Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film

Caster, Peter

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Recognizing the centrality of the prison in American history and culture, Peter Caster adroitly explores complex interrelations between the actualities of incarceration and a wide-ranging sampling of their varied representations in the American imagination, zooming in on those always troublesome perceptions of race and masculinity. Caster’s ambitious project succeeds because he combines formidable scholarship with exceptionally insightful reading of texts as varied as Faulkner’s novels, Hollywood feature films, documentaries, and political discourse. Especially impressive are his nuanced juxtaposition of American History X with The Hurricane and his audacious crosscutting between readings of Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice and contemporaneous proceedings of the American Correctional Association.

This is an unusually valuable contribution to our understanding of a crucial subject for contemporary America.”

—H. Bruce Franklin, author of Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist and editor of Prison Writing in 20th-Century America

“Examining representations of crime and punishment on the page, on stage, and on screen, Peter Caster’s new book moves smartly from textual analysis (the sort of close reading no one seems willing to do anymore) to larger social and historical study, balancing with dexterity the texts and contexts of fictive representation and historical recollection. Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film offers significant insight into a modern American culture increasingly divided (and defined) by incarceration.”


“Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the centrality of the prison system to American culture. Through skillful analysis of literature and film, Caster shows how our collective imagination of incarceration shapes the way prisoners are seen by politicians, the general public, and even corrections officials. Starting with Faulkner and ending with contemporary activist drama, Caster offers an important historical perspective on the present. He argues persuasively that even films that expose racial injustice can also represent prison as a redemptive experience and thereby contribute to the powerful stereotype that yokes black masculinity with criminality.”

—Amy Kaplan, Edward W. Kane Professor of English, University of Pennsylvania

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