



Parchman

R. Kim Rushing

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Constructed in 1904, the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman covers 20,000 acres, forty-six square miles, in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. Originally designed like a private plantation without walls or guard towers, the prison farm has been slowly transformed over the decades into a modern penitentiary. In 1994, photographer R. Kim Rushing was the first outside photographer in Parchman's history allowed long-term access to inmates and the chance to photograph them in their cells and living quarters after earning great trust with his subjects. In *Parchman* he offers a glimpse of the men incarcerated in this infamous place. Eighteen volunteer inmates, ranging in custody level from trusty to death row, are presented through images and their own handwritten letters.

When Rushing started this work, he brought visceral, human questions. What is it like to be an inmate in Parchman Penitentiary? What happens to an individual there? How does it happen? How do the prisoners feel about their circumstances? What does it feel like when two people from completely different worlds look at each other over the top of a camera?

Moving to Ruleville, Mississippi, a small town in the heart of the Delta, Rushing came face to face with the influence of Parchman State Penitentiary. After becoming known in the area, he was allowed to photograph inmates for almost four years. These men volunteered and permitted him to photograph them in their cells. They even shared their written thoughts about their lives and prison conditions. It is particularly fascinating to see the visible change, or lack thereof, that becomes obvious when viewing portraits separated by two or three years.

These stark, moving portraits of prisoners attest to the impact of photography. The photos are accompanied by the prisoners' stories, told in their own words. Together the images and words provide the most complete understanding of Parchman ever published.

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