Back from Hell

Rick Karp

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a review of

A Clean Hell: Anarchy and Abolition in America's Most Notorious Dungeon by Eric King. PM Press, 2026

It is difficult for people who have never been imprisoned to understand what it implies on a physical and mental basis. The disconnection from everyday life, the absolute control of one's actions, the rigid routine, and being cut off from nature. Add the violence inflicted by other prisoners and guards, and the mistreatment when labeled as an anarchist and you are living in what former political prisoner Eric King experienced for nearly ten years.

King's memoir recounting his stint in the Supermax ADX Florence, Colorado prison opens with an explanation of why he arrived at the notorious maximum-security prison known as the Alcatraz of the Rockies.

In 2014, King was arrested for throwing a Molotov cocktail at the Kansas City office of U.S. Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver in solidarity with the Ferguson, Missouri uprising following the murder of Michael Brown by the police. After pleading guilty, King was sentenced to ten years imprisonment and was remanded to a low-security Federal Correctional Institution. He was upgraded because of stick-figures he had drawn that the prison administration considered threatening. The cartoons are replicated in the book.

At the medium-security institution, FCI Florence, King was brought into a camera-less mop closet and confronted by an enraged lieutenant to discuss an email he had sent to his wife. The officer shouted at him, spit on him, and threatened him. King writes that he "made a decision, a decision that has affected [him] ever since"—he laughed in the man's face.

The lieutenant pushed and hit him and King hit him back, three times. King afterward was slammed to the floor, stomped, handcuffed to a bed post, suffocated, and tortured. A year after the incident, he was charged with assaulting a government official and the prosecutor asked for an additional 20 year sentence. A federal jury surprisingly returned a not guilty verdict.

Targeted as an anarchist, the government and Bureau of Prisons were undeterred. After being held for several months in another facility, he was transferred to the SuperMax prison that he describes in a chapter as "The Scariest Ride of My Life."

King's book details many things about life in ADX, and about incarceration in general. One section gives some history of the joint constructed in 1994 and classed as a "control unit" designed to incarcerate what the government considers the "worst of the worst"—political prisoners, gang leaders, and those convicted on charges of terrorism. King writes: "they needed to quell any future prisoner solidarity movements and stop the amount of influence that revolutionaries had within the [federal prison system]."

He writes about some of the more-famous people he met there, such as the so-called Unabomber Ted Kaczynski and shoe bomber Richard Reid. He describes the dangers faced by queer and transgender prisoners, by people who try to leave gangs and seek protective custody, and by all the prisoners at the

hands of the staff. The book features some horrible tales of violence he experienced, being subjected to four-point restraints, sexually-invasive searches, and brutality from the staff.

There are fascinating parts of King's story where he writes about how he and others are able to retain one's sense of self; even when dealing with a dehumanizing experience. This includes a variety of prisoner acts of resistance such as throwing feces at the cops, resisting being extracted from their cell by force, attacking prison staffers, and more. He notes, however, these acts inevitably lead to the rebellious prisoner being pepper sprayed, severely beaten, or other penalties such as communications restrictions or increased time spent locked up. But, King explains, "There is a level of pride and self-gratification that comes when you make that choice to engage in combat on your own terms." And he notes that, while he might not agree with every tactic, "I will never judge someone for any act of prison rebellion." He continues, "I think it is brave. I think it is honorable."

The other parts of keeping yourself whole were less-extreme, but still inspiring to read. Maintaining a personal schedule, which includes things outsiders take for granted or possibly even dislike, such as cleaning the toilet and exercising, providing structure and a bit of control to your day-to-day drudgery.

Even when things were basically terrible, King writes, "before 7 a.m., I've already accomplished something. Anything." He continues, "It is a conscious decision and an act of control. I am making this choice and they can't stop me." ADX Florence allows prisoners to have televisions in their cells, but as King warns, you couldn't let yourself get too addicted. However, he certainly enjoyed days when he watched Manchester United or the Kansas City Chiefs play (and sometimes win).

He describes one night where a "miraculous event" happened: the power went out. Instead of looking out at the big wall and floodlights, everyone was able to see the stars.

When the power returned about a half-hour later, his eyes welled with tears. "Being this removed from the natural world affects your psyche," he explains. "It hurts in a deep way."

Another thing that goes a long way for keeping one's mental health together while incarcerated will already be familiar to readers of the Fifth Estate: mutual aid and prisoner support. King notes how important even normal canteen access can be for additional food, medications, cleaning supplies, and other items—and how easy it is for the administration to mess with prisoners' small bits of happiness receiving it.

He thanks people who sent money to him for canteen purchases and stamps, those who provided books and publication subscriptions, and everyone who sent a letter. He writes with a painful empathy about people isolated in the prison system who almost never receive anything. His last sentence in the book "Please write a prisoner."

King was released in December 2023; his wife and child embraced him as he left the prison complex.

King's book belongs on your shelf along with Alexander Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. The companion of Emma Goldman was imprisoned for 14 grueling years in a federal prison, aptly named a penitentiary, where cruelty and filth were rampant, for shooting a corporate boss in 1892. In King's experience, it was only hell made cleaner that has changed in 135 years.

Abolish the class system. Abolish prisons. Doing one will accomplish the other.

Rick Karp lives in New Jersey. Reads books, plays games, grows plants, enjoys music, and likes cooking. He survives in the wage economy working as a researcher and fact checker.

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