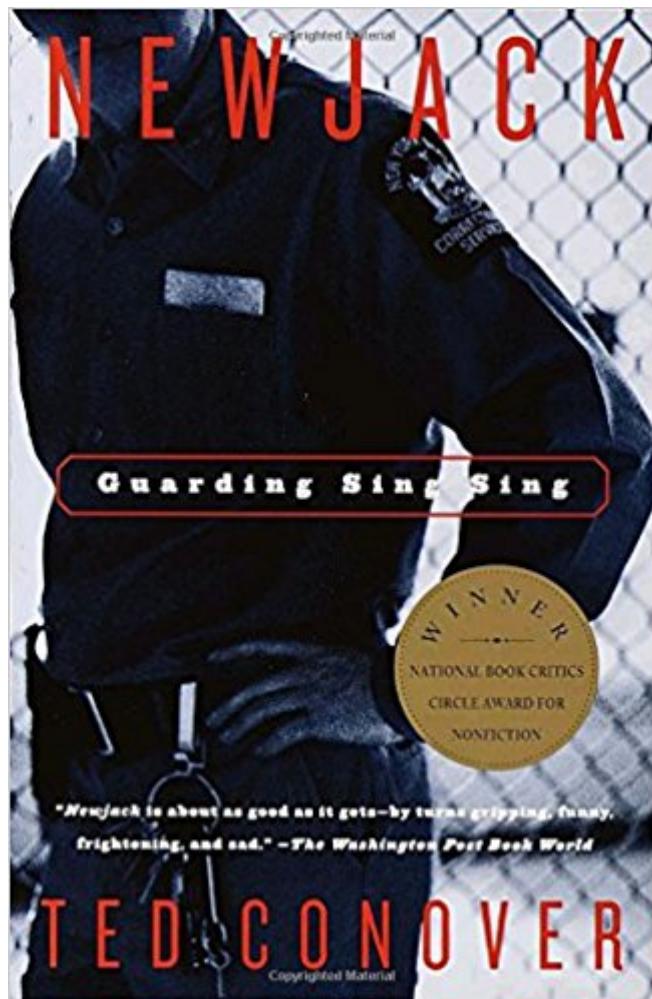


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Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

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 heartbreakingly sad 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 --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I just finished this book. I read it after reading one of his other great books "Routes of Man". This book was no let down. It provided a very interesting look into the world of the American prison system. From the day-to-day mundane procedures to the heart-pounding encounters with some very dangerous men, Mr Conover's writing effectively transports the reader as if he were there. This is not a world to which many of us are not accustomed to having much contact. From a sociological standpoint this book has much to offer with regard to understanding what ails our penal system and why things are the way they are. The media often portrays Corrections Officers (COs) as brutal and without compassion. But when you really examine the situations in which they are placed (literally and figuratively) one gains a better understanding of why some of the abusive practices happen. These are law enforcement officers who deal with some of the worst offenders while, in the case of Sing-Sing at least, work under abysmal conditions. Mr Conover addresses issues with how we rehabilitate or don't rehabilitate prisoners. No one wants to shell out money to send convicts to college or trade school, but the truth is these people will get released one day and will need to work if the public wants them to succeed. I know Mr Conover caught some flak from certain elements in the prison system over this book, but I don't think his portrayal was unfair or even all together negative. The key to change is understanding the problems so that you can focus on improvement. The book was great!

Newjack is book that gives firsthand experience to a very stressful and draining job and lifestyle. I

was recommended this book by a friend that is a C.O. in a medium security prison in the Midwest. I was interested because he shared that this book was pretty accurate in regards to the viewpoint of a correctional officer. I read it in three days--I read pretty quickly. This book gave me a clear and honest view of the way prison life moves for the guards and the prisoners. I would recommend this book to people interested in working in corrections or with released prisoners. This author brings you right into the daily interactions. Thank you for giving a voice to this group of silent protectors/enforcers.

Used to work in a jail for 11 years but never a prison. Heard the author talking about the book on WPR radio and he tweaked my interest. What an eye opener. From the vigorous training Conover went through to the history of the killing of the prisoners in the old days, the author told a great story. Felt like I was there with him and couldn't wait to get out of there after his shift. I gave the book to my fellow EMT who works at the Correctional Facility in our neighboring county. All guards should read it and treat their prisoners accordingly. Think I will read more of Conover's books.

As someone who worked briefly in a jail(not a prison) and as a contractor and not a guard, I strongly identify with much of what Ted Conover talks about. I enjoyed the fact that this book was honest and doesn't come across as a liberal or conservative diatribe. Just the facts as he saw it. I was however a bit disappointed it didn't end with an over arching review of his position of the system now that he had spent a year as a CO. I also would have liked a bit more about the prisoner mentality. Overall though, a very good book that I would recommend.

Gives an overview of a job that most people have no idea what it really is, but still misses on what Correction Officers have to deal with. It is not the author's fault as the problems CO's face build over time and the author is just giving a description of what a rookie is facing. In the author's defense it is truly hard to write about the perspective of a 19 or 20 year CO without going through what they have gone through. The only real flaw: it would appear that author is trying to give too much information at once and the book overall could have been written in a smoother way.

I'm almost done with this book and I've also read almost all the reviews of this book here on . First let me say that this book is spot on to the everyday life of a rookie correctional officer, he really nails it. Some pages are boring while others are exciting while on others there's a lot to learn, and that's the life of a rookie correctional officer right there in a nutshell! Some reviewers have said that he's a

bleeding heart who must hate correctional officers and prison staff and loves inmates and blah blah blah. As a correctional officer myself I can honestly say reading this nothing he has said felt insulting to me. While his views and opinions are clearly a little "softer" than your average "hardened" veteran correctional officer they're certainly not insulting or untrue. Mostly he just expresses how seeing people's lives go to waste because of poverty and crime and then incarceration is an unpleasant thing that takes a toll on a person. One must take into consideration that these are the words of a liberally educated, admittedly politically liberal author who walked in the role of a correctional officer for only one year. As others have mentioned it takes 3-5 years to really be a fully developed well rounded officer, not 365 days, of which only about 261 days were spent at work if he took no sick days or vacation days. Point is, I wouldn't say anything he says in the book is untrue of most prison's in this country, or too biased to stand behind, even for a conservative like myself. EVERYTHING he talks about in this book is either very well researched and stated from a stance of studied facts, or stated from his personal experiences working in Sing Sing. Nothing he's said in this book, so far, not quite done yet, differs from my experience working in prison. I'd recommend this book to anyone interested in working in prison or who knows someone who works in prison. It will give you a great insight into the life, day to day, and mind of a correctional officer, at least for the first year anyway. After the first year a lot changes for a lot of different reasons, it's too bad he didn't stay on a couple more years, then it would have gotten really interesting.

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