



Fish: A Memoir of a Boy in a Man's Prison

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When seventeen-year-old T.J. Parsell held up the local Photo Mat with a toy gun, he was sentenced to four and a half to fifteen years in prison. The first night of his term, four older inmates drugged Parsell and took turns raping him. When they were through, they flipped a coin to decide who would "own" him. Forced to remain silent about his rape by a convict code among inmates (one in which informers are murdered), Parsell's experience that first night haunted him throughout the rest of his sentence. In an effort to silence the guilt and pain of its victims, the issue of prisoner rape is a story that has not been told. For the first time Parsell, one of America's leading spokespeople for prison reform, shares the story of his coming of age behind bars. He gives voice to countless others who have been exposed to an incarceration system that turns a blind eye to the abuse of the prisoners in its charge. Since life behind bars is so often exploited by television and movie re-enactments, the real story has yet to be told. Fish is the first breakout story to do that.

Fish: A Memoir of a Boy in a Man's Prison Details

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From Reader Review **Fish: A Memoir of a Boy in a Man's Prison** for online ebook

CMolieri says

It's been a really long time since a book was capable of moving me to tears, but by the last pages I was sobbing. Parsell writes about serving time in prison when he was 17 with painful honesty about vulnerability, violence, the brutality of rape, coming to terms with his sexuality in a hostile setting while trying to survive his term. Stunning.

Jennifer Vogel says

I found this book as a suggestion on amazon. I'm not into reading gay/lesbian literature, but this was a good book. It is extremely sexually graphic. It gives an account of a young man sent to prison for a relatively minor crime. He is then raped and treated like a piece of property his entire stay in prison. He explains what it's like to be controlled by other prisoners and how there is really no help for men that can't protect themselves. As he did, you just have to give in and put your time in. I don't know anything about prison life and this book really gives you the down and dirty. It asks the question...even if you did do something bad to get sent to prison or even if you are gay in prison, do you deserve to be raped? I'm sure everyone will have a different answer. The author was even successful in getting George Bush to sign a new law protecting men from rape in prison, which I found pretty impressive on his part. Good read, not for those that can't handle the truth.

Gayle says

This book simply has to be read to be appreciated. It is written by a man who was a boy (17) when he was sent to a man's prison for robbing a Fotomat with a plastic toy gun.

In the beginning I was engaged in this boy's story. In that dark world people do whatever it takes to survive, and apparently almost constant sex is what it takes! However, out of 336 pages, probably 300 were just that-s-e-x. I realize the point of the story is getting across how young men who never should have entered an adult prison are abused (even by the guards). I realize what a horror it was for the author and that getting the word out is of paramount importance. However, for *me*, (and I am speaking only for myself) I was convinced after 150 pages; the rest became sort of "ho hum," like war and violence tends to become ho hum from constant exposure.

Mr. Parsell, is now an activist and writer working to end sexual abuse in prison. I do wish him luck. I hope that others become aware of the problem enough to want to help and support his efforts. Reforms are absolutely necessary. With over 2 million people incarcerated in the United States and no slow down in sight, it's great to know that at least one person cares.

Rick says

Harrowing, thought-provoking, and heartbreaking, this account of a 17 year old's years in adult prison is not an easy read, but it's ultimately immensely gratifying.

Sarah says

This is the true story of a 17-year old boy sent to prison for holding up a photo-mat with a toy gun. Yes, it was a practical joke that put him behind bars for four years. In addition to experiencing prison rape, power politics and the label attached to being inside a maximum-security prison by guards, family and society, he had to go through a painful struggle to accept his sexuality. Not many people can say they came out, were raped in prison and then achieve a stable enough life to feel comfortable enough to write about it for the world's eyes. Parsell does not hold back any details of the trauma he went through. It serves as a good example of prison life for people who want to learn about prisoner human rights.

Ilene says

This is a man's story, his real life so how could I adequately review it? I can't it is not my right.

It was gritty, raw and heartbreaking BUT he made it out and thrived. Most writers embellish but I fear that TJ may have actually downplayed some of what happened. I pray that these Hell's he wrote about don't go on anymore but my guess is they still do. Times advance and prisoners get more crafty.

Prisoners deserve prison? Sure but the punishment doesn't always fit the crime.

T.J. thank you for telling your story.

