

# Women Doing Time

Marius Mason

2019

a review of

*Taking the Rap: Women Doing Time For Society's Crimes* by Ann Hansen. Between the Lines, 2018

When offered the chance to review Ann Hansen's memoir about her time in the Canadian prison system, I was enthusiastic but doubtful that I would be permitted to receive such a book.

With my Communications Management status and participation in the Rehabilitation Drug Abuse Program (RDAP) while imprisoned at Carswell Federal Medical Center in Texas, it seemed unlikely that this courageous and intensely honest account of real life in all manner of jails, holding facilities, and prisons would be allowed in.

Ann Hansen is a Canadian anarchist and former member of Direct Action, a guerrilla group that bombed a factory making components for American cruise missiles. She was sentenced to life in prison in 1983, but released after eight years.

Upon hearing the sentence, Hansen threw a tomato at the judge. In 2001, the publisher of this title, issued Hansen's *Direct Action: Memoirs Of An Urban Guerrilla*.

Certainly there have been some other prison memoirs in the Carswell library from time to time, but none of them advocated for the abolition of the prison system itself. Furthermore, Hansen's candid discussion of drug use, trafficking, and smuggling into the prison system might be considered a "glorification of the criminal lifestyle," or detrimental in some way to the people in my RDAP Unit program who are trying to recover from addiction.

Fortunately, the censors decided to pass on the book. I devoured it in just a couple days, despite a busy work schedule, staying up late with my book light to read it. Hansen writes in a straight-forward way, with clearly articulated ideas and with powerful feeling.

Though the stories she tells are written in a way that protects the privacy of her fellow prisoners and friends (using composites, changing names and dates), the end result is still the truth. There were parts of her stories that concurred with events and behaviors that I witness at my prison.

With great skill and no small amount of grace, Hansen gifts her subjects with the humanity and compassion that they are so often denied in other narratives. By relating the records of facts and figures of demographics as to who is incarcerated and why to real people's stories, there is a wealth of understanding delivered that surpasses the reach of mere statistics.

When Hansen describes a particular suicide cluster over a small number of years, we, as readers, are more able to grasp these acts of despair after knowing the personal stories of some of the victims.

Hansen does not leave off at just telling the truth. She provides an analysis as to what economic forces, including the ever-increasing advances in technology and manufacture, push the planned obsolescence of human workers. These forces are leading governments to turn more and more to the carceral system as a means of social control for those members of the population who have been edged out of the economic system.

I was inspired by her frankness about figuring out a way to fully embrace and care for her prison community, responsibly, while still remaining true to her political beliefs. During my years of incarceration, this has not always been easy.

It was reassuring to read about Hansen's process of self-criticism and her willingness to acknowledge what she deemed to be mistakes in judgment. She seems to have found a way to both keep her ideals in place and to act with sensitivity towards her fellow prisoners.

Though many of her stories tracked with my own experiences in prison over the past ten years, Hansen's account of her time in the Kitchener, Ontario, Super Max unit of Grand Valley Institution for Women was really on point for me. In such a small population, the unit culture determines how your life runs.

Her interactions with the "Q," the unit alpha female as it were, as they built up to a possible physical fight, felt eerily familiar. The close confines, tiny community, and the swamp mix of stress, pent up anger, mental health issues, and a reliance upon violence to both vent and resolve dominance questions and access to resources all jibed with my memories of time at the restrictive Administrative Unit at Carswell.

Although I did years of work in prisoner support groups before being imprisoned, it didn't prepare me for how it feels to be incarcerated, how it affects your family and your life's direction. Hansen's book is the nearest thing to opening a window into the inner life of that experience.

Her narrative is framed within the context of a political vision that explains the possible evolution of this painful and generationally damaging way of addressing social problems that are the result of economic disparity and prejudice.

Hansen's book is a powerful witness to what is being done wrong beneath the pretense of protecting society.

Marius Mason, a former *Fifth Estate* staff member, is an anarchist, environmental and animal rights activist serving nearly 22 years in prison for acts of property damage carried out in defense of the planet. Incarcerated since 2009, he came out as transgender in 2014.

More information on supporting Marius and communicating with him is at **[supportmariusmason.org](http://supportmariusmason.org)**.

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