

Almost Innocent: From Searching to Saved in America's Criminal Justice System

Shanti Brien

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Almost Innocent is an attorney's passionate memoir about how difficult it is for people to find real justice in America.

Shanti Brien's heartrending memoir *Almost Innocent* gives an eye-opening insider's account of the American criminal justice system.

Brien is a California-based attorney who represents clients during their appeals processes. The cases she takes on are both complex and almost impossible to win. Each chapter of the book deals with a different case; the book connects Brien's personal story throughout, covering how she shoplifted as a teenager, and the fact that her husband, a former NFL kicker, struggled with his own legal troubles. The contrasts between the two worlds are often jarring, as when the book describes how other football wives compared expensive handbags, at a time when one of Brien's clients faced sixteen months in prison for possessing a handful of stolen coins.

Evocative scenes of the crimes for which people were incarcerated begin each chapter. They play out in real time, tracking, for example, a mumbled threat that led to an arrest in a grocery store parking lot. The chapters then address the outcomes of each case; all represent lives upended by the legal system without need, and all are emotionally forceful. Brien represents a woman who was driving to buy Tylenol, but who happened to drive the same vehicle that an armed robber drove at the same time, for example, as well as a man who was imprisoned for something no longer regarded as a crime, and a woman who was mistaken for someone else, and who now has an alibi. The messiness of each case is apparent, and each hints at the legal system's inability, or unwillingness, to grant relief from such entanglements.

From this perspective: innocence is a concept that rarely connects to how the legal system treats people for crimes. Brien is seen working in courtrooms and prisons; she describes Folsom as a place that "rises out of the golden hills like a decaying castle" and expresses frustration about a metal detector set off by her bra: "[I] would love to find the shiv made of an underwire." Her droll perspective holds the text together through its jumps between cases, and her detailed observations help to highlight the inhumanity of the prison system itself—a system that is shown to be most egregious when it comes to addressing people of color. Still, the book ends with hope, arguing that justice is being able to find "your better self in the face of mistakes."

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