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A major American novel, and arguably the finest work of literature ever to emerge from a US prison, On the Yard is a book of penetrating psychological realism in which Malcolm Braly paints an unforgettable picture of the complex and frightening world of the penitentiary. At its center are the violently intertwined stories of Chilly Willy, in trouble with the law from his earliest years and now the head of the prison's flourishing black market in drugs and sex, and of Paul, wracked with guilt for the murder of his wife and desperate for some kind of redemption. At once brutal and tender, clear-eyed and rueful, On the Yard presents the penitentiary not as an exotic location, an exception to everyday reality, but as an ordinary place, one every reader will recognize, American to the core.

On the Yard Details

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Author : Malcolm Braly , Jonathan Lethem

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From Reader Review On the Yard for online ebook

John says

Dated but so real.

Tyler Jones says

The story is a sad but not uncommon one: an abandoned baby grows up in the institutions of the state and, once grown, finds himself in and out of jail. Such was the life of Malcolm Braly, who by the age of forty had spent sixteen years in prison for various robberies. While in prison he wrote three mediocre novels, then while on parole in 1965 he began what has become the great American prison novel- On the Yard. The book was a critical hit and more importantly seemed to effect a change in the life of its author; after publication in 1967 Braly never returned to prison, got married, had children and was a "fat and happy" man the rest of his days.

The novel has no clear protagonist at first but shifts focus from one character to the next leaving the reader with so many different impressions of prison life that a composite picture forms that is frightening and fascinating. Slowly the main characters emerge; Paul, an average man who committed an act of violence in a moment of passion; Red, the clownish repeat offender; Chilly, the prison kingpin of drugs and loan-sharking, and lurking around the edges is Stick, a violent sociopath. The stories of the prisoners and the men who keep them weave in and out and not until the end of the book does it become apparent how closely their stories are linked.

The novel is hard to categorize because the tone of the story shifts nearly as much the point of view. It is like realism; all the nuances of violence and boredom seem authentic, yet it is much more than prison reportage. Braly had a keen understanding of the importance of the story and masterfully developed the tension.

Many thanks are due to the New York Review of Books for bringing this wonderful book back in print.

Nancy Oakes says

To be quite honest, I'd never heard of this book before I went looking for NYRB titles to read. Another NYRB title I'd read earlier, Hard Rain Falling, by Don Carpenter, also dealt with life in prison, but it examines the causes of why the main characters went to prison, what happened to them while they were there, and then what happened after they were released. Unlike that novel, the action in On the Yard occurs nearly completely within prison walls, and the story is told through the voices of a group of prisoners as well as by people who work there. As a matter of fact, the author, Malcolm Braly, had written three earlier novels while incarcerated, then started On the Yard while doing a stint at San Quentin. He had to do it in secret since it was based on his own experience and he was threatened with revocation of parole if he continued to write it. Its publication was put off until much later, according to Howard Bruce Franklin, author of Prison Writings in 20th Century America, after he was actually off parole.

The characters drive this novel -- the author often floats from character to character, as noted by Jonathan Lethem, who provides the book's introduction:

"...moving...through the minds and moments of dozens of characters, some recurrently, some only for a sole brief visitation which nearly always proves definitive. Three or four of these are into the minds of the prison's keepers, including that of the morose, long-enduring Warden. The rest are a broad array of prisoners, some "hardened" repeaters, some newly arrived at San Quentin, some floating in between and trying to measure the rightness and permanence of their placement inside those walls."

