

Literary Review week 7

Woman and Crime

Cheryl Brady

Babies Behind Bars

by: Deborah Jiang Stein

This article is written by a girl who was born at The Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia. This Prison was made famous by some of the inmates who served time there including Martha Stewart, Billie Holiday, Squeaky Fromme, and Tokyo Rose. For Deborah Jiang Stein it was home for the first year of her life. She was born to a heroin addicted mother who was serving time when she was born for drug related charges. Her first home consisted of her mother, 200 or so other inmates, guards and a warden. She describes it as being born into a “Universe of Uncertainty” and considers herself a pro at uncertainty. While she only has vague but powerful sensory memories of her time with her mother in prison they do exist. Her skin still stings when she thinks of that separation her body knew the enormity of that loss.

The prison system doesn't allow for children to grow up there so after a year a federal marshal came to get her and was put in foster care in

Seattle where her birth mother was originally from. At the age of 4 she was adopted by a white Jewish family who wanted a at risk special needs child. Deborah fit the bill due to the heroin exposure before birth and being bi-racial. Her self decription is by 4 years old she was a “gaping raw wound of self-doubt and distrust” of everyone around her. She would go mute for days because that was the only way she felt safe. Her adopted parents were both English Professors and provided her with opportunities for education, creativity and encouraged her love of learning, the fine arts and travel. While this may sound like a happy ending it was not, not yet at least. Her well intentioned new parents evaded questions about her birth and birth mother and when it came to light when she was 12 her downward spiral began. As common for children whose lives begin drug addicted the path back to drugs, crime and a life of self- destruction was hers. She describes her way back as being filled with luck, hard work and a strong support system and the only reason she made her way back to clean life. In her late teens she speaks of such overwhelming uncertainty that made her feel so unsafe and exposed, it crippled her. Her reaction was to hide or flee. The want to run away was her instinctual response to the uncertainty, to find comfort and to this day it still is something she has to keep in check. For ten years she struggled with drugs, violence and crime to deal with her

grief. She has made peace with who she is and with both her birth mother and adoptive mother. She is a writer and public speaker and found helping others was the way to help herself. She is the founder of a non-profit The unPrison Project which works to serve woman and girls in prison. She has two daughters.

All children who are separated from their mother's ask the same questions of themselves. Am I lovable? What's wrong with me? Children don't understand what's happening when they are taken away from their moms and have deep emotional security issues from that event. Deborah Jiang Stein works to help others answer those questions it has taken her years and much help, work and support from others to answer it for herself.

<http://www.cwla.org/voice/JA10babies.html>

<http://www.deborahstein.com/>