Jeannie says

Hard hitting and brutal true story of what happens to a young man thrown into a maximum security prison. What stood out for me was his courage in telling his story, most people suffering this treatment in prison wouldn't be as forthcoming about it. He comes out of the system a better person which speaks volumes for who he really is. A good read that never bored me.

Lola says

This book is just....wow. So brutal. The author is very brave. I hope the prison system will continue to improve to avoid tragedies and mistakes.

Danny Tyran says

Early in his memoirs, T.J. Parsell doesn't yet know that he is gay. He wondered about that, but he makes a young woman pregnant. He discovers his homosexuality in prison. The theme of his memoirs is entirely focused on his coming of age, his discovery of his homosexuality and his coming out.

One day, he commits a crime: he robs a Fotomat with a toy gun. But US laws consider that even if the gun was a toy, Parsell nevertheless committed a robbery and he was sentenced and imprisoned for that crime.

He is repeatedly raped in prison until Slide Steps "offer" himself as his protector. Later, at his final prison, Parsell meets Paul King and falls in love with him. King teaches him how to survive in prison.

At the end of his incarceration, Parsell returns home, continues his studies and becomes vice president of a computer firm. He participates in many groups to help prisoners in general, but especially to teach them to avoid prison rapes. Subsequently, a law is passed allowing prisoners to denounce their rapists, which they could not do before.

This is a good book, especially if you are interested in any aspect of homosexuality and sex among inmates. It offers an encouraging perspective in the sense that the author managed to get through it all and fared very well in his life outside jail.

"Fish" is better written than "I cried, You Didn't Listen", a book addressing the same topic that I read lately. Parsell is more educated, so he has a better grasp on English language. He even allows a few small jokes regarding how some prisoners talk, "But for the moment, I was preoccupied with trying to figure out if, *don't lose no good time* was a triple negative, and if so, did that mean I didn't want to don't lose no, or if I wanted to not don't lose some?" lolll "Don't lose no good time" was said by another prisoner at the beginning of Parsell's incarceration.

Two instructive quotes:

"According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, we house 2.2 million prisoners in the United States-- more than any other country in the world. And an estimated 13.5 million more pass through the justice system each year, including over 100,000 teenagers who are housed in adult facilities.

Sexual violence is a crime that preys on the vulnerable. In some states, children as young as fourteen have been sentenced to adult facilities, and in many cases, they fit the profile of likely sexual assault victims because they are small in stature and inexperienced in the ways of prisons."

"Most people who want to be tough on crime don't care what happens to inmates. But they should care, because 95 percent of all prisoners are eventually released back into society, indelibly marked by the violence they have seen or experienced."

But I nonetheless preferred "I cried, You Didn't Listen" written by another convict named Dwight (Sonny) Abbott. Perhaps I preferred it because I read it first. But I think this is mostly due to the fact that Sonny was first jailed when he was only eight years old without ever having committed a crime and his experience was so significant and brutal that he could not cope. He is seventy-two years old now and is living in a kind of hospital facility for inmates, which he'll probably never get out of. I found "I Cried..." story more significant mainly because it not only emphasizes prisoners' sexuality, but it describes also all other forms of violence, abuse and every difficulties prisoners face each day of their life.

So I give "Fish" 4 stars.

See other review here: <http://heartsonfirereviews.com/?tag=D...>

K.j. says

It was easy for me to imagine the struggles the author faced as I have worked in a jail setting. Though I am happy to say nothing like that ever occurred while I was working/or in the facility that I worked at- that any of us know of- I can see how easily those actions could go unnoticed.

The terrible cycle our legal system has created is so disheartening. The people I met from inside those walls were no different than myself. Making a poor decision can change your life forever. And once that decision is made, and time is spent inside, its nearly impossible to began anew.

Every once in a while I see someone I recognize and find out they are doing well for themselves. I am so proud of them for making it 'on the outs'. But without a strong support system, how can anyone do it?

I hope as a society we can stop labeling people and allowing them to have second chances. I hope rape inside prisons has become a distant memory instead of an every day occurrence. I wish I could have been there to help this author as he faced those demons alone. I'm glad as a society our collective minds are changing for the better, but people do often forget about those who get locked up, believing they deserve whatever happens to them.

As I worked on the inside, I always told myself that being locked up was their punishment, and any continued undue punishment while locked up was unnecessary. Their freedom is already removed, there is no need to treat them as less than human. Sometimes all someone needs is a person to believe in them, like wonderful Sherry did.

