



# AMONG MURDERERS

LIFE AFTER PRISON

**SABINE HEINLEIN**

"A remarkable achievement, an eye-opening  
work of journalistic empathy."

—Scott Stossel, editor, *The Atlantic*

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*Life after Prison*

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley Los Angeles London

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University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.  
London, England

© 2013 by Sabine Heinlein

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Heinlein, Sabine 1973-.

Among murderers : life after prison / Sabine Heinlein.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-520-27285-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Criminals—Rehabilitation—United States—Case studies. I. Title.

HV93O4.H45 2013

364.80973—dc23

2012025825

Manufactured in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To Giovanni García-Fenech*





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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Angel, Adam, and Bruce: I am indebted to you for your openness, your honesty, your courage, and the endless hours you spent with me. Thank you!

Thanks also to the Fortune Society, its clients and staff, for opening your doors: Barry Campbell, JoAnne Page, David Rothenberg, Rene Sing, and “Rich Stone,” as well as the many others who were willing to share your experiences and expertise.

I am grateful to Mae Dick and all the Quakers in Rochester and at the Attica Correctional Facility, particularly Richard Robles, whose frequent letters provided crucial insight from behind bars.

When you begin your career as a writer, you are often warned of the loneliness it requires. You rarely hear of the many friends and colleagues who are there to help. A million thanks to Robert Boynton, in whose class the seeds of this project were planted and who has been an avid supporter from beginning to end. David Samuels, thanks for helping me hear my own voice—and for never mincing words. Erin Soros, thank you so much for inviting me to read from my manuscript at the University of East Anglia. I am grateful to Ted Hamm from the *Brooklyn Rail* for publishing my first stories about society’s

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outcasts and to Karol Nielsen and Willard Cook from *Epiphany* for publishing an early excerpt from this book. Thanks also to Ted Conover, who gave instrumental advice after reading an early draft.

I am grateful to Roxana Robinson for her support and to Sam Swope for taking the time to review with me each chapter of this book for several hours in the very (!) early morning.

The evenings of food, drinks, and laughter with Carrie Villines, Rachel Stevens, and Leslie Hutchings helped me to get up the next day and continue my work. Franziska Lamprecht, please never stop visiting me when I least expect it. I so very much appreciated Josh Weinstein's afternoon visits, which invariably turned into hours of inspiring conversation. Thank you to Melissa Dunn for helping me think when I couldn't think anymore and to Deborah Lutz for being an excellent reader and much-appreciated supporter. I am grateful to Karl Monger for valuable editorial input on an early draft and to Alexandra Zendrian for her help with transcriptions. I am indebted to Bill Dineen, whose "life should be good" made all the difference in the world, and to Simon Eskow, who listened and cheered me on and up when I most needed it.

I am also grateful to Glenn Martin, Ronald Mincy, Devah Pager, Gabriel Torres-Rivera, Jeremy Travis, and—most of all—Edward Latessa, each of whom took time out from their busy schedules to discuss the challenges of reentry and rehabilitation with me. Many important thoughts were formed as a result of these conversations.

Many thanks to the Corporation of Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Margolis Award for understanding my work and providing me with financial support, time, and space.

Thanks are also due to Rachel Berchten, Stacy Eisenstark, Chris Lura, Alison Mudditt, and Naomi Schneider of UC Press for guiding the book through its various production stages. Joe Abbott did a magnificent copyediting job, saving me many embarrassments.

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And finally, if I had to name one person whose intelligence, love, enthusiasm, support, humor, and ideas made the writing of this book possible, it would be my husband, Giovanni García-Fenech. Thank you for never saying no when asked to read the same section for the one hundredth time and for believing in me like no one had ever believed in me before.



By talking and hanging out with murderers, child molesters, burglars, drug dealers, and robbers, I entered a parallel world unfamiliar to most of us. Although these former criminals are among us, our lives rarely intersect. What is life like for those who have spent several decades in prison and are released into a world in which people and places they once knew have ceased to exist? What is it like to start over from nothing? And did prison succeed in making them see the error of their ways?

