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An Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women

Kris Miccio

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BOOK REVIEW**An Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States¹**

By Rickie Solinger, Paula C. Johnson, Martha L. Raimon, Tina Reynolds, and Ruby C. Tapia, eds.

Book Review by Kris Miccio, Sturm College of Law, University of Denver

AN INTERRUPTED LIFE is a compilation of essays on the experiences of women inmates which brings home to practitioner, advocate, scholar, and educator what life is like for women behind U.S. prison walls. Much of the literature, as well as popular culture, on prison life is passed through the prism of male experience, and thus gives short shrift to the complicated lives that women lead in prison. Solinger et. al have presented a compendium of essays which address the issues faced by mothers and women of color as they cope with life behind bars and life after prison.

The authors have used storytelling, poetry, and first person accounts to bring to life how women create families behind the walls and sustain families outside prison. An interesting fact which emerges from this book is that the majority of women inmates are mothers of minor children. AN INTERRUPTED LIFE gives insight into how these women maintain their role as mother as well as what they face if that role is interrupted due to their child's placement in foster care. What comes through is that inmates still feel a connection to their children which transcends the bars and the regulated – and at times isolated – life that these incarcerated mothers face.

We also learn how some inmates attempt to reproduce familial units within the prison by becoming involved as mothers to younger inmates, lovers to others, and sisters to sisters. What develops is an intricate system of sisterhood which serves to protect all members of the family structure. Such units also provide the women with sexual intimacy, if that is what they choose, and for some it recasts previous beliefs about sexuality, resulting in a redefinition which can fall outside cultural boundaries.

One interesting aspect of the book is how women inmates resist the oppression that is part of prison life and the loss of privacy that follows a life behind bars. While some resort to violence, many women choose poetry, prayer, or spirituality as a means of refusing the categorization that accompanies prison life. What is clear is that these women use writing, poetry, and spirituality as more than a survival tool but as instruments to redefine themselves and to rise above the grinding life imposed by the state.

AN INTERRUPTED LIFE is not an easy read because it deals with both facts and raw emotion. However, it is an important book for any scholar, lawyer, advocate, or educator who wishes to gain insight into what women inmates face. And it is an interesting counterpoint to those who would find such lives expendable and unworthy of concern. AN INTERRUPTED LIFE is an important book for those of us in the Academy who teach criminal law because it gives insight into the consequences of a system which places human lives outside the ambit of compassion and care. And finally, it is an essential read because it reminds us that the dignity of the human spirit can rise up even behind the walls of U.S. prisons.

¹ Rickie Solinger, Paula C. Johnson, Martha L. Raimon, eds. *An Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States*, University of California Press (2010).