Lethem's assessment is quite accurate. How these people deal with the stultifying sameness that is their life day after day is one of the main themes of this novel. For example, there's Billy Oberholster (aka Chilly Willy), imprisoned for several armed robberies, who made his way to the top of the food chain so to speak on the inside by being at the head of several operations: he runs a usurious cigarette loan business, has the corner on nasal inhalants (which the prisoners use to get high on amphetamine sulphate), and runs a tidy black-market business that offers him a great many advantages while serving out his time. His influence is spread everywhere, down to his ability to maintain a cell with no roomies. He is the king of the yard - and uses others for his dirty work, keeping his hands clean. He counts among his friends Society Red and Nunn, a repeater back only after half a year of freedom. Then there's Stick, a sort of Neo-Nazi who survives through creating scenarios in his head with himself as the centerpiece -- constantly staging "new myths" in which he plays the major part, imagining himself as vampire and deliverer. Another most interesting character is Lorin -- an intelligent 22 year-old, in for stealing a car, spending his time trying to fend off the attention of another inmate who has a thing about shoes. When he's not dreaming about Kim Novak, Lorin works on his poetry writing. One of the most interesting characters is Paul Juleson, who's been incarcerated for the murder of his wife, and who wants nothing more than to be left on his own, often living in favorite fantasies, trying to steer clear of the other inmates, "watching the animals from a distance and taking every precaution necessary to keep free of them in all essential ways." He spends his days mostly reading and visiting the library on his lunch break; the only person on the outside who still keeps in contact with him is his aunt, who sends him \$5.00 each year on his birthday. When Juleson decides to spend his not-yet-received birthday cash on cigarettes, he runs afoul of Chilly Willy when the money fails to arrive, leading to one of the major plots that runs throughout the novel. Each character's worst points are carefully revealed rather than soft soaped, yet the author provides them with a fair amount of points with which the reader finds him or herself showing some empathy -- including those outside cell bars: the psychologists, guards and even the warden and his servant. For readers who are more interested in plot, there are several stories at work that will keep you actively engrossed in the story. But it is Braly's characters, each brought to life (if even only for a few lines in some cases) that will draw the reader's attention on a deeper level.

While its content may seem tame to modern readers, considering what goes on in today's prisons, *On the Yard* is still a solid read. Kurt Vonnegut's blurb on the back cover notes that this book is "Surely the great American prison novel." In my case, it would be difficult to agree with his statement since I don't have a lot of reading experience in that area, but I did find *On the Yard* to be quite engrossing once the cast of characters was introduced. It seemed a bit slow at first (as character-driven novels often can be), but I started the getting the picture of what happens within the prison walls (how the hierarchies play out, the interplay between prison officials and the prisoners, and among the prisoners themselves), I couldn't put this book down. The author, Malcolm Braly, spent a large part of his life behind bars in different prisons, so he knows what he's talking about and this is exemplified in the book's realistic and gritty tone. Obviously, the subject matter might not be for everyone, but it is one of those novels that you won't soon forget after putting down, not just because of the story, but because of the writing and Braly's mastery of characterization.

Larry Ggggggggggggggggggggggggggggg says

RIP William oberholster, who flew too close to the sun on wings of sodomy and black market benzedrine

Geoff Hyatt says

"On the Yard," like a boxer who finds his rhythm in the later rounds, starts off on shaky footing but really comes through in the end. In his introduction to Braly's novel, Jonathan Lethem compares the narrative's shifting point-of-view to both an audition process and to the hesitation cuts of a suicide. Fortunately, this process isn't indefinite, and the work isn't killed by its early attempts. Grimy realism mixes with hopeless dreams behind the walls. None of it feels contrived, and while a couple aspects seem outrageous, they don't undermine the story's impact. This ain't no "Shawshank Redemption," so if you're looking for a triumph of the spirit, move on. "On the Yard" is a novel about people imprisoned by more than just bars and bricks; they are trapped by love, duty, rage, addiction, and madness. They are serving life sentences as human beings. That, more than anything, is the Big Bitch--no one gets out alive.

Chris says

I could not stop talking about how much I was enjoying this book. I'm sure people tired of my "It's Oz in a book!" refrain, but it is. The characters in this 1967 prison novel are intriguingly complex, and I seriously cannot remember a more gripping climax to a fiction narrative. I was bent on writing a film adaptation, but I see it's already been done. Remake perhaps?

Paul says

4.5*

Kid says

I found this in a thrift store and bought it for the blurbs. . .Vonnegut, John D. MacDonald, Truman Capote all were saying that it was the heaviest book ever. And they were mostly correct. It is a lost classic of sorts.