We could all stand to be a little more empathetic and a lot less judgmental.

Good book and highly recommended. Kudos to the author, you did a great job.

Mohd Yasim says

Life is a series of choices, and most choices are based on two things: love or fear. But what happen when life leaves you with a very limited options and in order to survive you either fight or submit.

T.S. says

I never heard of this book until recently. After the last "page," my Kindle directed me to related books that readers of "Orange is the New Black" have read. Given this, I thought the book would be an interesting comparison, given that it is set in a men's state prison rather than in a women's federal prison. The book, however, provides very little insight into how a state ran prison operates. Instead, it is more of a coming of age story. Specifically, it's how one young man, who enters prison at 17, comes of age and, more

importantly, comes to terms with sexuality while in prison. This, though, is where my problems with the book lie.

The book graphically describes the rape scenes in way that seems almost as if they were relished rather than reviled. To me, the intense descriptions were unnecessary, and after repeated details of various rapes it started to feel almost like pandering. It felt as if the book was written for people with a prurient curiosity. If there was a prison rape romance novel genre, then the first half of the book would fit into it.

That being said, I thought I would really dislike the entire book, but in third quarter of it, the book started to grow on me. It's here that the story shifts and the author delves more internally as he comes to terms with his sexual orientation, deals with injustice within the justice system, begins his spiritual journey, and realizes his own potential. If it weren't for the last quarter of this book, I probably would only give it a one-star rating, but the final chapters more than make up for what is endured in the first three-quarters as Tim undergoes self-evaluation, accepts himself (and responsibility for his past actions), and then moves forward to closure. In that sense, the book mirrors how prisoners might develop as they serve their sentences.

Kiesha says

Sexual violence and prison - two of my greatest fears. Prison hyper-masculinity, power, and rape. In an institutionalized community where violence is one of the few commodities, the author shares his story of sexual abuse and his struggle to come to terms (and self acceptance) with his own sexuality and identity.

This terrible, horrific tale of a survivor's story kept me up two nights in a row. I couldn't relax enough to fall asleep because as soon as I did I knew the night terrors would chase me. I haven't read a book this quickly since I don't remember when and Parsell's experience and that of his fellow inmates still haunts me. As soon as I finished reading I made an immediate donation to Stop Prisoner Rape and Human Rights Watch. This book stirred up my passion about prison reform - read it! Get involved.

Should you need a teaser to light the fires of motivation, check out this article from The Nation:
<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060710...>

Robert says

What led me this story was an interest in reading someone's tale of surviving prison abuse. I didn't pay much attention to the description of the book or its author.

What I found was a truly emotional story about a young gay man who came from a dysfunctional family and made some very poor choices in life.

How the system treated him was shocking but not a total surprise. What he chose to do with himself during his incarceration and afterwards is inspiring.

The graphic nature of the author's storytelling may turn some people off but I thought it was necessary to portray what jail life was like for him. I commend Mr. Parsell for his endurance and ability to turn his negative situation into a way to ultimately help others.

Jay Bell says

Who isn't fascinated by prison life? I've watched a slew of movies and documentaries, but they always left me hungry for more detail. When I heard an interview with the author on BBC radio some years back, the concept of a gay man being behind bars intrigued me. Would he find it easier to cope with the sexual aspect of playing a boy to a man that protected him? I finally got around to reading this book recently, and boy was it a much needed eye opener!

I'm not much of a nonfiction guy, but Tim's story reads like a work of fiction. The truth of prison life is even wilder than the glimpses I've seen on TV. What Tim went through, and what countless others go through while awaiting to be judged innocent or not, is sickening. And yet, the story also surprised with the occasional romantic moment. I only wish that the more positive and willing sexual moments were described in as much detail as the rape scenes. I understand why the author didn't hold back with the unpleasant details, since the ugly reality needed to be exposed, but I would have liked to experience those rare and fleeting moments of beauty alongside of them.

As many other reviewers have pointed out, the book is riddled with typos, especially the second half. None of them take away from the compelling story though. It's always clear what the author intended to say, and I didn't find them troubling. While not always easy, I highly recommend this book to anyone curious about prison life, and the strangely homosexual/homophobic world that exists there.

