



Correctional

Ravi Shankar

University of Wisconsin Press (Oct 26, 2021)

Hardcover \$26.95 (232pp)

978-0-299-33530-4

In *Correctional*, poet and academic Ravi Shankar reckons with his public fall from grace, which landed him in jail, but also allowed for an inside look at the court system of the United States.

Born in Washington, D.C. to Brahmin parents who immigrated from India, Shankar was pestered by his parents to study. He won spelling bees, earned an MFA from Columbia, hobnobbed with famous artists and writers, started a literary journal, published books, and became a tenured professor. However, after a series of poor choices, Shankar wound up serving 90 days in the county jail. Due to his stature, his situation attracted unwanted attention; the resulting notoriety extended across the US.

The book's six sections correspond to the six seasons of India, each preceded by a letter to a loved one harmed by Shankar's actions, conveying his regret. In the subsequent pages, he examines his past, including an astrologer predicting his downfall during a visit to India, in an attempt to make sense of his trajectory. These chapters are juxtaposed with scenes of jail life.

Through deft characterizations and snippets of inmates' vernacular, Shankar creates vibrant portraits of his jailmates that are written with tolerance, sympathy, and often affection. Their barter system, with packages of dried ramen serving as currency, suggests an entrepreneurial spirit behind bars; other examples of prisoners' ingenuity are impressive, too. In spite of glimmers of the men's potential, however, little effort is made to rehabilitate them. Through his discussions with fellow inmates, Shankar raises questions about the efficacy and fairness of the system.

Shankar's honesty and humility render him a sympathetic figure. His elegant prose is strewn with references to philosophy and poetry, helping to make his storytelling compelling—even entertaining. *Correctional* is the story of a beleaguered man on the road to redemption, trying to set the record straight.

SUZANNE KAMATA (November / December 2021)

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