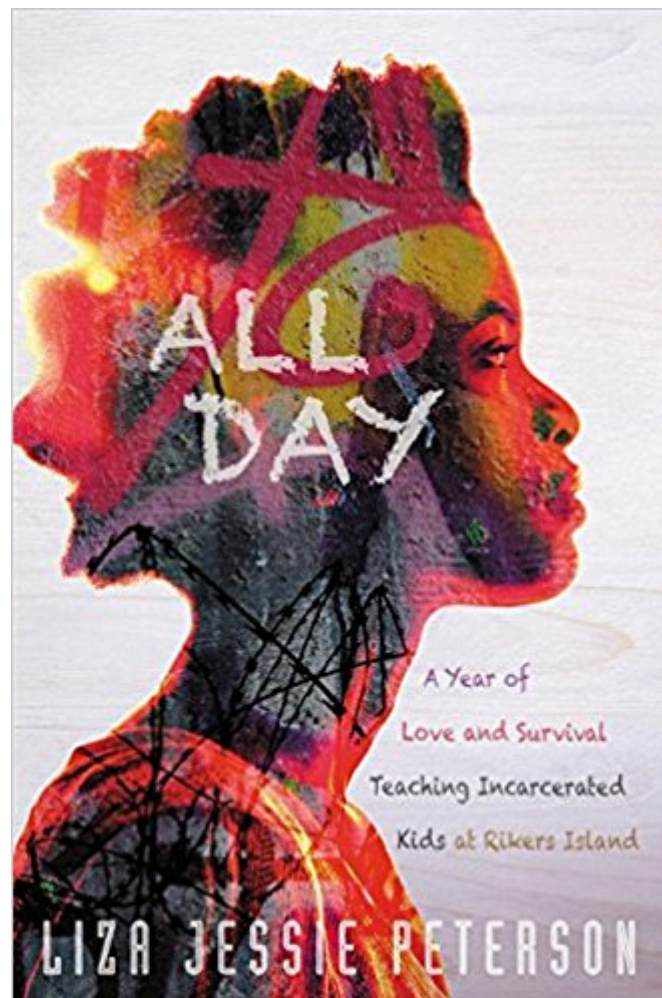




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All Day: A Year Of Love And Survival Teaching Incarcerated Kids At Rikers Island



Synopsis

ALL DAY is a behind-the-bars, personal glimpse into the issue of mass incarceration via an unpredictable, insightful and ultimately hopeful reflection on teaching teens while they await sentencing. Told with equal parts raw honesty and unbridled compassion, ALL DAY recounts a year in Liza Jessie Peterson's classroom at Island Academy, the high school for inmates detained at New York City's Rikers Island. A poet and actress who had done occasional workshops at the correctional facility, Peterson was ill-prepared for a full-time stint teaching in the GED program for the incarcerated youths. For the first time faced with full days teaching the rambunctious, hyper, and fragile adolescent inmates, "Ms. P" comes to understand the essence of her predominantly Black and Latino students as she attempts not only to educate them, but to instill them with a sense of self-worth long stripped from their lives. "I have quite a spirited group of drama kings, court jesters, flyboy gangsters, tricksters, and wannabe pimps all in my charge, all up in my face, to educate," Peterson discovers. "Corralling this motley crew of bad-news bears to do any lesson is like running boot camp for hyperactive gremlins. I have to be consistent, alert, firm, witty, fearless, and demanding, and most important, I have to have strong command of the subject I'm teaching." Discipline is always a challenge, with the students spouting street-infused backtalk and often bouncing off the walls with pent-up testosterone. Peterson learns quickly that she must keep the upper hand-set the rules and enforce them with rigor, even when her sympathetic heart starts to waver. Despite their relentless bravura and antics-and in part because of it-Peterson becomes a fierce advocate for her students. She works to instill the young men, mostly black, with a sense of pride about their history and culture: from their African roots to Langston Hughes and Malcolm X. She encourages them to explore and express their true feelings by writing their own poems and essays. When the boys push her buttons (on an almost daily basis) she pushes back, demanding that they meet not only her expectations or the standards of the curriculum, but set expectations for themselves-something most of them have never before been asked to do. She witnesses some amazing successes as some of the boys come into their own under her tutelage. Peterson vividly captures the prison milieu and the exuberance of the kids who have been handed a raw deal by society and have become lost within the system. Her time in the classroom teaches her something, too-that these boys want to be rescued. They want normalcy and love and opportunity.

Customer Reviews

"When in 2008 the opportunity arises for poet and actor Peterson to teach a pre-GED class to male teenage inmates at Riker's Island, where she'd previously worked as a teaching artist, she jumps for

the shot at job stability. Beyond trying to maintain general order in her classroom-no small task-she must knock down hurdles that these boys, (her "rug rats," "rascals," and "bad-news bears") have been dealing with for ages: unwarranted special-ed designations, social promotion that left them at sea, and an education thus far that did not include the history and gifts of their black and brown ancestors. Occasionally, the boys lure "thug mama genie" from her lamp, and Ms. P goes off; other times, her sweet, cool-headed alter ego, "Miss Crabtree," is in charge. Unwaveringly, Peterson tries to reach and teach her young men, honor their stories, and counteract the traumas that have led them to her classroom. She has teacher's pets and perpetual thorns in her side, but there's love all around. Peterson's unique experience, care for her students, and quick-flowing poet's prose do justice to these young people who've been let down, while addressing the system that let it happen, and the only possible way out: love plus compassion and education."

—Annie Bostro, Booklist

"Liza Jessie Peterson's ALL DAY is a must read for anyone who has ever cared about young people - and all people. Peterson brings amazing warmth, love and laughter to the devastating state of our juvenile justice system. In her able and gifted hands, we meet young people we will not soon forget. So glad this book is in the world."

—Jacqueline Woodson, National Book Award winner for *Brown Girl Dreaming* and New York Times bestselling author of *Another Brooklyn*

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