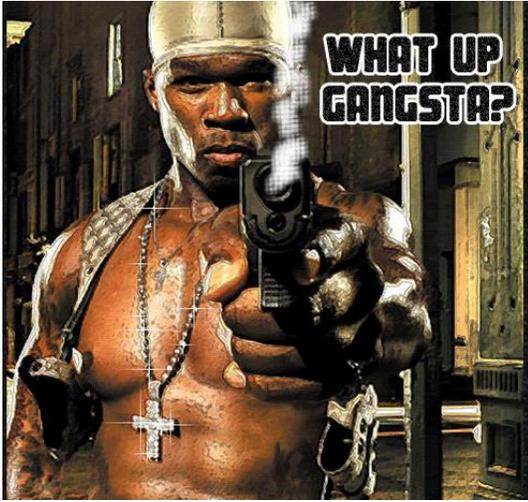

HUCK'S PICKS

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In Book I of *Chronicles of a Foolish Don* by Nathaniel Upsur, we meet a young Nick and his sister Isis in a small apartment while their mother dresses for work. She points to Nick and tells Isis to look after him to ensure that he will turn out to be better than his worthless father, but fate has other plans. Isis is voice of reason throughout the narrative, just like Mom anticipated, but Nick's flawed personality makes her attempted intervention ineffective.

Nick ends up in a gang and leaves a trail of bodies across two states while accumulating enough cash to open a chain of hair salons in Philadelphia. But the legitimate life soon bores him, and he returns home to North Carolina for a visit. On the surface, going from Philadelphia to North Carolina wouldn't be a prudent move for anyone, black or white, but Nick is homesick. Once there, he discovers that his old gang has disbanded with the leaders having shifted their operations to Jamaica. Resolving to take care of unfinished business, Nick makes plans to follow them for some payback.

Only Dons and Divas matter in Nick Lyons's dystopian world, where social Darwinism is alive and well. He has a specific worldview that tolerates no deviation and doesn't ask for any favors. Presented as the archetypal gangster with a good heart, he picks up Dawn, a down-and-out loser, and tries to convince her to make something of herself. Along the way, she learns to bow before Nick's self-proclaimed racial and ethical superiority and call him "master." Her limited intellect makes dream fulfillment impossible, which means Nick has to shoot more people before he catches the flight for Jamaica, where an even bigger jackpot awaits. Forgetting for a moment Nick's habit of killing people in front of witnesses who never report his role, we see the results of believing that the rules don't apply to him or people like him. And, unfortunately, there are many people like him.

Upsur graphically demonstrates that you can take the gangsta out of the 'hood, but you can't take the 'hood out of the gangsta. Nick's boilerplate lectures on the abilities and duties of a Don are simply excuses for ignoring anyone's rules but his own: "We make things happen." He treats all women as whores and believes that shooting people is the most efficient way to eliminate problems. Meant as a primer for how not to live one's life, Book I is a hard but necessary lesson about the fallacies that inhabit an egocentric universe. Stay tuned for Book II.(fictv)

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As if one chronicle of murder and mayhem weren't enough, we also have *Chronicles of a Gangster* by Mark Nixon, which also advertises itself as the definitive description of a modern gangster, casting aside the wannabes and phonies who don't know either what it takes or how to get it. If this all sounds familiar, it is.

In a series of alternating vignettes, the story unfolds, first set inside prison where G-Hop is doing time, put there by yet another in a long line of snitches everyone knows and his refusal to violate the code by which he lives. We get the familiar tale of bad medical care and a dead prisoner as a result, encapsulated by G-Hop's relationship with a homey on his block and a guard from the 'hood.

