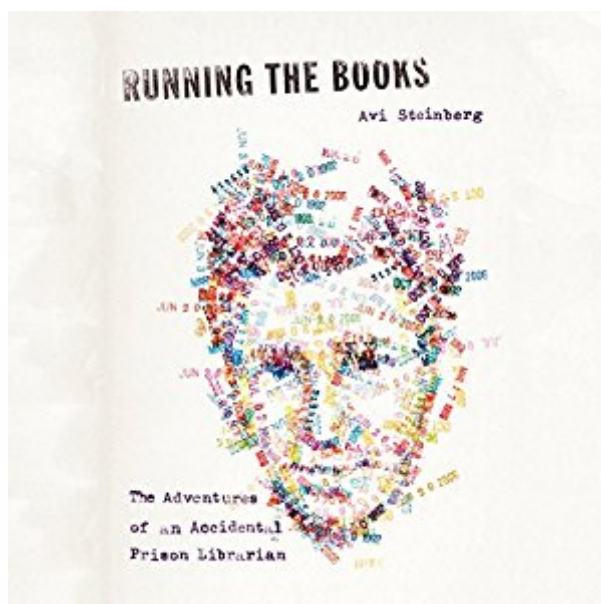


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Running The Books: The Adventures Of An Accidental Prison Librarian



Synopsis

Avi Steinberg is stumped. After defecting from yeshiva to Harvard, he has only a senior thesis essay on Bugs Bunny to show for his effort. While his friends and classmates advance in the world, he remains stuck at a crossroads, unable to meet the lofty expectations of his Orthodox Jewish upbringing. And his romantic existence as a freelance obituary writer just isn't cutting it. Seeking direction - and dental insurance - Steinberg takes a job as a librarian in a tough Boston prison. The prison library counter, his new post, attracts con men, minor prophets, ghosts, and an assortment of quirky regulars searching for the perfect book and a connection to the outside world. There's an amiable pimp who solicits Steinberg's help in writing a memoir. An industrious gangster who dreams of hosting a cooking show titled Thug Sizzle. A disgruntled officer who instigates a major feud over a Post-it note. An ex-stripper who asks Steinberg to orchestrate a reunion with her estranged son, himself an inmate. Over time, Steinberg is drawn into the accidental community of outcasts that has formed among his bookshelves - a drama he recounts with heartbreak and humor. *Running the Books* is a trenchant personal exploration of prison culture and an entertaining tale of one young man's earnest attempt to find his place in the world while trying not to get fired in the process.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This was not the book I expected. I'm not totally sure what I expected, but I think it was something funny: something about a librarian hanging out with pimps and drug dealers, scattering literature across the infertile soil of a prison's worth of undereducated, life-hardened, embittered minds. I was

looking for some uplift, here, something about how books can save even the toughest cases. What I got instead was reality. Avi Steinberg, who falls into prison librarianhood mainly because he is avoiding the expectations of his strict Orthodox Jewish upbringing (Doctor or lawyer or rabbi, oh my!) but not making enough money as a freelance obituary writer (Another career I never really thought existed, though of course it does), does indeed hang out with pimps and drug dealers, but it isn't really funny. These are not the cartoonish pimps that floated through my mind, a cornucopia of platform shoes and ostrich feather hats and 70's jive lingo; these are actual hustlers, men who make their living off of the exploitation of women, men who are cold and calculating and violent no matter how charming they appear. And because they are human beings, they are also emotionally stunted victims themselves, sufferers of abuse and neglect and generational poverty; their less savory characteristics are simply their best defense against the world that surrounds them. Although there is very little about the saving grace of literature and words and books, Steinberg does paint a vivid and touching portrait of the criminals he dealt with every day for the years he worked in Boston's South Bay prison, as well as a harsh and unflinching one.

"Running the Books" is a reminder of the indomitable human spirit even when it is caged as a result of its more wayward and reckless predilections. Liberty may be incarcerated but Life and the pursuit of Happiness reign supreme even inside the prison walls. Avi Steinberg has written a love story of sorts. Love tends to manifest itself in serendipitous ways and often takes us by surprise. I'm sure Mr. Steinberg tried to maintain a "professional distance of the heart". But, for two prisoners in particular, the tendrils of human connection pushed their way through the cracks in the concrete of prison protocol and reached Avi's core. Jessica and Chudney reached into the core of my being also, and I really didn't want them to. I thought "Running the Books" was going to be more humorous than pensive. But those tendrils reached through the concrete of my own stand-offish heart and here I am, still thinking about two people who I will never meet. Of the two, Jessica captured me the most. She had hope, but the reality of how her choices and addictions had wounded others weighed heavily on her heart. She wanted to hope, but she was a realist. She knew that some habits can't be broken and some relationships can't be healed. Some people can hope and with that hope forge a new life, but she knew that option wasn't for her. Chudney is the opposite of Jessica, ever hopeful and optimistic. He made plans so that when he left prison behind him, it would be for good. As a reader I was rooting for him. As I read along I kept hoping he would make it. I couldn't wait to cheer his successes. In my mind, he was going to make it! I just knew he was. There were only two options for him: quick success or struggling but finally making it. Failure wasn't

a thought.

I chose this book because I was intrigued by the story of a prison librarian...and because one of my favorite writers was quoted on the back with very positive things to say about "Running the Books." And it was interesting...but would have been a more compelling read if - and I've tried to think of any other way to say this - it was shorter. Since that sounds more than slightly lazy - I suppose what I really mean is that there wasn't a story arc that held my interest through the whole book. Though I realize this is a memoir - there just isn't a climax of any sort. The reader is introduced to Avi, we learn how he ends up applying for and becoming a librarian in a Boston prison...and then we just stay there in prison with him. We learn more about the prisoners than we do Avi. Which is interesting, of course, but because he is our window into this world that few of us know much about, we want to know more about how he feels in that unreal atmosphere - and the effects that it has on his life outside of work. For that matter - I wanted to learn more about his life outside of work, period."The main book man. I like that. I can't help it. For an asthmatic Jewish kid, it's got a nice ring to it. Hired to run Boston's prison library - and serve as the resident creative writing teacher - I am living my (quixotic) dream: a book-slinger with a badge and a streetwise attitude, part bookworm, part badass. This identity has helped me tremendously at cocktail parties."Because he's one of the few people we read about that spends time in the prison world by choice, I wanted to know more about what kept him there, more about how he felt about leaving and what he did after his prison experience.

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