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# HUCK'S PICKS

New Books Published on [www.prisonsfoundation.org](http://www.prisonsfoundation.org) as reported by Charles Huckelbury

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## ***KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCKIN' ON HEAVEN'S DOOR***

For those of you who think you've read every conceivable kind of memoir and believe you have a pretty good grasp of the genre in general, wait until you get a look at the excerpt from Kenny Howell's book, *The Near Death Experience of Kenny Howell*. The chapter just published deals with his experiences immediately after suffering a fatal heart attack. Well, it was only temporarily fatal, if you'll

pardon the oxymoron.

While clinically dead, Kenny makes that often discussed pilgrimage to the pearly gates, gains access to heaven, and proceeds to discover what his "assignment" in paradise is: a beautiful little girl who welcomes him as her father. I won't spoil the tale, only add that Kenny meets more dead people, all of whom welcome him with love and tell him in no uncertain terms how special he is. Told in poignant detail and remarkably effective prose, the story will not leave you unaffected.

Howell's version of heaven is sort of like a Mr. Rogers neighborhood: quaint homes, picket fences, and manicured lawns filled with children's toys. Admitting what a feckless life he had led before his death, Howell recounts the unconditional forgiveness he finds in that

celestial neighborhood. One assumes that upon returning to his mortal vessel, he remains eager to die permanently so he can return and be reunited with everyone he met on his introductory tour.

Howell concludes the chapter with a biblical lecture on the evils of a profligate life, gay marriage, abortion, and sin in general. He decries what he sees as the moral relativism, otherwise known as secular humanism, rampant in American culture. Writing from Texas, Howell offers his experiences, his *literal* experiences, in heaven as confirmation of the traditional Southern Baptist dogma of the wages of sin and the rewards of obedience to a providential god who really cares about human activities.(memvv)

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## ***JUVENILE JUSTICE ISN'T***

Juvenile criminal justice issues have been in the news recently, especially with the US Supreme Court's tossing out mandatory life without parole sentences. Ricardo Noble's sad commentary therefore resonates even more than it normally would. Sentenced to LWOP for a crime committed when he was fifteen, Noble relates the familiar tale of codefendants giving him up for a lesser plea, even when no physical evidence connected him to the crime. For anyone hooked on cop shows or lawyer shows, the ones that typically depict guys walking out of court for lack of evidence or on a "technicality." Noble's story is a solemn reminder of what really goes on in a courtroom and the intrinsic vulnerability of juvenile offenders. Read *Erie, Pennsylvania's Betrayal of a Child* and open the door to the real world.(nonfict)

## ***BACK IN BLACK***

Kenneth West is a man with a message, one that all young African American men and women should hear. The *Young African American's Survival Guide* takes no prisoners, destroying the urban myths that have proven so seductive and deadly and offering instead stand-up alternatives, all told in the 'hood's vernacular by someone who has lived it.

Taking the form of a Socratic dialogue, EOG conducts a symposium with three interlocutors, all players or wannabes, on a variety of relevant topics. The book is divided into six chapters, each a sobering narrative backed up by statistical evidence and personal stories. The information is augmented with self-help check lists and survival strategies, much as you would find in clinical applications.

The chapters cover sex, drugs, hustling, education, gangbanging, and violence and are related in graphic but necessary prose for maximum effect. West exposes the true nature of pimps and the women who are enslaved to them. They are parasites feeding on their victims and indifferent to the consequences: teen pregnancy, STDs, and the intrinsic violence that stalks the women who work the streets. The false glamour of drugs and gangbanging get the same raw treatment, with West emphasizing the destructive nature of behaviors that on the surface appear to encourage loyalty to a specific group but are in effect suicidal for the black community.

West's alternatives include an emphasis on education as a means to escape the pernicious effects of poverty and hopelessness, but he offers that option as a cautionary tale. He points out that schools are prone to teach irrelevant material ("George Washington and a cherry tree") as opposed to information that will both aid survival in a dysfunctional environment and provide a means for moving up the food chain in the face of the racism that continues to infect both the educational system and the criminal justice monolith.