I was still working on my master's degree at New York University's Carter Journalism Institute when I set out to learn how New York's growing net of reentry organizations helps former prisoners ease back into freedom. The goal of these agencies is to rehabilitate their clients—to restore their livelihoods and prevent them from going back to prison. After spending large parts of their lives locked up, these men and women need a roof over their heads, medical care, and a job—any job, really.

In 2007 I began to attend reentry events where advocates, ex-cons, and their family members discussed the challenges of life after prison. I talked to the clients and staff of reentry organizations with Pollyanna-ish names like STRIVE (Support and Training Results in Valuable Employees), CEO (Center

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for Employment Opportunities), and the Fortune Society. Most clients of the Fortune Society, STRIVE, and CEO were people with extensive rap sheets—and most were out of luck. Few had ever learned to strive for anything, and it is safe to assume that they will never become CEOs. What they needed most was individual attention and love.

One man I spoke to had forgotten how to turn on a faucet after living in a prison cell for twenty years. When I accompanied another recently released man on his walk through the city, he almost got run over when crossing the street, not once but five times in half an hour. His sense of public space had atrophied so completely that whenever he managed to avoid the traffic, he bumped into other pedestrians. I once tried to show yet another ex-offender how to turn on a PC, go online, and check his emails. It would have been easier to teach a child how to drive a car. Freedom was a relief, surely, but it was also a challenge. It wasn't something that could simply be embraced. The men had to painstakingly learn how to master this freedom. I noticed that no one had ever addressed those seemingly minor obstacles of prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration; this is how the idea for this book came into being.

A growing number of reentry organizations backed by public and private funds have tried to smooth the individual's return to society. In the last decade reentry has become a hot-button topic. Reentry resource centers, reentry round tables, reentry institutes, and reentry initiatives have popped up across the country. The work of advocates and legislators has yielded impressive results: The Second Chance Act was signed into law in 2008. Aimed at improving the lives of ex-offenders, it authorizes federal grants to government agencies and nonprofit organizations for employment assistance, substance-abuse treatment, housing, family programs, mentoring, victims' support, and other services that may help reduce recidivism. In 2009 New York's tough drug laws, which had been signed into law by Governor Nelson Rockefeller in 1973, were revised to remove mandatory minimum sentences.



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But despite the reentry movement's recent successes, the term *reentry* sounds like wishful thinking. At the reentry meetings I listened to advocates endlessly introduce services, strategies, and legislative goals. At the end of these lectures a man or woman of color would usually stand up, trying to share his or her sad life story. "I just came home after serving fifteen [or twenty or thirty] years," the person would begin before spiraling into a rambling tale of alienation. Eventually someone from the panel would cut off the speaker, leaving the rest of the story unheard.

Naturally, the phenomenon of ex-prisoners attempting to become part of our society begged for a name, but "reentry" seemed hopelessly removed from what it really meant to be released from prison. There was nothing guided or measured about becoming part of mainstream society. Besides, did these men and women really succeed in "reentering" our world?

In 2009 almost 730,000 people were released from U.S. prisons.<sup>1</sup> Many ex-prisoners return to the same crime-ridden and impoverished neighborhoods that raised them, and a very select few find permanent employment. Two-thirds of them land back in prison.<sup>2</sup>

Incarceration affects a disproportionate number of men of color. More than half of all incarcerated men are African Americans, and greater than 20 percent are Hispanics.<sup>3</sup>

These harrowing statistics and my own personal experiences with ex-prisoners and reentry organizations made me wonder: How can we rehabilitate these disenfranchised masses? How do contemporary institutions approach rehabilitation, and what role does the general public play in this process? Few of us consider the individual who bears the brunt of this burden. What attempts at rehabilitation does the ex-prisoner himself (or herself) make? How do ex-prisoners learn to navigate their freedom? What resources can they count on, and what obstacles do they encounter? While society may be comfortable talking about racial and social disparities

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in the abstract (or in public policy terms), in this book I talk about these issues by looking at real human beings who have faced the challenges of reentry.

