
HUCK'S PICKS

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Most people who have never done time derive their impressions of what it's like from TV or movies, but both media come with flaws, usually inserted for dramatic effect. *The Devil's Courtyard* by Steven Thomas is quite another animal. The work is fiction, but anyone familiar with Florida's prison system will come away without any doubt that the author lived the life he articulates in these pages.

He describes Florida's two most infamous prisons, the Rock and the East Unit, facilities that grabbed headlines in the Seventies for murder, mayhem, and organized criminal

activity. He tells us about the slamming of doors on the various wings, always indicating someone is bleeding. We get a guided tour of Q-Wing, the death house, and various population wings, plus some of the guards who work them. And Thomas needed to be there to describe the events with such startling accuracy, including some of the actors. We meet Whitehead, a weightlifting booty bandit who was indeed killed in the gym during a workout. Boss Willie gets his during a movie in the gym, and a week later, one of his crew, the one carrying Willie's shank, gets killed for running when Sonny took Willie off the count. I repeat: these events are part of a factual narrative placed in a fictional format.

But all is not prison violence. The principal character, Poison (also a well-known name in the system), is initiated into prison sex in the Rock's showers. Bisexual, he eventually meets Mimi on a wing housing other potential victims. The wing is unidentified as protective custody, but anyone who knows the East Unit will recognize it as the old W-wing. Poison meets several movers and shakers and develops a reputation as a stand-up girl. He eventually paroles and hooks up with Mimi, who turns out to be fabulously wealthy. One thing leads to another, with Poison getting a culinary job in a fancy restaurant and then ripping off a drug dealer for big bucks.

He invests the money offshore, courtesy of Mimi's dad, moves to California, starts an escort service, gets set-up and goes back inside for a few years before paroling again and hooking up with a college professor in California. The story is a gritty one that moves, and the characters are genuine, especially for an experienced eye. Even if you have had the good fortune to miss Florida, Steven Thomas will give you a feel for what it was like. (fictvv)

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Master
Master
Storyteller
Storyteller

In this line of work, a reviewer encounters many styles of writing that span the entire literary spectrum. Some reach unexpected heights, and a few approach what might be referred to as sublime. *Sometimes, the Heart* by Rafael Vasquez must certainly be included in that pantheon. His collection of short stories moves from an old man's secrets for longevity, to a poignant story about a special child, to race relations and a dying mother. Included also are a medieval tale and two poems. Each piece, every single one, leaves the reader hungry for more.

Vasquez's impressive control of the language, smoothly integrated plots, and sophisticated narrative make this book a joy to read. Each chapter is an exploration, in one form or another, of loss and its consequences, whether at a

personal level ("Sophie's Music," "Thief," "A Matter of Time") or more generally, as in the poem "Towers of Grace." For anyone tuning in for a slice of prison life, Vasquez includes a nice piece about the bus ride most of his readers will have taken, a description of an old lifer who never makes it home, and, by extension, a moving tribute to a couple of bank robbers who prefer death together to capture, masterfully avoiding the mawkish tone that usually accompanies such treatments. He even includes a brutally candid poem about his personal demons that would have silenced a less powerful voice.

And I can't omit the author's note, one that perfectly captures the superficiality of a popular culture based on vicarious participation and a preference for form over substance. He contrasts this with a life of intellectual pursuits, serious contemplation, and the rapidly decreasing number of readers out there, those who can still express themselves in standard English without being captivated by sports heroes and semi-talented musical performers.

Rafael Vasquez is a talented writer and one whose work I hope will not always be executed behind prison walls. He should be on everyone's bookshelf. (fictvv)



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Western tales never seem to lose their attraction, whether in books, on television, or on the big screen. "Django," for example, drew both large audiences and approval ratings from the first day it showed in theaters, and pseudo-cowboys (e.g. Longmire) continue to populate many channels. Aaron Richards adds to the list with *Changing Times*.

Anthony Speed is black bounty hunter in 1900. He quits his job as a deputy after mother's death and starts out with little equipment except a pistol and an old Winchester. Racism was hardly dead only 35 years after the end of the Civil War, and true to form, Speed encounters it early in his travels, including two rednecks who insult him and torture another black man. To Speed's credit he kills both but discovers no bounty on either of them. But it's a start.

Speed meets the Rev. Jones, who makes sporadic appearances throughout the tale to bolster the religious undertone of reward and punishment. Speed's friend, Jay Dee, runs afoul of the man Speed is hunting and dies as a result. Speed again kills the bad guy but this time earns a little money.

Speed's adventures continue apace as he kills more outlaws than Wyatt Earp. Tossed in for good measure are a corrupt mayor, venal lawyer (but I repeat myself), a crooked cop, and *mirabile dictu*, a contract killer with a conscience. Just when it appears that the bad guys will gain control of the town where Speed and his family have settled down, he rides to the rescue in a thrill-packed climax. Some decent people don't get to see his form of righteous justice, but we get a surprise at the end, when the only nasty actor to survive gets a lesson from a source he never anticipated.