This must be relegated to the cult status b/c I have to work too hard to prop it up. The writing is amazing, the characters are amazing - it's a novel written by a career criminal who saw the light after like 20 years in the big house - so it has the tinge of authenticity in its favor. But I'm like 3/4 of the way into the book and I'm really not sure what the point is to this thing besides a portrait of a prison. That is all well and good and apparently we need more of these kinds of books - probably we need more NOW but that's another review. I recommend that you check this out though. It's one of those forgotten genre classics that crate diggers will appreciate. I think you know who you are.

Ana says

Todo empezo buscando inspiración para una historia que hace ya un tiempo que me ronda. La idea central estaba más o menos perfilada, pero siempre quiero que tenga algo de base real, así que comencé a buscar bibliografía. Lo poco que encontré estaba en inglés, así que decidí inspirarme en novelas centradas en cárceles americanas... y allí surgió este título. La sinopsis me gustó, así que me lancé de cabeza. Escrita por un ex convicto de prisiones como San Quintín y Folsom, las autoridades estuvieron a punto de denegarle la libertad condicional cuando supieron de la existencia de este libro. No se trata de una autobiografía, sino de la vida de una serie de reclusos en la prisión de San Quintín. Un repertorio rico de personajes con su bagaje y sus esperanzas (o desesperanzas). Son tan variados que no terminas de centrarte en ninguno; todos son protagonistas, e incluso podrían tener su propia novela independiente. Pero la unión de todas estas vidas hace que la novela sea tan colorida y amplia en sus puntos de vista. Vidas (y muertes) que se cruzan en este mundo cerrado. Aquellos personajes que podrían llegar a ser "los malos de la película" no lo son tanto, e incluso terminas sintiendo aprecio por ellos y sus circunstancias. Es una Novela, con mayúscula. De las que te dejan un gustillo amargo, pero que se mantienen en tu cabeza después de terminadas.

Jim says

Again, a blurb for a book overstates its significance or power; this was a good story of a genre I enjoy, prison stories (why? I have no idea). The writing was decent, but not amazing, and the characters were kind of dull (my opinion). There really wasn't any new story line that I haven't seen before, and the rather startling lack of racial tension that actually exists in the prison system (especially California---at least two Hispanic rivals, blacks, and whites), I think watered it down a bit. There are better, and in fact funnier fictional pieces, as well as really good memoirs. Also, a couple of characters are introduced, and then seem to simply vanish. And there were underlying hints of misogyny that made me feel uneasy. Overall, however, I liked the story, as well as finding out about this little-known author.

Slade Grayson says

A classic tale of life behind bars for an assortment of characters, written by someone who actually lived that life.

Tip: Don't read the introduction until after you read the novel. Lethem gives away a few plot points.

Joe says

A solid, well-plotted prison novel from a man who spent half of his life behind bars. Well-rounded characters, and superb writing, in particular, Braly could make some fine similes. I'll be ordering his biography soon.

Jeremiah says

On the Yard is correctional facility Shakespeare--a novel at once limited by prison walls, yet inside the head, the heart, and the hands the reader slams on the table in disbelief in light of its twists and turns. Here Braly is on to a sort of desiccating lucidity, and I doubt I'll come across another novel with such power.

Kobe Bryant says

The moral of this book is dont fall in love with a queen

J.M. Hushour says

Easily the best novel I've read in a long time, and probably one of the best American novels I've ever read. Hyperbole, right?

Braly spent most of his adult life in prison and wrote several novels while he was still in, and worked on "On the Yard" after his release. It's so great, it's hard to know where to begin. Multiple character arcs spiral around the black vortices of Chilly Willy, yard king, the Barksdale/Kingpin of San Quentin, who controls the trade in drugs and cigarettes; Juleson, mild-mannered suburban guy who murdered his wife. They lock horns. Nothing happens the way you expect it.

At turns hilarious, harrowing, and infuriating (don't get enamored with anyone), it's hard to overstate the importance of this book whether as a microcosm of American writ whole, or a Wire-like exploration of the worst and best in human nature. Dostoevsky would've been proud.