Gregory says

Definitely a page turner. You cringe with what might come next. Yet, it is more the sick side of human nature that I found that I was curious about what comes next. You want something awful to happen so you can recoil and the difficulty as to which this man survived the experience. As a true tale, you feel awful for the guy and can't imagine what he went through. It was a really sad read but good. However, I felt like a voyeur - or a serf in medieval times willing going to the Town Square to watch someone be hanged. I guess it revealed in me something I didn't like about myself. It also confirmed for me how backwards our society is and how disgusting the whole prison system is. I think it is just a matter of time before more people realize what a disaster the penal system is and how we are creating more monsters rather than trying to figure out how to help those who can be helped and making people more productive members of society.

Hannah says

"Chicken Soup for the Gay Prison Raped Soul"

I decided to read the book after binge-watching the Netflix *Orange is the New Black*, before reading the memoir of the same name that inspired the show, as a sort of grounding action before reading the less representative experiences of Piper Kerman. I found the book at the top of several lists for prison culture non-fiction. [Fish: A Memoir](#) is often cited as a sort of songbook for the prison rights' activists since the author, T.J. Parsell, is an active, outspoken, and popular advocate for the end of sexual violence in prisons. I

knew the author was gay, I was warned the book would be graphic, I knew the story would directly address violent rape, homophobia, abuse of power by prison officials, and race relations.

I thought it was a "message" book about the prison system. But it's not.

It's a coming of age story.

A "fish" is a new inmate, and when a series of misfortunes sends mischievous Tim into the adult penal system at 17 he is definitely a catch. Young, attractive, skinny, and white, he is doomed to the life of a "boy" or a "punk" for his stay, needing a larger, meaner, more connected "Man" to protect him from the rest of the inmates. Since Tim has been questioning his sexuality in a rural, small town, he vacillates between excitement at the chance to explore his sexual urges in an environment that he believes embraces homosexuality and guilt, believing that his small-town tabooed desires might be responsible for driving the behavior that put him in prison. He doesn't have time to decide for himself how to deal with his burgeoning homosexuality, though... after a brutal gang rape upon his arrival, a Man called Slide Step takes Tim on as his Boy; raping him regularly--but otherwise treating him with dignity and care, and even confessing feelings for him. Though not sexually attracted to him, Tim begins to look to Slide Step as a father figure. When they're separated, he's devastated, but finds comfort in a relationship with the savvy Boy Paul. Paul teaches Tim how to find and keep his power in the Man-Boy relations that prison demanded of them, and the two fall in love, each providing the other the singular attention, consideration, and care that neither had met before in their life... until Paul brutally wields his experience over Tim, revealing a shocking truth about Slide Step and then escaping from prison without saying goodbye. In the end, things turn out well for Tim, who, now grown and sharing children with a handsome husband, uses the name "T.J." for the byline of the book.

The narrator slips in and out of time and memory throughout the narrative, linking atmospheric recollections of his drunken, angry, and funny family to graphic descriptions of prison life. But the real story is snuck in between these captivating events in the form of Parsell's frank commentary. He owns the confusion he feels about his sexual orientation, about his crimes, about the men he's interacting with, about everything.

It can be discomfiting to read some of the rape passages, it seems like they are recollected with more relish than revulsion. It's discomfiting, but also beautiful, honest, and true. He does not shy away from the ugly fact that sometimes sexual violation, both related thoughts and the acts themselves, can be arousing--instead he confronts and rejects the guilt a survivor of sexual assault can feel over those emotions. He explains how the events, his reactions, and his feelings shaped him into the person he is today.

It's a book about self-examination, acceptance, and closure.

With a ton of gay prison rape.

Probably not for everyone, but an uplifting and quick read.

Rose Gluck says

The Story:

In what would turn out to be a horrible mistake with tragic consequences, seventeen-year-old Tim Parsell holds up a photo store with a toy gun. The stunt had been a gag but the girl behind the counter thinks the gun

is real and hands a small sum of cash over to Tim who takes it and walks away home. Tim is arrested and booked for armed robbery. He is convicted and sentenced to up to 15 years in the Michigan prison system. It doesn't matter that the gun was a toy, the employee thought it was real and believed she was in mortal danger so the charge of "armed robbery" stands.

According to Michigan law Tim is an adult at 17.