If you enjoy cowboys and characters doing things instead of talking about them, you'll enjoy *Changing Times*. One final observation: Richards faithfully captures the personalities and conflicts of the turn of the century, but the persistent racism and corruption that still infect American society show that the times haven't really changed that much. (fictvv)

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Poets and song writers abound inside this country's prisons, each experiencing enormous frustration in his or her ability to see work in print. Publishers, for a variety of reasons, tend to ignore imprisoned artists, irrespective of the artistic merit of their work. As Paul Schlueter discovered, in the music industry, no one is interested in *seeing* his song; they want to hear them first.

Technology now enables music producers to ignore sheet music, preferring rote mechanical interpretations instead. For someone like Schlueter, locked behind bars with no



means to make a demo tape, his creativity finally found an outlet here in this venue. *Schleuter's Songs* is an impressive collection of music, and many of the songs are available on Schleuter's Web site. I took the time to visit the site and listen, and if country music flips your switch, then you need to hear what Schleuter has composed. Whether traditionally upbeat numbers or ballads, the lyrics will resonate with anyone grounded in the real world.

You won't hear these songs on your favorite station, and that is part of the injustice a prison sentence carries. To Schleuter's credit, he never stopped composing and trying to get his work out to the public. Now, if only some music producer would wake up and recognize the talent so long overlooked we would all be better for it. (musicvv)

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POETS' CORNER



Traditional haiku is a difficult form to master, consisting of seventeen syllables in three lines, five in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third. A superficial reading might encourage the novice to think that dispersing seventeen syllables over three lines isn't that hard, and certainly arranging any collection of seventeen syllables would not present a challenge. The haiku, however, is far more demanding, requiring an extreme economy of words, each indispensable to the often unstated theme of the poem. Robert Cook, writing as Dr. Q. A. Cush, demonstrates his mastery of this form in his collection *Cushite Haiku*.

Taking the title from the ancient northeastern African kingdom of Cush (often Kush), the poems are subdivided into discreet sections, each dealing with an aspect of our brief sojourn on this planet. Dr. Cush gives us thoughtful and inspiring pieces on men, women, and children. He muses on friendship and abandonment. Also included are poems that treat the exploitation of Africans and African Americans, their lost heritage, and the possibility of divine revenge, here framed in terms of 9/11.

Poetry can be a source of comfort or distress, but its primary obligation is to make the reader feel. In this endeavor, Dr. Cush has indeed succeeded. (poemvv)

Prophetic Poems by Robert Graham are indeed focused on prophecy, many of which deal with an uncertain future that requires individual effort to realize. Graham reminds us that life as we know it includes occasional trauma, and as a corollary, urges us to show no fear in the face of disappointment and injury. To assist in dealing with those beasts, the poems extol the importance of learning to sing (whether musically or poetically) during those hard times.

As might be expected in any writing that treats prophecy, Graham's work is guided by his faith, which of course imparts a strong religious overtone to the collection. Constant references to angels and God permeate the poetry, including "My Angel," which inadvertently confirms that those special people we love don't require divine assistance. Still, a strong belief in predestination leads to an admonition about a future without sin as the preeminent human goal.

Also present is the standard trope about pain being a lesson, accompanied by implied references to Ecclesiastes ("A time to . . .") and I Corinthians ("Thinking Like A Child"). The poet's idiosyncratic spelling and structure mark this arresting collection as one that will certainly challenge the reader to engage the work on a different level than normally expected. What follows is, of course, up to the individual. (poemvv)

Genesis by Richard Woodham is an eclectic collection of poems, spanning the emotional spectrum from true love to anger, from pain to rapture. Religion dominates, especially themes of an afterlife in a place with fairytale houses made of gingerbread, a place "both blessed and divine." Woodham's poems provide a "reason to believe" in something beyond our immediate present, framed in terms of Christian iconography. Accordingly, the poem "Bonding of Hearts" describes that special relationship that only occurs when heaven gets involved. But, of course, earthly

matters intrude, as in the poem "Good-bye," in which the speaker makes it clear that his former lover, one presumes not the same one whose heart was previously bonded to his, is no longer a significant figure. One supposes that holding a grudge still binds the soul to the realm of the living.

Included are moving pieces about a child's tragic death in a world where either no one cared or no one listened. For most readers, maintaining one's religious faith in the face of a child's suffering and death would be a challenge. Perhaps Woodham has the key when he says, "We may not be able/to change the world we're in/but we can change ourselves/And that's how the solution begins." (poemvv)

Experience is not what
happens to you; it's what you
do with what happens to you.

Aldous Huxley