

Stark Observations on Life inside Australia's Manus Detention Center

No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison

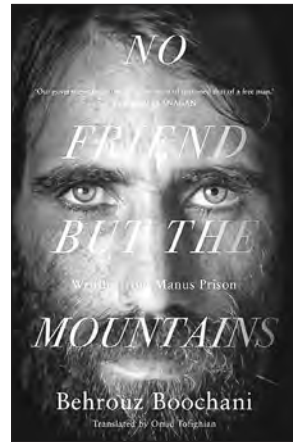
by Behrouz Boochani. Translated by Omid Tofighian. Sydney: Picador, 2018. Paperback, 374 pp., USD\$13.37.

Reviewed by Varunika Ruwanpura, University of Adelaide, South Australia

Kurdish-Iranian writer, journalist, scholar, and filmmaker Behrouz Boochani in his book discusses an increasingly controversial Australian topic—the Manus Island regional processing center for asylum seekers. This book convincingly demonstrates that Boochani's writing is on par with some of the world's best prison literature, which includes U.S. journalist Ted Conover's book, *Newjack*, on New York State's infamous Sing Sing prison. The Australian author, Richard Flanagan, who wrote the foreword to *No Friend but the Mountains*, compares Boochani's writing to prison stories written by renowned authors like Oscar Wilde and Martin Luther King, Jr. Prestigious Australian literary awards that Boochani's book has won include the Prize for Literature and the Prize for Non-Fiction at the 2019 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. Shortlisting for other national awards is further proof of its merit.

Boochani was a detainee on the original Manus Island Regional Processing Centre when he wrote this story and remains a detainee at another processing center on the island. The story was laboriously written on a mobile phone and smuggled out of Manus as thousands of text messages. It is an autobiographical account of daily life inside the original detention center, which was closed in 2017. Boochani's descriptions of severe mental trauma sustained by inmates are highly confronting: "The prison landscape is so violent that it is likely that out of a few hundred there could be at least one angry and disenfranchised prisoner who could decide to commit a violent act—and enact it during the night—in the dark, behind the bathrooms, or alongside the obfuscating coconut tree trunks . . ." (177). Most detainees have no idea when they will be released, and many are not welcome back in the countries from which they have fled. These issues have already been widely covered by Australian and international media, so instead, this review focuses on the exceptional quality of Boochani's writing.

Drawing on Norman Sims's description of the five characteristics of literary journalism, as immersion, structure, accuracy, voice, and responsibility in *The Literary*



Journalists (1984) may illustrate how Boochani's book can be considered literary journalism. Boochani was literally immersed in the subject of his book because he was an inmate of Manus detention center. But he is also immersed in the book's topic in a metaphoric sense. At times his prose gives the impression that he is almost observing life at the center from afar: "There are so many times the prisoner is forced to straddle the border between human and animal. One has to decide whether to uphold human values or live life like The Cow. . . . When a person is hungry, they rush anything that smells like food. And if there's competition, they attack with even more ferocity" (232–33). The book is also artfully structured as a series of prose chapters interspersed with stanzas of poetry, for Boochani is also a poet. The way poetry is woven into the narrative creates a lyrical reading rhythm.

Sims's characteristic of accuracy in literary journalism is always difficult to assess when reviewing a nonfiction book, as views on accuracy can be subjective. This review's analysis of the accuracy of Boochani's account is based on three factors. First, Omid Tofghian, the academic who translated Boochani's book from Farsi (also known as Persian) to English, is a well-regarded scholar who spent extended periods of time on Manus conversing with Boochani. Second, Tofghian's meticulous explanation of his translation approach, which is found at the beginning of Boochani's book, notes the author's collaborations with leading Australian academics, authors, and human rights activists. Third, Boochani's evocative and humble acceptance speech, conveyed via video link from Manus, when he won the 2019 Victorian Premier's Literary Award, provides the strongest evidence of the book's accuracy. In this speech Boochani says, "Literature has the power to give us freedom." His book is testament to the power of literary journalism to lift our senses and bring true stories to life.

Boochani's voice is authentic, drawing attention to his Kurdish heritage as much as it exposes the tragedy of life as a Manus refugee. An excerpt, in which he reflects on the mountains of Kurdistan, is an example: "Grand mountain peaks covered with snow, full of ice, abounding in cold/ I am there/ I am an eagle/ I am flying over the mountainous terrain" (30). Having visited Kurdistan in my youth, I can clearly visualize from reading this passage Boochani's longing to return to his homeland.

Sims's final characteristic of literary journalism is author responsibility. There is no doubt that Boochani takes absolute pride in and responsibility for his writing. This is evident in his own reflections on how he conceptualized and wrote *No Friend but the Mountains* and in the content of the book itself.

Overall, this work of literary journalism is one of the most important to emerge from Australia in recent years. For literary journalism scholars, the book provides a rich subject of study. *No Friend* offers not only stark insights into the unfortunate lives of Manus detainees, but also commands appreciation that such a highly evocative and creative work of literature could be produced under such dire circumstances. Reading *No Friend but the Mountains* reminded me of Viktor Frankl's having conceptualized his theory of logotherapy during his imprisonment at Auschwitz. For me, the extraordinary way this book was written is what is most meaningful about this book and why I highly recommend it to other scholars.