



## Men in Prison

**Victor Serge**

**Richard Greeman, Translator**

PM Press (May 1, 2014)

Softcover \$18.95 (320pp)

978-1-60486-736-7

*This thinly veiled fictional autobiography is a powerful polemic on prison life, as well as a beautifully wrought literary gem.*

First published in 1931, *Men in Prison* chronicles Victor Serge's time spent as a political prisoner in France from 1912 to 1917 and shares his harrowing account of the struggle to remain sane under deplorable conditions. Originally translated from the French by Richard Greeman in 1977, it was recently reissued with a fresh introduction by Greeman, the cofounder of the Praxis Center and Victor Serge Library in Moscow, and a foreword by David Gilbert, who is full of insight about present-day prison systems, since he is currently a prisoner at Auburn Correctional Facility for crimes committed when he was a member of the Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground.

*Men in Prison* is tagged as a novel, but in the book's epigraph, Serge says, "Everything in this book is fictional and everything is true. I have attempted, through literary creation, to bring out the general meaning and human content of personal experience." If one knows anything about Serge's life, it will read as if it came from his own diary. It is fiction so unfathomable that it must be truth.

With unflinching honesty and sometimes excruciatingly grim prose, Serge writes about his five-year journey through the French penal system. The prose is layered with searing revelations and demonstrate his talent for parsing out an incarcerated man's primal fears. He writes of suffering a thousand daily humiliations at the hands of those in charge, which eventually led most to inhabit a dull space into which nothing could penetrate. It is here they found solace. He says, "I am free because nothing more can be done to me." Serge's struggle to maintain sanity in the face of a lengthy sentence is one of his most difficult challenges, and he repeatedly, with great psychological insight, probes these existential depths.

Serge writes poetically of simple pleasures that come unexpectedly and are few and far between. "The sky! Above our heads a glittering winter sky, full of constellations, spread out its deep blacks and blues, its profusion of stars, the ripples of light in its shadowy gulfs. Had I ever understood the marvel of a simple starry sky before?"

*Men in Prison* deserves to sit prominently in the canon of prison novels with the likes of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Serge manages to render an atmospheric perspective on prison life written in the highest literary style.

DIANE PROKOP (Fall 2014)

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