Education is indeed a socialization process which sadly often requires assimilation. West points out that America functions with a racist perspective and white advantage. The myth of meritocracy and need for credentials means that African Americans face a daunting panoply of obstacles, but they are not insurmountable. West then provides a comparison with the level of education and the average money earned at each level, clearly demonstrating the link between jail time and lack of education. On the list of jobs requiring a college degree, however, West lists police officer, which surprised this reviewer. A Google search turned up a high-school diploma or GED as the standard prerequisite.

As West points out, prison functions as a mechanism for social control, and he provides startling statistical evidence for his claim. Along with that evidence is a diagram of a prison cell as the hustler's eventual destination. No more money, women, cars, and jewelry. Given that a felony conviction makes an ex-con a "felon for life," West advises that it makes far more sense--and is potentially far more lucrative--to apply one's talents and hustle legally. For those interested in support groups and assistance, he closes with a lengthy index.

As the author indicates in his preface, this is an indispensable book for young African Americans seeking a better future than drugs, violence, and prison. Given their disproportionate numbers in America's prisons and cemeteries, one can only hope they read and heed.(nonfict)



*I want to be a figure for prison reform. I think the criminal justice system is rotten.* Henry Louis Gates

## **WORLD WITHOUT END**



I've read and heard many descriptions of abusive relationships and the underlying pathologies that produce and drive them, but rarely have I encountered a more precise and accessible description than Jason Cooper's stunning play, *Do I?* The spare stage setting emphasizes the emptiness of those relationships, and the off-stage narrators, while providing explanatory direction, evoke the distance between the two characters and the rapidly accelerating degree of abuse the audience witnesses. In this brief dramatic performance, Cooper has captured the deceptive, disgusting tactics of guys who beat women and enjoy it: the initial overtures, gifts, pledges of love, all followed by escalating abuse and the apology, followed, of course, by more abuse and more apologies. As we approach the end of the play, we ache for the victim, whose answer to the marital question posed by the play's title should have been a resounding HELL NO. If this play reaches the Prisons Foundation Kennedy Center presentations, don't miss it.(dramavv)

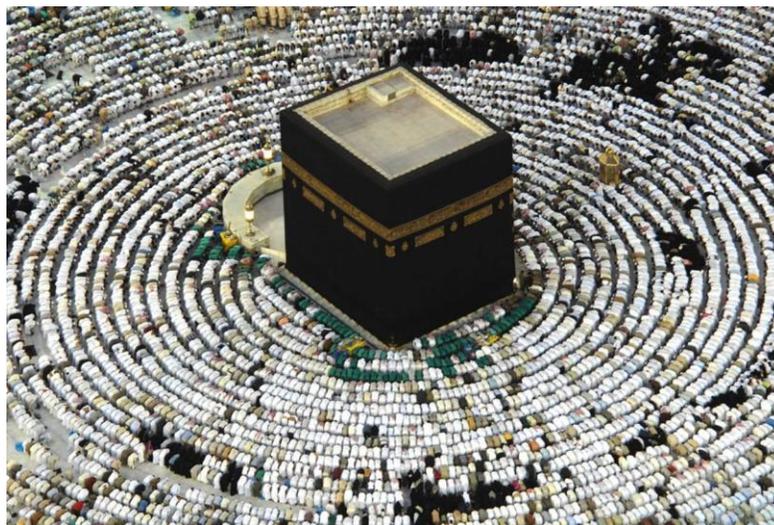
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## **5 PILLARS AND MORE**

In an age when religious bigotry continues to poison large segments of the globe, *Islam: The Misunderstood Religion*, Minister Khalil Shabazz Muhammad's brief description of Islam, is a welcome antidote. It dispells some of the more pernicious assumptions created and disseminated by intolerant groups and individuals intent on the colonization and enslavement of susceptible minds.

After a brief introduction, including disturbing examples of Western prejudices that thinking men and women should instinctively reject, the minister provides a trenchant history of Islam and Muhammad's role in uniting a people under a set of laws that have remained in effect for 1300 years. His is a story of sacrifice and devotion, of a man surrendering a life of family and personal success to follow a calling that would be anything but easy. Also included is a helpful exegesis of the Qu'ran and reminders of the contributions that Muslim scholars have made to Western culture in general in fields such as mathematics and astronomy.

