

In the Spider's Web: A Nonfiction Novel

Jerome Gold

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Striking, deeply honest, and sensitively told, this novel based in real life considers juvenile prisons and all its dramas.

Jerome Gold calls *In the Spider's Web* a “nonfiction novel.” In it, he depicts the routines and characters of a prison for juveniles, centering on one young woman in particular. All the events really happened and are drawn from his years working as a rehabilitation counselor at the institution he calls Ash Meadow—some supporting characters are composites, but all the major players are real people; names except his own, places, and some other details are changed to shield identities. As might be expected, the stories Gold relates are often disturbing, but they are beautifully told from a sober and compassionate perspective.

Caitlin Weber was convicted of the murder of her mother's employer. Caitlin and four other teens, under the direction of her mother, to whom Caitlin was said to be “uniquely loyal,” beat the man with baseball bats and stabbed him to death, when Caitlin was thirteen. At fourteen, Caitlin entered Ash Meadow, where Jerry requested to be assigned as her case manager. The two became very close as Caitlin worked toward recovering from her trauma, establishing healthier relationships, and, ultimately, being rehabilitated.

Gold also details the drama and dysfunction of staff relationships. Gifted and caring counselors do immensely good work there, but at the other end of the spectrum lie abuse, neglect, and failures that are as troubling to read about as the lives of the young prisoners.

Gold's characters are fully developed and complex; even juvenile murderers are surprisingly sympathetic once their full stories are told. The dialogue is not always linear and clear, thus accurately representing the troubled minds involved. The tone of Gold's remembrances is wandering, quiet, and contemplative, and also often searingly angry or hurt. A war veteran, Gold brings his own wounds to this different field of conflict.

Caitlin's story does not wrap up neatly, because it is true. But in Gold's tender, precise prose, Caitlin comes vividly to life and gains the fair consideration he asks for her.

JULIA JENKINS (Summer 2015)

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