The tale ventures back to the 'hood and a litany of robbery and murder, distrust and betrayal. Every woman G-Hop meets falls in love or lust with him, and even the wives of friends and business partners aren't safe--literally. Dee, for example, is a local weed dealer and merely a means to an end: more money and success for G-Hop, who is always ready to cap him for the slightest insult. Which he eventually does in one scene where he also kills the mother of his unborn child--and Dee's wife--and leaves her three other children alone in the house. Even a prison nurse perceives G-Hop's "innocence," a less than astute judgment contradicted by the numerous murders he's committed, all before he turned fifteen. Everyone in this chronicle, according to G-Hop's gangsta ethos, is for sale or to be used for his personal enjoyment. Everyone is simply a means to an end, either naive or stupid.

Sure, G-Hop's story has the prison part cold: the bad food, indifferent medical care, and nasty guards. In fact, in a telling moment, the narrator tells us that G-Hop had never had "a *female* deep throat him." Makes you wonder if *guys* on the inside with him had been there and done that.

And he's doubtless on the money with respect to being in the game. He attempts to justify his pathology by providing a redacted history, reprising the old canard that the CIA introduced crack into black neighborhoods to destroy them. In other words, everything is a plot or conspiracy to keep G-Hop from realizing his own potential. He isn't prone to introspection and always looks externally for the cause of his problems. Like Sartre's protagonist in *No Exit*, he thinks that hell is other people, most of whom have the same value as furniture.

But after ripping off business associates and being ratted out by people he trusted, G-Hop still sanctimoniously opines that "Loyalty is forever." After a tour through these pages, one can't help wondering what planet he came from.(fictvv)



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Tales from Inside by Vaughn Wright is a dazzling tour by a master story teller, someone who is on intimate terms with the men and women who occupy prison cells and those who are doing their best to get there. "Cellies," for example, leads the way and sets the tone for the rest of the collection. It is a realistic portrayal, complete with pitch-perfect dialogue, of what most cons dream about when it comes to snitches. You think prison is a treacherous place? Read Wright's stories for confirmation. He even offers a brief explanation of each story's origin to give us a little insight into the creative process.

And, of course, no genuine tales of crime and punishment would be complete without addressing the theme of payback, as in Wright's "Love Is As Love Does." We all get to cheer in the end when a bullet stops the clock of the collection's most despicable character.

That isn't to say humor is absent in these tales. Far from it. Even "Cellie" has its funny moments at the end, but *Vomer Bird* is truly hilarious, touched with an existentialist warning that "a partner ain't nothing but a witness for the prosecution." Sound familiar, anyone? Wright's closing offering is "High Score," perhaps the only story to strain credulity, even given Homeland Security's authority. Wright uses national security as a platform to emphasize the pernicious nature of prison, its role in creating killers, and the complicity of cop shows that dramatize forensic labs and concomitantly provide tips on how to elude capture.

Tales is a read you won't want to put down before you've read it through. And when you do, you'll want to look for more from Vaughn Wright. (fictvv)



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Caged Hearts by Lionel Manigault is a drama set on the mean streets of Brooklyn, where Lamont and his homies learn the tough lessons and survival techniques that their school doesn't provide. Pamela is a year older than

Lamont's fourteen but already turned out by Sin, an older predator whose younger brother tried to kill Lamont. The two crews become deadly enemies, with Lamont attempting to use Pamela against Sin. The story follows a predictable path: Lamont falls for Pamela, who has been vainly searching for a knight to rescue her from Sin's clutches. He manages to succeed by leaving the rest of his crew to handle Sin and his soldiers.



For anyone who hasn't seen or lived it, fourteen-year-old killers and hookers might be a tough sell, but Manigault brings it off, successfully offering options that Lamont and Pamela eventually choose. Using Mrs. Casey, Lamont's teacher, he explains the students' dysfunctional attitudes in terms of poverty and hopelessness.