Much has been said of the stories regarding Muhammad's life and influence, with aspersions being cast by representatives and acolytes of other religions, whose stories are no less amazing. The focus for those shuttered minds should, however, be on the Muslim practice of charity, for example, as opposed to, say, what paradise might have in store for true believers. After all, paradise is something only the dead can confirm, and giving alms to the poor is tangible evidence of our obligation to each other as human beings. You can't find a stronger moral argument than that.(nonfictvv)



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## **A GREAT READ FOR A SUNDAY AFTERNOON . . . OR ANY OTHER DAY**

*The Writings of Dane Toomey* is an absolutely delightful excursion, a tour de force combination of Dungeons

& Dragons meets Monty Python, achieved with a mastery of language and information unusual in any literary venue. We begin our journey by accompanying Forethought and Malice in their hilarious quest for the Cattle Prod of Damnfestus, followed by the adventures of Dumass and Yin, who also is a member of the Ignorati. Toomey has an obvious gift for naming his characters, including a female named Arugula, with the anticipated connotation evident, and his strength never waivers throughout the book's 224 pages. If you're a Tolkien fan or a D&D graduate, you'll love the characters and action here.



Along with his unquestioned ability to tell a good story, Toomey also brings to the page a remarkable literary background that he works in, reminiscent of J. K. Rowling's oeuvre. "Pepe's Fab-U-Lous Adventure," for example, has the notorious line, "It was a dark and stormy night," initially penned by the Victorian novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton in his 1830 novel, *Paul Clifford*. The line has become the low-water mark for purple prose, even to the point of spawning an annual contest named for the author to honor the most florid sentence. Toomey works it into his story without fanfare, but for this reviewer, it elicited more than a smile.

Toomey's versatility in both plot and action is also evident in this collection of short stories, including a little erotica, but his real forte is humor. In his "Redneck's Time Travel Guide" he includes explanatory footnotes, an ingenious touch, and his technical description of synaptic responses to having a probing finger inserted into a nose is a genuine howler.

But his most impressive work, at least for this reviewer, was his poem "Here Kitty Kitty," perhaps a bit mysterious for those unfamiliar with Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment illustrating the inherent duality of quantum states. In sum, Dale Toomey's ability to shift idioms as his stories require, his vibrant imagination, and his grasp of subjects beyond what one would expect in such a collection make this a book worth the time invested in reading it cover to cover.(fictvv)

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### **THE ARTISTS' EASEL**

In Book 1 of *Poetic Pictures*, Burl Dees's drawings present the classic battle, in Freudian terms, between the Id and the Super-Ego. The pictures illustrate the carnal tendencies of the primitive mind, mediated by the morality instilled by, among others, the artist's mother, as his poetry subsequently confirms. The subtitle, "The Battle Within," focuses on the erotic nature of desire, opposed by the more numinous experience of pure love. Book 2, "Thorns of Life," illustrates the artist's lament that mirrors Shelley's: both bleed when they fall upon those thorns.

Following the richly colored drawings, Dees offers poems to accompany them, or perhaps it's more accurate to say the drawings accompany the poems. In either case, the marriage is a successful one, with Dees's poetry expressing the longing for the absent loved one and the unfulfilled wish that he, she, and they could retrieve the halcyon days they have lost. And, of course, such selections would not be complete without expressing the standard fear that she will move on with her life now that the poet is no longer able to function in her world. This combination is remarkably effective at explaining the angst generated by having one's existence compressed into a cell.(artvv)

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Floyd Alan Hughes brings a stark minimalist technique to his drawings, emphasizing a medieval motif combined with a supernatural overtone that features dragons, castles, and skulls. Add to this a schematic rendering of the solar system that piques the curiosity, and you will have some idea of what this artist sees in his creative moments. His rendition of Spock from the old *Star Trek* series, for example, captures Leonard Nimoy's portrayal perfectly: direct gaze, fearless, and daring anyone to question either his logic or his intelligence. Hughes's vivid use of color in the last drawing gives us a fierce samurai sitting in seiza ("proper sitting") as if waiting for his overlord's command. And Hughes definitely has command of these drawings. (artvv)



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In a brief preface to *A Poetic Journey in Mid-Life*, John Raley tells us that the poems were all composed late at night when he had the luxury of being able to think and reflect, when the normal storm and stress of prison life recedes, if only for a few hours. The poems therefore reflect the overarching sense of loss every prisoner feels in his or her private moments, coupled with an imaginary escape. In Raley's case it's a sailboat, a car, or something as prosaic as a pair of shoes, carrying him to anywhere else. Raley also incorporates the traditional poetic tropes of weather and seasons to represent the change for which the poems' speaker yearns.

