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A Forty Year Journey in Corrections

Robert Hannigan
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Television shows like *Prison Break* and movies like *The Shawshank Redemption* portray a skewed version of what goes on behind the walls of a prison. Robert D. Hannigan sets the record straight with his memoir, *A Forty Year Journey in Corrections*. Here he offers anecdotes, history lessons, moral conundrums, and a hearty dose of real life experience to counteract the Hollywood interpretation so many of us rely on.

Hannigan began his career as a guard working the night shift at Kansas State Industrial Reformatory. Though inmates threw glass jars and bars of soap at him on his first night, he soon earns their respect by refusing to be frightened away. Perhaps his training as a marine helped him stay so strong in the face of burly convicts. Over the next few decades, Hannigan honorably climbs the promotional ladder all the way to warden, witnessing events that are sad, bizarre, funny, horrific, and all degrees in between.

Most of the chapters are written in a friendly, conversational tone that is pleasant to read, even when the subject matter involves deceit and danger. For instance, the story about an unfortunate incident during which a new vehicle, an International Travel-All, ends up deep in a reservoir, begins like this: “It must have been close to midnight when my telephone rang one night back in 1971. Now, over the years I had gotten a lot of calls late at night, but this one would be different. The voice on the line said, ‘We have a little problem here at the Perry Honor Camp…’ I advised him that I liked little problems, but I was sure he wasn’t calling because he had a small problem.” Hannigan goes on to describe how the leader of an ill-fated fishing expedition neglected to set the emergency break, and the group later had to dodge the runaway truck. This jocular tone works well with this humorous story of human error and forgiveness. However, when more than a hundred chapters begin in this same spirit, the chatty introductions soon grow repetitive.

Many of Hannigan’s chapters are personal stories about his experiences with inmates and other personnel, but he occasionally veers off into accounts of renovations, complaints about political favoritism, and musings on various recurring problems, such as over-crowding. Hannigan’s career certainly encompassed all these elements, but readers may respond with more consistent interest if he’d chosen to explore either the personal or the business aspect.

Though his memoirs are overly long, often repetitive, and dichotomous, Hannigan does manage to make his readers smile at the bizarre patterns of human behavior. Thieves, murderers, rapists: Hannigan was exposed to the worst of humanity and still managed to rise above it with grace and humor.
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