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Breaking the Rock: The Great Escape from Alcatraz

Jolene Babyak
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Did they make it?

That's the question everyone asks when first learning of the Great Escape from the maximum-security federal prison of Alcatraz on June 11, 1962. Four men spent months planning and implementing the elaborate escape-surreptitiously chipping through concrete walls with old spoon handles, constructing dummy heads to place in their cell bunks, and even building a raft from purloined raincoats to navigate the frigid waters of San Francisco Bay.

The author recreates a fascinating tale of the three men who escaped and have never been seen again, and of their hapless ringleader, the prisoner who orchestrated the escape but was unable to get out of his cell in time to join his fellows before they departed into history from "The Rock."

The author compellingly argues that the trio of hardened cons most probably did not make it ashore. The real story, though, lies in the plans and tactics undertaken by the criminals and the many mistakes made by guards and prison administrators. Babyak combines her review of documents and interviews with a well-paced narrative to bring fresh life to the nearly forty-year-old drama.

The book contains photographs and biographies of the conspirators and of the guards and administrators, many of whose careers were ruined by the escape. Also included are snapshots of the prison and of the escape route, which ended at the shoreline and began with holes in the cell walls ingeniously concealed with paper and paint stolen from the prison's art supplies.

The author is superbly situated to fill in the gaps of the official escape report; indeed, Alcatraz is in her blood. Her father was the associate warden at the time, and she was a teenager living in family housing on Alcatraz Island. Now recognized as one of the leading authorities on Alcatraz, she has, since 1978, interviewed and examined the files of more than 175 people associated with the former prison. She has authored two best-selling books, Eyewitness on Alcatraz and Birdman, The Many Faces of Robert Stroud.

With Babyak's skillful wordsmithing, this book reads more like a suspense novel than a dry historical tome. Anyone interested in Alcatraz, great tales in American history, or even mystery stories will appreciate this well-crafted book.

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