Tim is sent to an adult close-security prison (akin to maximum security with extended time outside of their cells). He enters an alternate society behind locked cells, prison gates, and under the watch of armed guards. While the criminal justice system looms in the background, a large amorphous machine that is inconceivably powerful and fundamentally unjust, Parsell's memoir centers on the lives and dynamics of the prisoners and life inside the prison. It is a terrifying world of hierarchy, inmate code and deception. New prisoners are known as fish and like other fish Tim entered prison life with little knowledge of the rules and how to survive. Something as innocent as accepting a cigarette from an inmate may be entrapment.

On Tim's first day in the general prison population, he is drawn into a deceitful plot by a group of men pretending to befriend him. He senses something is off in the way the ringleader speaks to him (in a sort of cunning charm and long, suggestive glances). The men offer Tim 'spud juice' (home made prison liquor), and he joins them in drinking. What Tim doesn't know is that the drink is spiked with Thorazine, a heavy tranquilizer. The drug takes effect and Tim is brutally gang raped, unable to so much as call for help. The drug is paralyzing. Once the sexual assault ends, the perpetrators flip a coin to determine who will own Tim. There after he is the property of the coin toss winner, a man known as Slide Step.

Despite the conditional relationship between Tim and Slide Step, the two men share an intimate bond. In exchange for sexual relations Slide Step –an inmate with high respect and status amongst the other prisoners- - protects Tim. The two develop a closeness and intimacy that would be hard to understand outside of the context of trauma and the terror of prison.

Review:

Parsell's honest account of incarceration in the Michigan prison system centers on sexual violence, exploitation, prison hierarchy, and inmate code. Reading the book kept me emotionally engaged and often terrified for Tim. As I continued to read I didn't know how he could possibly survive his remaining sentence. Even when his term was nearly over and he had only a year to go, I wondered how he would make it. The tension never let up. I was fearful that injustice would strike again and he would not be released. I was deeply saddened when Tim was transferred to a new facility and without the protection of Slide Step, he was gang raped a second time, more violently than the first. It was even more heartbreaking when word of Tim's sexual assault spread through the prison and he was targeted further and subject to ongoing harassment.

Throughout the story my thoughts returned to the fact that Tim was a seventeen year old boy who was raped and forced into sexual slavery for robbing a photomat with a toy gun.

After reading the book I found out that Tim (T.J. Parsell) is a human rights activist and has spent several decades working to change the conditions for prisoners and to end prison rape. In his prisoner advocacy work, Parsell often states that he feels he deserved to be punished for his crime, but did not deserve to be brutally raped and exploited. It is admirable that he acknowledges the traumatic impact the robbery must have had on the sales woman. I agree with him. However, I couldn't help but think of the things myself had done as a teenager and the trouble that friends of mine had gotten into. Teenagers do stupid things sometimes. Tim got caught and injustice repeatedly intervened in his young life. I agree with a need for contrition for a stupid, hurtful act – but how can justice be reached in the context of a system that subjects

teenagers (and sometimes children) to torture?

Parsell continues to work towards changing the prison system and protecting prisoners from sexual violence. He bravely uses his own story to shine a light on the broken prison system and give voice to the many victims of prison rape. In his book *Fish: A Memoir of a Boy in a Man's Prison*, Parsell gives an empowered voice and dignity to the many prisoners who have suffered rape and exploitation. He has also demonstrated the courage to forge a path for all of us who have experienced trauma and the re-traumatizing effects of societal shame and stigmatization. I deeply admire his talent, courage, and insight.

Stephen says

While I tend not to like books that dwell on the prurient interests surrounding the rapes of young guys in prison, this book held some appeal because it dealt with the prisons in my home state of Michigan.

I had an uncle that made a few mistakes and did a stretch at the state penitentiary in Jackson Michigan. My grandmother often visited my uncle there and usually got my dad to take her. One time my mom and dad decided to drop my grandma off with us kids in the car. The high walls and the machine gun turrets are still imposing images in my mind.

This is a true story and the author is only a few years older than I am. His story of the brutal environment inside the prison seemed all the more striking because it was grounded in events of the day that I experienced as a contemporary.

He tells it like it was and it's not entirely bleak. There are touching moments and he even learns a bit about how to deal with the outside world while inside.

While it's not a cheery subject by any means it is a fascinating read.

Cory says

I was completely sucked in and captivated from the start. I had to keep reminding myself that this wasn't fiction, which made some parts difficult to read as it really humanized it for me. I finished it this morning and I can't stop thinking about it. There are people that touched Parsell's life in prison and I keep wondering 'where are they now'? Very eye opening and thought provoking read!