Besides the commonly cited objective of reducing recidivism, no one discusses what constitutes successful rehabilitation. Is it simply a matter of keeping an individual out of prison and of finding him or her a job? We will see that this issue encompasses a number of mundane aspects, as well as several significant moral ones. The life stories of the three men of color, men who spent several decades in prison for murder and were released into the hands of the Fortune Society in 2007, illuminate these complex questions.<sup>4</sup>

### **CONNECTING**

I must have interviewed at least fifty former prisoners before I finally found a subject: Angel Ramos. Angel's horrific crimes and his extraordinary journey to freedom, his willingness to let me accompany him to his programs and to share with me even the most mundane details of his life, made him a perfect subject for this book.

Angel was released in March 2007 after having served twenty-nine years in prison. At eighteen years old he had taken one life and nearly two others. After he was caught, he tried to escape from New York's Rikers Island. Considering his journey, he was remarkably upbeat and optimistic. Most important, maybe, wherever he went, people seemed to like him. A short, sturdy man, Angel was of Puerto Rican descent and had grown up in East Harlem, the neighborhood where he committed his most heinous crime. He had smooth brown skin; a mustache; and short, curly hair. He often wore a dark suit, a bright shirt, and a wildly patterned tie. Angel was witty and charming, and he looked at the world with wide eyes. He thought of himself as someone special, someone whose story needed to be told.

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Shortly after his release, Angel met Adam and Bruce at a halfway house, and the three became friends. They had few things in common beyond the fact that they were intelligent men of color who had served several decades behind bars for murder.

In his early seventies, Adam had spent thirty-one years in prison for murder, robbery, conspiracy, and an attempted escape. He was released in April 2007, one month after Angel. I first saw Adam at one of the many reentry events he attended. Although I don't remember the particulars of the event, I do remember his presence. His forehead was deeply furrowed. His graceful posture, gray beard, and thinly framed glasses lent him an aura of wisdom and respect. To me he looked more like a retired sociology professor or a famous jazz musician than an ex-con. Despite his solemn disposition, he often broke out in spontaneous laughter. While genuine, his laughter was also deceiving. Right at the start Adam told me that he had difficulties taking off his "prison armor." He couldn't "find the zipper." However much he tried, Adam couldn't find his way "home."

In May 2007 Bruce joined Angel and Adam at the Castle, a West Harlem halfway house founded by the Fortune Society. When he was in his late twenties, Bruce shot a stranger following an argument; he spent twenty-four years in prison. Bruce is the most introverted of the three men. Compared to Angel and Adam, he is intimidatingly tall. Trying to make himself look shorter, he walks with a slight hunch. His head is always shaved smooth. At his height, who would want to add an extra inch? He often wears a baseball hat that looks comically small on his large head. Try as he might to appear shorter, he remains six foot six. Bruce is quiet and reserved. He speaks primarily when addressed and even then only sparingly. Bruce seems to have few illusions about life yet strides ahead with surprising balance.

Angel, Bruce, and Adam began their new life at the Fortune Society's Castle. A prominent reentry organization in New York, Fortune, as it is

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commonly known, has been around since 1968 and has helped thousands of former prisoners navigate the welfare system and find housing and work. In three New York locations Fortune offers a variety of services, including computer tutoring, substance-abuse treatment, cooking classes, and father- and motherhood programs.

Angel, Bruce, Adam, and I are as different as can be. I grew up in an upper-middle-class family in a suburb of a Bavarian city not much bigger than the suburb itself. I moved to Hamburg right after high school and immigrated to the United States in 2001. When I was growing up, the darkest shade of skin in my town was that of the two dozen gypsies that camped out on a field at the city limits for a few weeks every year. The common opinion among the permanent residents was that the gypsies were liars and criminals. Clearly, the gypsies didn't *want* to integrate. Unhappy with the little town's rigidity and impregnability, my mother instilled in me a sense of doubt in stereotypes. At an early age I learned to defeat my fear of the "other" through curiosity. So in a sense, my work as a journalist is a response to my mother's desire to break out of her small world and broaden her view.

