



The Prison Runner

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Deborah Ellis's latest exploration of the lives of poor young people in the developing world takes her, for the first time, to the South American continent, and to Bolivia. Diego lives with his mum and sister in the San Sebastian's Women's Prison. He goes to school every day outside the prison and also earns pocket money, as a 'Taxi', running errands in the city for the women prisoners. When he and his mother get into trouble with the prison inmates committee because Diego has failed to look after his sister properly, he is tempted by his friend Mando into a scheme to make quick money in the country. He and Mando are taken to the forest, with three other boys who are out of their heads from glue sniffing, and brutally used as labourers in the production of coca paste, the crude form of cocaine, treading coca leaves in pits. Ellis's spare colloquial style, her narrative drive and her empathy with her central character once more produce a fast moving, gripping, and thought provoking story. Both the prison and the forest are vividly described. Only Smith, the American boss of the drug operation, a Vietnam veteran and ex-mercenary, strikes a slightly off key note, suggesting that Ellis wants to make obvious that it's not Bolivians who ultimately profit from the drug trade. On the other hand, Smith's belief that clever, tough and defiant Diego might be of the right stuff to rise in the organisation does suggest how, when opportunities are limited, even the best may turn to the worst. But that's not for Diego, whose sense of justice is as strong as his self-interest. Mando dies in an escape attempt and, tracked through the forest by Smith, Diego sees his tormentor die in quicksand, then finds refuge with a peasant family of coca growers in the hills. There is at least one sequel to follow, called **The Sacred Leaf**, which, if its title is anything to go by, may give more explanation of the place of the coca leaf in Bolivian society and its relationship with the cocaine trade.

Running Order:

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