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Inside—Out? The Challenges of Representing Prison, From the Screen to the Page

As America's prison population swells to stunning proportions—2.3 million are behind bars in the U.S., or one in 100 people—an artistic genre evolves to represent this reality. Books and films about prison-related issues have become a mainstream industry, depicting life “inside” from a range of reality-based perspectives. But can the inside ever really make it out? This paper explores why recent books and films about prison—from *Rikers High* and *Lockup* to *Visiting Life* and *True Notebooks*—face tremendous challenges in doing their subject justice, and all too often end up endorsing the very thing they aim to critique. What tacks have these texts taken, and why is prison so difficult a reality to represent?