Also evident is the usual, for some, struggle with the desire for retribution. In "Blue Light," for example, the speaker's anger toward a family member is framed in terms of a conspiracy to keep him prisoner. He finds release, or at least resignation, in the form of a plea for someone to help him rise from his knees and lead him toward a better life, free from the "Whiskey Song" and "Stiletto Heels" that had previously captivated him. (poemvv)

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It isn't often that a poet comes along with the range and ability to make every creation a visceral and visual experience. John Griffin is such a poet, and his book, *Legacy*, comes to us in four sections, each demonstrating an uncommon mastery of jailhouse idiom and a startling ability to pierce the mask that most prisoners wear. In "Brown Paper Rapper," the speaker raps about the differences in perception of real men vs. the stylized gangstas usually portrayed in music and film, the phonies with no thought about their culture, their families, or anything other than material gain. Included in these works is a pointed criticism of violence and the drug culture that simultaneously extols guns and denigrates women. Griffin goes about his task mercilessly, pulling the cover off the wannabe tough guys on the prison yard, those with all the stories but none of the money, the same ones that drove a Benz or Beemer but need to borrow money to buy a soda from the canteen. If you've been there, you know the type. Griffin also offers an excoriating critique of America's assumed position of moral arbiter to the world, juxtaposed with its treatment of the poor and disenfranchised.

In his "Perspectives" section, Griffin describes a lifer's slow death inside prison, a place even gods avoid. Included is a moving lament for all the mothers and fathers lying in their graves, having sacrificed in vain so their imprisoned sons could have a better life. History and duty are common themes in these poems. "Legacy," for example reminds readers of a brilliant Nubian history, one that competed with Egypt's magnificence and still lives today for anyone with the mind and courage to look for it. "A Breath of Fresh Air," a beautifully wrought piece, captures the evanescence of the wind, ephemeral as peace in prison. Griffin also keeps company with Miles Davis and O. J. Simpson and hits home with "Letters from Prison" and "Captive Lover," both stark reminders of the costs of prison.

"Tales from the Yard" should be a favorite chapter for experienced cons, primarily because they can see and hear Oldhead, a lifer and mentor, telling newbies how to do their time and stay out, and in the same breath, telling thugs who come and go and whine about parole to step off. Oldhead is dead perfect on prison guards, and in "Team Support," he offers the best possible advice: use your mind instead of your body to survive. "Once Around the Track" will be a familiar tale for anyone who has experienced a nasty guard with attitude, and Griffin's poem about the great food theft and the incompetent thief who stole state food will have cons and ex-cons laughing because all of us have a similar story.

Finally, in "Letter to My Father," Griffin finds his most effective voice, first evoking Donne's famous poem, "Death Be Not Proud," and promising his dead father that his memory and lessons will survive him. Included in this section are wrenching descriptions of a child's first experience with racism, the 1963 church bombing in Montgomery, merged with an adult's hopes and desires. His "Conversion" ponders religion's promises as promoting patience or cowardice, and another piece virtually deifies his child and her African roots. The undertone throughout is slavery and the slave mentality, exemplified by "Shackles & Chains," that morphs from a Mississippi plantation to a prison cell. And near the end of the book, "The Lifer" reminds us that, contrary to the philosophers, freedom is more than just a state of mind: "From the inside looking out,/even the beggar isn't poor."

Griffin's poetry is carefully sculpted and deserves a place on any serious reader's shelf. It's enlightening and edifying, amusing and didactic. One hopes that we will see more of Mr. Griffin in the future.(poemvv)