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Maximum Security. Eve Pell, ed.

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BOOK NOTE

MAXIMUM SECURITY (Eve Pell, ed.). New York, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc. 1972. 250 pages. \$6.95.

Maximum Security, edited by Eve Pell, is a collection of letters principally addressed to Fay Stender from inmates at various California prisons. Consumer tastes being what they are this book may fail to receive the readership it deserves, because it can not be merchandised by introducing the latest in the line of charismatic prison personalities. There is no Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, or Edgar Smith to be lionized. With the exception of Fleeta Drumgo of Soledad renown, the names signed beneath the letters mean absolutely nothing to the public. This is, however, one of the book's virtues. Confronted with an Eldridge Cleaver or the late George Jackson we may become distracted by their intellect and personality. Complaints raised to the level of *belles-lettres* ultimately fail to provoke our moral sense because too much is explained too well. Moreover many sympathize with these prison writers personally, and see their plight as an unfortunate mistake. A common reaction to the late George Jackson was a profound sense of disappointment that somehow someone with so much potential should be caged—that a man of *his* gifts should suffer the indignities of prison life. This attitude misses the point, as it fails to recognize that conditions repugnant to the talented are equally oppressive to the nonentity. This collection of letters partially remedies that error.

These letters are from the rank and file. Often they are selfish letters, begging for intercession on a variety of personal complaints and problems: an attempt to recover a gold watch appropriated by the authorities, a plea for medicine and medical care, a cry for protection, for sunlight, clean water, toilet paper, soap, food Some of the letters make feckless attempts at rhetoric and politics, but most do not, their writers much too concerned with simply securing immediate relief. As such they are urgent messages, created under hostile and problematic conditions. Accordingly they quite unselfconsciously capture the essence of their experience. Lamentably that experience is grim: beatings, gassings, shootings, homosexual assaults, unsanitary conditions. Yet these

letters contain more than vignettes of oppression; they bear the seeds of change, of improvement, of reform. Some of the inmate proposals embodied in the letters are striking *only* in the regard that they are so eminently sensible, capable of success and essentially conservative.

The book, however, could have its chief value if it were able to convince the public that the conditions described by the letters are in derogation of the law. The public must learn that incarceration for purposes of public security need not, should not, be accompanied by gratuitous humiliation and cruelty; that punishment as retribution and punishment for purposes of deterrence do not require more than the deprivation of liberty; and that rehabilitation is not a euphemism for torment and torture. If the public does not accept this lesson, then the security it desires will be irreparably undermined. It is unnecessary for the state to mount a blue-ribbon commission to gather and disseminate the vital information. An understanding of what is wrong with prisons today can be garnered by reading these simple, crude, sometimes misspelled letters from *Maximum Security*.

For those however who must have more enticement, be assured that *Maximum Security* has a place in letters. The book contains much of the raw material of that which has been celebrated as the essence of contemporary literature. Kafka, represented by *The Trial*, is spiritually present, for within California prisons the anxiety of never quite *knowing*, thanks to indeterminate sentencing, if and when freedom will ever come, makes paranoia the currency of the mind. Solzhenitsyn haunts *Maximum Security* with his everyman, Ivan Denisovich; and lurking beyond is Kosinski with his garish spectacle of violence reminiscent of *The Painted Bird*. Ultimately it is Heller revisited, with prison rules, the quintessence of all *Catch-22*'s.

Maximum Security also carries a message for the bar. To date, the popular image of the lawyer has been that of the intrepid defense counsel in a capital crimes case. That image must now yield to one far less dramatic. Today the over-all challenge is not to save the individual accused from execution, though that has not yet been entirely displaced, but to save the lives of *countless* numbers of prisoners facing death ad hoc from prison personnel, from other inmates, and from the system itself. It is a mundane

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struggle which will neither excite public attention nor earn accolades. But unless counsel sedulously persevere in securing transfers for endangered inmates, hector authorities until medicine and medical care are provided, and ensure that administrative provisions do not destroy sanity and spirit, lives that lawyers could save will be lost.

In closing this review, the introduction by Fay Stender should be mentioned. If read as an introduction it may be deemed rash. If encountered as an epilogue it will be measured as quite mild. The point is that the reader will soon realize that the letters say it all.

BERNARD M. BRODSKY