Employing Legend, Lamont's imprisoned father, Manigault creates a counterweight to the pull of the street, as the language shifts from gangsta idiom to a philosophical treatise. This is a tragedy of sorts, as all wasted lives are tragedies, but cathartic as well because of Lamont's

ability to internalize what he has obviously wanted to believe all along. (fictvv)

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Kenneth Garcia's description of how he fashions his paint brushes and other creative tools demonstrates the determination and resourcefulness of this particular artist and others in similar cells. The themes found in *Garcia's Art* are multifaceted: religious, contemplative, provocative, and resilient, especially the personal piece that deals with surviving cancer. Garcia is clearly a Denver Broncos fan, as well as an admirer of Spider Man, and his imagination is readily evident in one striking drawing that features a spider attacking a rose, symbolizing, of course, the victimization of innocence by a soulless predatory. Given his restricted access to resources, the lack of encouragement of his environment, and the fundamental limitations imposed by imprisonment, Kenneth Garcia has produced an exceptional collection of drawings that testify as much to his strength of spirit as his artistic ability. (artvv)

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Justin Dawson's brief collection of four songs, *The Soul of Life In Many Ways*, treats traditional country music themes, citing his preference for Southern girls and fishing, coupled with an appreciation for real friends and a certainty that his life will change for the better now that he has found the right path to negotiate the challenges he will face. Dawson also provides a brief history of his inspiration for each song, placing them in context with what was happening in his life at the time. Although each song's genesis is self-evident, the composer's discussion renders them more personal and perhaps enables those who hear or read them to gain a little more insight about musical composition in general. (musicvv)

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Charley Bear is the creation of Charley McMurtry, and he is an attractive and effective teacher. His *New Nursery Rhymes* gently but persuasively guides children along life's path, a path that, as McMurtry implicitly acknowledges, is often fraught with unrecognized dangers. He cautions children to avoid strangers and keep their bodies healthy, and he smoothly shows how stealing ("Boys and Toys") and other acts always have consequences ("Tough Love" and "Let's Be Frank"). The only discordant note was "Praying Mantis," in which the insect's posture is taken for reverence instead of its predatory disposition, but overall this collection, complete with color illustrations by the author, is



grounded in her love for the land and the people. If it is "the coldness that helped shape" who she is, we can be grateful for her experiences and the poetry that arose as a result. (poemvv)

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Steven Crutchfield brings us his *Poetry of An Ordinary Man*, but the selections are anything but ordinary. Beginning with haikus, a far more challenging verse form than it appears, he moves to his own creation, the alku, the traditional haiku with each line following an alliterative pattern. Following those pieces, Crutchfield moves to rhymed couplets and a more lengthy treatment of his subjects, most with obvious or implied religious overtones, including one titled "Justified," not to be confused with the TV show of the same name.

We then get to the heart of these selections with "Her Eyes (Dawn Marie)" et seq. As Crutchfield explains in his introduction, the subject and inspiration for this poem and many of the others in this section was his first love, one he foolishly squandered. With an active imagination, Crutchfield offers some surprises in his style, including two patterned on a Fibonacci sequence, in which each line contains the number of words in the preceding two, not a construction usually encountered in poetry.

Crutchfield closes his collection with several prose selections, including the arresting "Post Mortem," which contains a graphic description of the autopsy of a young man dead from a broken heart and the subsequent sentencing of the man responsible for seducing the victim's fiancée, the proximate cause of the fatality. Poetry of an ordinary man? Not as traditionally defined but definitely worth a read. (poemvv)

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Locked up at 18, E. L. Ballance is now 40, and his collection of poems, *Worthy of Love*, represents what cons and ex-cons will recognize as the mixture of fatalism and loss that grows through the years of a long prison sentence. The poems' speaker yearns for the love of a special woman, one who can distinguish the man within, versus the state-owned subject with only a number to identify him. He issues a challenge: "Are you woman enough?" He also makes it clear that it will take quite a woman to handle the man "most men want to be." Ballance's poems are a stark reminder of what long-term imprisonment does to anyone, especially a young mind and body ripped from society before reaching the legal drinking age. In one poem, Ballance pleads for heaven's help, but both the poet and the reader know that no aid is coming. In prison, poets and non-poets alike are destined to suffer and die just as they dream--alone. (poemvv)

A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable, but more useful than a life spent doing nothing.

[George Bernard Shaw](#)