As an adult I realized that part of this childhood "exercise" called for the augmentation of empathy for people who can't find empathy from society at large. However naive or impossible it may seem, I wondered what would happen if empathy was our first response to people who find themselves at the margins. (Later I learned that there actually is a movement named "journalism of empathy." Ted Conover, the author of *Newjack*, has taught a course by that name at NYU, as did Alex Kotlowitz, the author of *There Are No Children Here*, at Northwestern University.)<sup>5</sup> In my career as a journalist I have spent time with all kinds of people—homeless alcoholics, people with mental illnesses, blind teenagers, clowns, and fortune-tellers, to name just a few. I didn't *like* or agree with every individual I met, but without empathy I would have never been able to understand them. I think we can learn to respect each other, even while admitting our ambivalence or disapproval.

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## WHY MURDERERS?

In terms of empathy, murderers are obviously very low (if not lowest) on our list of priorities. Murder is universally considered the most serious crime of all, and the violent loss of a human life inflicts endless grief on the victim's relatives and friends. It is hard to look a murderer in the face. It is infinitely more comfortable to reduce murderers to numbers than to try to understand their lives. Yet considering the rising number of murderers being released from prison, it becomes harder and harder to turn away.

New York's murder rates have decreased dramatically over the last decades. In 2007 the rate had dropped to fewer than five hundred killings a year, its lowest point in more than forty years. But forty years ago murder rates in the city began to rise. (In 1971, for example, 1,466 were killed in the city, and in 1990 the murder rate peaked at 2,245.)<sup>6</sup> My main characters all committed their killings at a time when these statistics were escalating. After serving twenty, thirty, or even forty years in prison, the murderers are returning home to a culture less inured to their crimes.

Given my goal of displaying the different dimensions of rehabilitation, I became particularly interested in people who had spent large parts of their lives behind bars. An extreme crime with an extreme sentence most clearly highlights the issues with which ex-cons commonly struggle, and the longer a person has been imprisoned, the more overwhelming freedom becomes. An extreme crime and an extreme sentence require more complex individual, institutional, and societal strategies of rehabilitation.

One issue that came to interest me in particular is the moral ramifications of murder. No other crime is so transformative, inside and out. Angel once said to me, "Murder is the ultimate crime. Victim and murderer both can't recover." His comment made me wonder whether a murderer can ever be fully rehabilitated. We will see that a murderer's rehabilitation may or may not involve a lifelong struggle with guilt and with society's inability to forgive. My subjects' stories demonstrate that murderers return to our society

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with a huge amount of psychological baggage and that attempts at rehabilitation and integration put an enormous strain on private and public agencies, on families, and on the individuals themselves.

Although there are many academic studies, memoirs, and journalistic accounts exploring the long-lasting consequences of violent acts on victims, there is little information on the effects that crime and long-term incarceration have on the murderer and on the society to which he or she returns. And to take a step back: murder rarely happens without forewarning. Through three individual narratives my book shows that there are a slew of predictors leading up to the crime. These predictors, in turn, provide important clues about how such a murder could have been prevented. While individuals, family, school, community, and society may have failed at prevention, the examples in this book might help us understand what is necessary for a criminal's rehabilitation. As such, rehabilitation is linked to the criminal's life before prison.

