



Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing

By Ted Conover

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Acclaimed journalist Ted Conover sets a new standard for bold, in-depth reporting in this first-hand account of life inside the penal system at Sing Sing.

When Ted Conover's request to shadow a recruit at the New York State Corrections Officer Academy was denied, he decided to apply for a job as a prison officer himself. The result is an unprecedented work of eyewitness journalism: the account of Conover's year-long passage into storied Sing Sing prison as a rookie guard, or "newjack."

As he struggles to become a good officer, Conover angers inmates, dodges blows, and attempts, in the face of overwhelming odds, to balance decency with toughness. Through his insights into the harsh culture of prison, the grueling and demeaning working conditions of the officers, and the unexpected ways the job encroaches on his own family life, we begin to see how our burgeoning prison system brutalizes everyone connected with it. An intimate portrait of a world few readers have ever experienced, *Newjack* is a haunting journey into a dark undercurrent of American life.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Most people know it's easier to get into prison than it is to get out. But for a journalist, just getting into Sing Sing, New York's notorious maximum-security prison, isn't easy. In fact, Ted Conover was so stymied by official channels that he took the only way in--other than crime--and became a New York State corrections officer: "I wanted to hear the voices one truly never hears, the voices of guards--those on the front lines of our prison policies, the society's proxies." *Newjack* is Conover's account of nearly a year at ground zero of the criminal justice system. What it reveals is a mix of the obvious and the absurd, with hypocrisies not unexpected considering that the land of the free shares with Russia the distinction of having the world's largest prison population. As of December 1999, it was projected that the number of people incarcerated in the United States would reach 2 million in 2000.

This is the world Conover enters when he, along with other new recruits, undergoes seven weeks of pseudomilitary preparation at the Albany Training Academy. Then it's off to Sing Sing for the daily grind of prison life. Conover correctly and vividly captures the essence of that life, its tedium interspersed with the adrenaline rush of an "incident" and the edge of fear that accompanies every action. He also details how the guards experience their own feelings of confinement, often at the hands of the inmates:

A consequence of putting men in cells and controlling their movements is that they can do almost nothing for themselves. For their various needs they are dependent on one person, their gallery officer. Instead of feeling like a big, tough guard, the gallery officer at the end of the day often feels like a waiter serving a hundred tables or like the mother of a nightmarishly large brood of sullen, dangerous, and demanding children. When grown men are infantilized, most don't take to it too nicely.

And not taking to it nicely often involves violence. Indeed, the constant potential for violence on any scale makes even humdrum assignments dangerous. It's astonishing that more *doesn't* happen, given that the majority of the 1,800 inmates have been convicted of violent felonies: murder, manslaughter, rape, robbery, assault, kidnapping, burglary, arson. But beneath the simmering rage rests an unexpected sensitivity that Conover captures brilliantly. After encountering a Hispanic inmate with a tattoo of a heartbreaking passage from *The Diary of Anne Frank* on his back, he writes: "It was easier to stay incurious as an officer. Under the inmates' surface bluster, their cruelty and selfishness, was almost always something ineffably sad." Ultimately, the emphasis of Conover's work is on the toll prison exacts--most immediately on the jailed and their jailers, but also on a society that puts both there in increasing numbers. --Gwen Bloomsburg

From Publishers Weekly

In books like *Rolling Nowhere* (about hoboes) and *Coyotes* (about illegal aliens), Conover distinguished himself with brave, empathetic reporting. This riveting book goes further. Stymied by both the union and prison brass in his effort to report on correctional officers, Conover instead applied for a job, and spent nearly a year in the system, mostly at Sing Sing, the storied prison in the New York City suburbs. Fascinated and fearful, the author in training grasps some troubling truths: "we rule with the inmates' consent," says one instructor, while another acknowledges that "rehabilitation is not our job." As a Sing Sing "newjack" (or new guard), Conover learns the folly of going by the book; the best officers recognize "the inevitability of a kind of relationship" with inmates. Whether working the gallery, the mess hall or transportation detail, the job is both a personal and moral challenge: at the isolation unit ("the Box"), Conover begins to write up his first "use of force" incident when a fellow officer waves him away. He steps back to offer a history of the prison,

the "hopelessly compromised" work of prison staff and the unspoken idealism he senses in fellow guards. Stressed by his double life and the demands of the job, caught between the warring impulses of anthropological inquiry and "the incuriosity that made the job easier," Conover struggles but nevertheless captures scenes of horror and grace. With its nuanced portraits of officers and inmates, the book never preaches, yet it conveys that we ignore our prisons--an explosive (and expensive) microcosm of race and class tensions--at our collective peril. Agent, Kathy Robbins. First serial to the New Yorker. (May) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Having already documented the lives of illegal aliens (Coyotes) and hoboes (Rolling Nowhere), journalist Conover gives a compelling firsthand account of life as a corrections officer. The site is Sing Sing, once widely known for housing the electric chair that killed 614 inmates but now unremarkable among New York State's prisons. Refused entry as a journalist, Conover actually attended the training academy and became a bona fide officer for a year. Once on the job, he appears to have identified completely with the persona of a prison guard: He feels his head swim as he tries to enforce rules that are routinely ignored to avoid confrontations. He braces himself to walk the galleries amid catcalls and threats of violence and tries to keep on top of the games inmates play. Given the monotony, dehumanization, and imminent dangers, why would anyone choose this profession? A good accompanying volume is Lucien X. Lombardo's *Guards Imprisoned* (1981. o.p.), which points out that, in areas of high unemployment, these are the most lucrative jobs requiring a minimal amount of education. Furthermore, some officers don't all can wield a kind of power hard to emulate in the outside world. Highly recommended for public and academic libraries. [Excerpted in the New Yorker. DEd.] DFrances Sandiford, Green Haven Correctional Facility Lib., Stormville, N.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Paul Hardy:

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