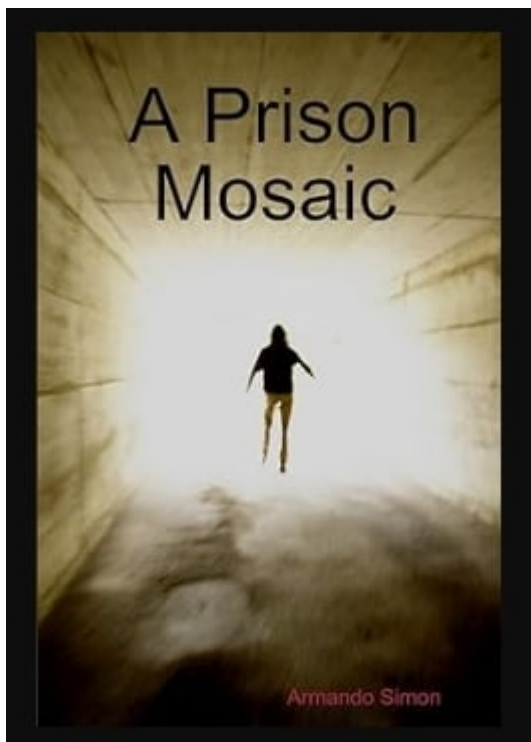


A Prison Mosaic by Armando Simon: A Sweet and Sour Summertime Read

By Carl Nelson

For those of us New English Review habitués, who circle the Iconocast postings like barflies around the office water cooler, Armando Simon is a well-known contributor. As a non-fictional essayist, he is our own Victor Davis Hanson, whose well-crafted prose pushes a veritable barge full of supportive examples like a powerful tug, off-times moving against the cultural currents. In this, our Armando pushes harder than most, and is even willing to pedal to the partial acquittal of an accepted miscreant – if that is where the truth lies. His stuff can be caustic and bracing as he hews away at accepted historical cant. He also writes fiction.



Armando writes his fiction with pretty good swings of his axe also, (albeit where a clearing is needed) leaving a space here and there for meadows to sprout. In his latest novel, *A Prison Mosaic*, this style of writing finds its natural home, as near everything and everyone connected within the prison paradigm is engorged by frustration, and unleavened in quiet despair at the constantly simmering injustice and mind destroying monotony of it all – while sitting in the isolation filing away on their shivs (axes).

Among the flat poverty of finer emotions, however, this

legally dark and harrowing book is leavened a bit in glimmers... in sketches sprinkled here and there: a children's story sent by an inmate in a letter to his child, an inmate who adroitly raises spirits and defuses violence by playing the court fool, a sunflower growing in a prison yard from a scattered packet of seeds gotten from the commissary by an inspired inmate, whose sunflower destiny is nannied like a child, through the barred window by each of his passing convict confederates.

Why would I call this book a great summertime read? And why sweet and sour? Well...

First. What could be more enjoyable than to rest on your chaise lounge to the lapping of sparkling waters, sucking on a pina colada (sweet!) – while reading the evocative tale of some poor misbegotten (sometimes innocent) soul suffering among violent cretins in a hot, humid, confined concrete hellscape (sour!)? Who, with a reverse twist of fate, could well be yourself? How did he (and all of these others) get there? How will they survive? What possible avenue of spiritual escape do they have? All of the while the reader, (you) is granted superhuman powers to fly from away from all that human misery, as if on a celestial furlough to a Mexican beach. You are having your cake and eating it too.

Second, this book is hard to put down – and even more impressive, easy to pick back up. The hallmark of an engrossing read is that you look forward to securing that next free moment to settle back within its pages. This is a fair sized novel, which took me a couple of pleasure-filled days, filled with damnable interruptions, to absorb.

Third, though our guide, Armando, isn't big on biographical details, he seems to have found his way out of Cuba, speaks three languages, has taught at a university and that he is currently a retired forensic psychologist who lives in San Antonio. And who was once staff psychologist for the Texas Department of Corrections: Rosharon, Texas. So, there is a

good chance he knows of what he speaks. The knowledge acquired here is probably fit to drink.

I came across some powerful information myself. Such as how plea bargains with their convictions benefit both the defense attorneys (remunerative fees plus less work) and prosecuting attorneys (high rate of convictions and low court costs). That parole officers are given incredible latitude to become tin-pot bureaucratic dictators. And that bureaucracy will enforce any policy sent down from above, no matter how irrational, counterproductive, immoral or flatly mental. This is just a few. But you can pick up, and won't miss the others yourself.

Educate your fantasies for what very well could become a future reality. (You'll believe this, after dipping just a toe into the legal tar pit which is our criminal law as practiced.)

Absorb the costs in human lives and emotions. Then sip your beer. It's all here. Buy the book!