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Social Sciences

Maggots in My Sweet Potatoes: Women Doing Time
Susan Madden Lankford
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Photojournalist Susan Madden Lankford has, in her own words, “always been interested in incarceration and confinement,” but she found her true subject when a homeless man challenged her to learn from the homeless themselves what life is like on the streets and in jail. “No longer could I photograph the places without the people in them. I had to fill the image with society’s reality and not my imagination.” This book is the result of her intense two-year involvement with inmates and jailers at the Las Colinas Detention Facility in San Diego County, California.

Lankford’s book, based on taped conversations with inmates and jailers, intimate and disturbing photographs of the day-to-day lives of women prisoners, and insightful comments from professionals in the field, should be required reading for anyone who has ever considered running afoul of the law. The photographs and text are compelling, but one wants to look away—to forget that these women, so like the ones that might be found at the supermarket or at the mall, are incarcerated and awaiting sentencing. Some will get the death sentence; some, because of long-term drug use, will never know what it feels like to have “normal” thoughts or lives; some have given birth while jailed and chained to a bed, and have had their babies taken from them to be raised by others; almost none have any hope of ever getting out of the criminal justice system before they die. The author asks readers to look with her at these ruined lives and join the search for solutions to the problems that usually begin in childhood.

Lankford has a bachelor’s degree from the University of Nebraska and has done postgraduate studies in photography; she has studied at Ansel Adams’ workshops in Yosemite and Carmel as well as with other legends of photography including Roy DeCarava, Paul Caponigro, Richard Misrach, and Ruth Bernhard. She has photographed in wildlife habitats in the American wilderness, as well as on the nation’s streets, and in the women’s detention center, where her openness and listening skills helped her to gain the trust of the homeless and the incarcerated. This excellent and disturbing book is the first in a planned photojournalistic

trilogy; the next two books will examine the plight of the homeless, and the problems of children in the juvenile justice system.

Kristine Morris