



# Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett

*Jennifer Gonnerman*

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**A groundbreaking work of reportage on the hidden consequences of America's prison boom**

*Life On the Outside* tells the story of Elaine Bartlett, who spent sixteen years in Bedford Hills prison for selling cocaine—a first offense under New York's harsh Rockefeller drug laws. The book opens on the morning of January 26, 2000, when she is set free, having received clemency from the governor. At forty-two, Elaine has virtually nothing: no money, no job, no real home.

What she does have is a large and troubled family, including four children, who live in a decrepit Lower East Side housing project. "I left one prison to come home to another," Elaine says. Over the next months, she clashes with her daughters, hunts for a job, visits her son and her husband in prison, negotiates the rules of parole, searches for her own home—and campaigns for the repeal of the sentencing guidelines that led to her long prison term.

In recent years, the United States has imprisoned more than two million people while making few preparations for their eventual release. Now these prisoners are coming home in record numbers, as unprepared for "life on the outside" as society is for them. Writing with a passion and an empathy that recall *There Are No Children Here* and *Cold New World*, Jennifer Gonnerman calls attention to this mounting national crisis by crafting an intimate family portrait—a story of struggle and survival, guilt and forgiveness, loneliness and love.

*Life on the Outside* is a 2004 National Book Award Finalist for Nonfiction.

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