

THE WRITERS' BEAT EDITED BY ANNIE DAWID

'Prison Life' by Annie Dawid

In this part of Colorado, one drives by prisons, jails, and other "correctional institutions" as frequently as fast food emporiums, or so it sometimes seems. The United States locks up a higher percentage of its citizens than any other country. Not a record to be proud of, as one of the wealthiest nations on Earth, with the kind of opportunities for advancement that immigrants legal and otherwise sometimes die for in their attempt to reach our shores.

In my own life, until now, however, I have been familiar with prison only as a reader of newspapers, viewer of feature films and documentaries, a driver past the gates of Florence, Colorado's "SuperMax," which looks, from highway 67, like a fancy high school, except for the barbed wire coils and guard towers instead of digitized scoreboards around the adjacent fields.

But now I am living inside those walls, if only through the device of fiction, as I tutor a writing student through the mail as he writes his first novel. This young man came into my life through a good friend who taught at a public high school in Portland, Oregon. The student – smart and privileged, from a "good" family – got involved with a gang of boys who wanted a thrill, what we might have called a "lark," in the old days. In the 1990s, this "lark" consisted

of armed robberies -- in which no one got hurt, pointedly – and lasted through a dozen robberies before they were caught. My student never held a gun, but he was convicted of armed robbery – justly, in his and my opinion, for having been a part of such a violent diversion. Though he had never been convicted of anything prior, the tough-on-crime atmosphere in this nation, which says locking up criminals, including teenagers, is the only worthwhile punishment, the high school senior was sentenced to eight years in prison. He has two to go, while his fellow robbers are out now because they gave themselves up. In his fear of the penal system – a just fear, for a young boy, of rape and other degradation common to young men in prison – he fled to Mexico, then returned to give himself up. So he is now "inside," while the other members of the gang are out.

He does not blame society for his actions or his punishment. A computer whizkid, he is integral in the Oregon prison's marketing program for prisoner-produced goods, designing advertising brochures and other graphics. A smart boy who confesses to having gotten through high school without reading a book all the way through, he now regularly devours serious literature in his quest to produce his work.

He handwrites his chapters, sends them to his parents, who put

the words into the computer, and they email the work to me. It was not their idea of the college education they had saved for, and perhaps will still help finance, should this young man be admitted to college, if he chooses.

Is today's prison like the horrible fear-inducing films of the past? Alan Alda in the TV movie of 1967 committing suicide? Yes. It is that and worse. Rape is as common as smoking. Drugs are easy to procure, and so addicts can continue their habits "inside." Crime, ironically – or not – is everywhere, with the need to "watch your back" or watch your buddy's back, even more crucial than in the most gang-infested neighborhoods outside. Gangs have infect infiltrated most correctional institutions.

If you have options, a loving family, like my student, you will do everything possible to avoid returning. You will be one who bests the recidivism odds. But if your life on the outside isn't too different from life in prison, then returning to incarceration isn't the worst thing in the world – just part of a continuum.



Annie Dawid taught a fiction workshop this summer at the Taos Summer Writers Conference. Her third book, *And Darkness Was Under His Feet: Stories of a Family*, is available on amazon.com. A former professor of English at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, Annie is raising her son, Isaiah Max, and two dogs, Rafe and Fanny, in her cabin outside of Westcliffe at 9100 feet in the Wet Mountain Valley.



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