



You Got Nothing Coming: Notes From a Prison Fish

By Jimmy A. Lerner



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A memoir of astonishing power—the true story of a middle-class, middle-aged man who fell into the Inferno of the American prison system, and what he has to do to survive.

It is your worst nightmare. You wake up in an 8' x 6' concrete-and-steel cell designated "Suicide Watch #3." The cell is real. Jimmy Lerner, formerly a suburban husband and father, and corporate strategic planner and survivor, is about to become a prison "fish," or green new arrival. Taken to a penitentiary in the Nevada desert to begin serving a twelve-year term for voluntary manslaughter, this once nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn ends up sharing a claustrophobic cell with Kansas, a hugely muscled skinhead with a swastika engraved on his neck and a serious set of issues. And if he dares complain, the guards will bluntly tell him, "You got nothing coming."

Bringing us into a world of petty corruption, racial strife, and crank-addicted neo-Nazis, Jimmy Lerner gives us a fish's progress: a brash, compelling, and darkly comic story peopled with characters who are at various times funny, violent, and surprisingly tender. His rendering of prison language is mesmerizingly vivid and exact, and his search for a way not simply to survive but to craft a new way to live, in the most unpropitious of circumstances, is a tale filled with resilience, dignity, and a profound sense of the absurd. In the book's climax, we learn just what demonic set of circumstances—a compound of bad luck and worse judgment—led him to the lethal act of self-defense that landed him in a circle of an American hell.

Electrifying, unforgettable, bracingly cynical, and perceptive, *You Got Nothing Coming* is impossible to put down or shake off. What the cult favorite *Oz* is to television, this book is to prose—and all of the events are real.

From the Hardcover edition.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

You Got Nothing Coming, Jimmy A. Lerner's memoir of his first year (of a possible 12) as an inmate in a Nevada state prison, is a shocking, hilarious, and heartbreaking narrative of a world both parallel to and absolutely alien from the one most readers inhabit. With deft, economical prose, Lerner, a middle-aged former marketing director for a major corporation, introduces us to his fellow inmates--swastika-tattooed skinheads, Wiccans, methamphetamine addicts, and fashion-conscious prostitutes, among others--as well as a multitude of prisoner scams, nonexistent but on-the-books rehab programs, and the life-or-death intricacies of the convict code of etiquette. Lerner's ear for prison language is pitch-perfect, and much of what we learn comes directly from the mouths of the incarcerated. Lerner has, in effect, written a nonfiction novel, one artfully laced with mordant humor and by turns tender, caustic, insightful, and relentlessly candid. --*H. O'Billovitch*

From Publishers Weekly

In the mid-1990s, Lerner killed a man in Las Vegas. Convicted of voluntary manslaughter, he's now doing time in the Nevada state prison system (he's due to be paroled in January 2002). Even so, he quickly earns, and keeps, readers' sympathies in this wholly engrossing memoir of his time behind bars in part because of the charisma of his voice, in part because of his book's clever structure, which has Lerner come clean about exactly why he's in prison only near the book's end. For 18 years an executive for Pacific Bell, Lerner employs a voice that's charming, canny, sassy, self-deprecating; a voice perhaps not to be entirely trusted, but one that's deeply magnetic. Certainly as a middle-aged, middle-class, highly educated white, Lerner brings an unusual perspective to his prison experiences, which he plays on throughout. "Curiouser and curiouser I felt like Alice fallen into the rabbit hole," he writes. Readers will share that sentiment as, along with Lerner, they negotiate prison life and culture, where you don't enter a man's house (cell) without his permission and where a usable chess set can be fashioned from wet toilet paper and stale toothpaste two examples of the hundreds of details with which Lerner grounds his tale. Curiouser still are the prison denizens he describes, misfits and malfeasants all, most notably his longtime cellmate, Kansas, a white supremacist who takes a shine to the author fortunately, as Kansas is the top "dawg" of the cons. Eventually, Lerner loses his "fish" (newcomer) status, growing adept at prison ways and slang ("And every Righteous Con in the joint knows a catcher ain't nothin' but a punk-ass bitch!"), carrying readers along with him up to the book's final chapters, that is, where he flashes back to the crime that sent him behind bars in passages that reek of self-justification. Overall, this is the most gripping, and most inviting, prison memoir in years. (Feb. 12)Forecast: Any book by a convicted killer, especially post-Jack Abbott, may face some media and public resistance, but the national radio campaign and other publicity planned by Broadway should bring this title serious attention and healthy sales.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School--Tempered with black humor, and with dialogue skillfully written in the vernacular ("Wassup, dawgs"), this tale of prison acclimation reads like an adventure story. The author was a marketing executive for Pacific Bell, complete with an MBA, living near San Francisco, when he was incarcerated in Nevada for manslaughter. He refers to his crime obliquely until the last section of the book, when he details the events that led to the murder of the "monster." First, readers learn what it's like for a 47-year-old, white,

middle-class man to suddenly be a "fish" or newcomer to prison. Taken under the wing of Kansas, a muscled skinhead who thinks he is a Nazi descendant, not the Jew he actually is, Lerner manages to survive. And he learns, ironically, using the business education lessons he acquired through years of management seminars (from *Managing the Difficult Employee*-"mirroring and echoing") how to get along. And, readers finally learn what brought Jimmy to this place. It's an old story-prescription drug abuse and chronic alcoholism. This isn't an angry or self-serving story; the author is only too aware of his failings. He also portrays his fellow convicts in the same honest and sardonically humorous manner. The prison system incurs more of his disdain. The guards, too, fare poorly under his descriptive pen. Lerner's lively and action-packed story is a stunning reality check, showing readers what can happen when you give up your life to the power of an addiction. Tragic and honest, it is a compelling read.

Carol DeAngelo, Kings Park Library, Burke, VA

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Users Review

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