

Prisoner 88

Leah Pileggi

Reviewed by: Sophia Cheng, Age 16

Star Teen Book Reviewer of *Be the Star You Are!* Charity

www.bethestaryouare.org

On May 31, 1885, Jake Oliver Evans logged in to the Idaho Penitentiary as Prisoner 88, the youngest person ever to be incarcerated there. At ten years old, Jake has been sentenced to five years for manslaughter, which he is convicted of for shooting someone while protecting his father. Surprisingly, life in prison far surpasses the life he had wandering around with his Pa looking for work, and the disadvantages of a cramped cell and hostile convicts are not too difficult to deal with. Jake only understands that he has books and a patient tutor to teach him how to read, a job he can dedicate himself to, and is well fed at every meal. He even finds friends among his fellow inmates, the kind warden, and becomes especially close to his employer's family. However, a prison is unsuitable for any child to grow up in and with its cruel reminders of the dangers within its walls, Jack is constantly having to witness the harsher side to life.

Prisoner 88 by Leah Pileggi is told through the voice of a child whose struggles and haunting life experiences will leave a lasting impression. The author has captured the essence of a young child trying to grow up in a world he does not quite understand while giving the reader a comprehensive understanding of the situation he is in. It is like having two adjacent windows looking into the same world, but depicting two different views of the same place. Additionally, the story is written in vernacular, it is very easy to follow since it is expressed with the limited vocabulary and one-way thought process of a ten year-old. The main character Jake is very complex, yet he bears the distinctive qualities of a trusting, inquisitive child, which in this unconventional setting, makes the story more intriguing, seeing how Jack matures and grows as the result of his experiences from his time in prison. Although a short piece, this book snaps up readers from the first page because of its viewpoint that is simple, but startlingly revealing.

There are no glaring errors or mishaps in this book, but one or two parts could have had some more attention directed towards them. For example, the conclusion, although there is a gradual build-up to it, is pretty abrupt and wraps up Jake's story with a few short statements that seem more like a summary of that chapter than anything else. Also, Jake had a tendency, more so in the first half of the book than the latter, to refer to the same event from his previous life, which made his life before he went to prison constricted to that one occurrence. Nevertheless, this is a book I would gladly read multiple times over.

Recommended Readings:

I highly recommend *Prisoner 88* to middle school students, but it should be appealing to any age group. It is a short piece of historical fiction that kids can easily digest since the language is colloquial and it is not informational to the point which it becomes bland. A few books that came to mind that are similar to this one include *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor, *Al Capone at Alcatraz* by Gennifer Choldenko, and *The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam* by Huynh Quang Nhuong.