



A Place to Stand

By Jimmy Santiago Baca

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Jimmy Santiago Baca's harrowing, brilliant memoir of his life before, during, and immediately after the years he spent in a maximum-security prison garnered tremendous critical acclaim and went on to win the prestigious 2001 International Prize. Long considered one of the best poets in America today, Baca was illiterate at the age of twenty-one and facing five to ten years behind bars for selling drugs. *A Place to Stand* is the remarkable tale of how he emerged after his years in the penitentiary -- much of it spent in isolation -- with the ability to read and a passion for writing poetry. A vivid portrait of life inside a maximum-security prison and an affirmation of one man's spirit in overcoming the most brutal adversity, *A Place to Stand* "stands as proof there is always hope in even the most desperate lives" -- (Fort Worth Morning Star-Telegram). "*A Place to Stand* is a hell of a book, quite literally. You won't soon forget it." -- Luis Urrea, The San Diego Union-Tribune "This book will have a permanent place in American letters." -- Jim Harrison

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A Place to Stand By Jimmy Santiago Baca Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #283693 in eBooks
- Published on: 2007-12-01
- Released on: 2007-12-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Anyone who doubts the power of the written word to transform a life will know better after reading poet Jimmy Santiago Baca's wrenching memoir of his troubled youth and the five-year jail stint that turned him around.

When he enters New Mexico's Florence State Prison in 1973, convicted on a drug charge, Baca is 21 and has a long history of trouble with the law. There's no reason to think jail will do anything but turn him into a hardened criminal, and standing up for himself with guards and menacing fellow cons quickly gains him a reputation as a troublemaker. But there have already been hints that this turbulent young man is looking for a way out, as he painstakingly spells out a poem from a clerk's college textbook while awaiting trial or unsuccessfully tries to get permission to take classes in prison.

When a volunteer from a religious group sends him a letter, contact with the written word unleashes something in Baca, who starts writing letters and poems with the aid of a dictionary. Reading literature shows him possibilities for understanding his painful family background and expressing his feelings. Poetry literally saves him from being a murderer, as Baca stands over another convict with an illegal weapon, ready to finish him off, and hears "the voices of Neruda and Lorca... praising life as sacred and challenging me: How can you kill and still be a poet?" Baca has a year to go on his sentence, but the reader knows at that point he has made a choice that will alter his destiny.

Without softening the brutality of life in jail, Baca expresses great tenderness for the men there who helped him and affirms his commitment to writing poetry for them, "telling the truth about the life that prisoners have to endure." --*Wendy Smith*

From Publishers Weekly

While readers may find Baca's poetry more dazzling than this prose memoir about how he became a poet, the author still manages to capture both the reader's interest and sympathies. Baca traverses his life, starting with his childhood in rural New Mexico where both parents essentially abandoned him his adolescence in "juvee" halls and his days as a drug dealer. The story leads up to an account of five years in a maximum-security prison in Arizona, and the unusual personal transformation that occurs there through his learning to read and write; eventually, he discovers his poetic voice. The text is structured like a conversion narrative in which Baca's past symbolizes all that is unhealthy and his poetry-oriented future is filled with the hope and optimism that come from discovering something divine in the midst of darkness. The darkness is often literal, as when Baca is describing his lengthy solitary confinements. He also recounts the intricacies of prison politics, in which failure to gain respect and alliances forged with the wrong people can mean death. Oddly, certain story lines are simply dropped along the way, such as his charge that the prison was lacing his food with strong psychoactive drugs. It is too bad that Baca's prose is frequently flat ("Poetry enhanced my self-respect. It provided me with a path for exploring possibilities for life's enrichment that I follow to this day"), especially when reflecting upon abstract topics, since the content of his story is so interesting and his poetry simply shines. (July) Forecast: Baca has won a Pushcart Prize, among other awards, including his title as a one-time champion of the International Poetry Slam. A 12-city tour will win him fans and sell more books.

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From Library Journal

Poet Baca's (Black Mesa Poems) memoir reveals a complex early life. Alternately loved and abandoned by his alcoholic father and his mother, nurtured by grandparents but sent to an orphanage when his grandfather died, Baca was illiterate at 21 and unable to support himself legitimately. Beyond self-pity, however, he acknowledges his own as well as others' responsibility for his path to prison. Arrested for dealing drugs but falsely accused of shooting an FBI agent, Baca was betrayed by friends, attorneys, and the legal system. His unflinching account of his incarceration, with its brutality and occasional benevolence, reveals the paradox of prison life. Ironically, his time in solitary confinement redeemed him, prompting lifesaving memories of his rural New Mexico childhood, which ignited his ability to use language to elevate himself above his immediate surroundings. The rustic imagery is beautiful, but beautiful, too, is the sun's path down the dark prison corridor. Baca, who has temerity and talent, was ultimately released, but his narrative begs the question: How many incarcerated individuals languish in U.S. prisons, victims of a system that history may someday compare to a medieval dungeon? Worth reading from both a literary and a social perspective, this book is recommended for all public and academic libraries. [Baca's new collection of poetry, *Healing Earthquakes: A Love Story in Poems*, will be released by Grove in July. Ed.] Nedra C. Evers, Sacramento P.L., C.

- Nedra C. Evers, Sacramento P.L., CA

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Errol Sawyer:

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Evan Hinson:

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