From a public policy perspective alone, it seems obvious that we should care about the 730,000 men and women released from prison each year. If millions of Americans were affected with a dangerous virus that cost us billions of tax dollars, destroyed families and livelihoods, and left a large part of the population homeless and mentally ill, no one would question the government's attempt to find a long-lasting solution. I think we should care about Adam, Bruce, and Angel not only because their stories illustrate the outcomes of applied public policy and criminal justice but because they address our values as human beings and as a collective society. Who deserves forgiveness, and who is willing to forgive? Do we consider punishment temporary or eternal? Should our personal history ameliorate the consequences of our errors? How much can we blame our parents and our environment for our missteps as adults? These vital questions pertain to all of us. I wrestle directly with these questions through the detailed psychological portraits I have drawn of Angel, Bruce, and Adam and show that one answer doesn't suffice.

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Rather, each individual deserves his or her own consideration and set of complex answers.

#### OF REHAB — AND CORRECTIONAL QUACKERY

This is neither a book of public policy nor one of criminal justice. It is a work of literary nonfiction that delves into the everyday lives and emotional struggles of three formerly incarcerated individuals. It explores their journeys to freedom and their various modes of rehabilitation. Not wanting to interrupt the narrative flow, I decided to deliver a brief excursion into America's conflicting philosophies of crime and punishment here.<sup>7</sup> Through their rehabilitative paths, Angel, Bruce, and Adam illustrate and enrich the theories that attempt to define and manage them.

In *Correctional Theory: Context and Consequences* criminologists Francis T. Cullen and Cheryl Lero Jonson define *rehabilitation* as “a planned correctional intervention that targets for change internal and/or social criminogenic [crime-producing] factors with the goal of reducing recidivism and, where possible, of improving other aspects of an offender's life.”<sup>8</sup> (Note that the primary focus lies on the reduction of recidivism; I will return to the second goal, the “other aspects,” which I consider of equal importance, a bit later on.) Cullen and Jonson argue that “the belief that a core function of prisons should be rehabilitation is woven deeply into the nation's cultural fabric.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, if America wants to stay true to itself, it has to revive the rehabilitative ideal, which was stamped out by the draconian get-tough-on-crime policies of the past decades.

In colonial times crime was not dealt with through prolonged prison sentences or correctional institutions as Bruce, Adam, and Angel experienced them. In his seminal book *The Discovery of the Asylum*, historian David J. Rothman writes that suspects accused of witchcraft, blasphemy, or idolatry, for example—the definition of crime then was based on the Bible—were held in small jails only until they were tried.<sup>10</sup> The accused was then publicly

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humiliated, whipped, fined, perhaps expelled from the colonial settlement, or even hanged. The three most powerful weapons of crime prevention were thought to be family, church, and community.

The period of enlightenment and nation building coincided with an enormous increase in the diversity and population density of America's cities. (Rothman notes that New York's population grew fivefold between 1790 and 1830.) The colonial methods of punishment were considered barbaric, and a new movement emerged that was concerned with the origins and treatment of criminal behavior. The severe colonial criminal codes were deemed a cause and thus amended, and incarceration was seen as a humane alternative to the old codes. America built its first prisons at the end of the eighteenth century. An offender's sentence was matched with the severity of the crime. When this approach failed to reduce crime, criminal behavior began to be attributed to dysfunctional families and the environmental factors that plagued American cities, such as prostitution, alcohol, theaters, and criminal opportunities. Authorities decided to create special environments, free of corruption, to reinforce the functioning social order. In 1820, two separate penal movements emerged: The Auburn prison established the so-called New York or Congregate System, which aimed to reform offenders through hard labor, religious training, obedience, and silence. At the Philadelphia prison, where the Separate System originated, total isolation and silence were implemented to instill repentance. The purpose of both systems, which were deeply rooted in Christianity, was to rehabilitate the wayward.

After the Civil War America's prison system was in a state of crisis. Unbearably crowded and disease ridden, many prisons had to give up on their concept of solitude, silence, and contemplation. This endemic problem, criminology expert Alexis M. Durham writes, "continues to bedevil modern correctional operations." He points out that the psychological impact of living in crowded conditions "may not appear until after the inmate has returned to society and is no longer under careful observation."<sup>11</sup>



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