

The Forever Young Prisoner

Marcus Lessard

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In the unusual novel The Forever Young Prisoner, an imprisoned man thrills in a chance to investigate a mysterious fellow inmate.

In Marcus Lessard's mysterious novel *The Forever Young Prisoner*, an affable inmate investigates an urban legend.

Tommy had abusive foster parents, was homeless for a time, and tended to fall in with the wrong crowd. Sent to Providence State Penitentiary, he decides to make the most of his time there. He makes friends and writes bombastic short stories. But then he hears a rumor about a prisoner, Henry, who's been held next door since the early 1900s without aging. Tommy gets himself thrown into solitary confinement to investigate.

Though he's guilty of multiple crimes, Tommy's complexity is emphasized. At first stereotyped as a ne'er-do-well, he proves to be a witty, sharp, and charming hero with a complicated family background who leans on his virtues as he becomes an imprisoned detective. There's also a question of how Tommy will fare when and if he returns to life outside of prison: his situation is at all times precarious, and recidivism is a possibility that's easy to imagine.

As the book progresses, Tommy receives a surprising amount of help from guards, office staff, and lawyers. Though his interests are quixotic at first, real proof emerges regarding Henry's existence. However, Tommy's decisions in relation to the case are drastic: he risks his life, and he ends up escalating his own sentence.

In a stark prison setting whose backstory and inmates are fleshed out with care, the story is at its most straightforward when it's dealing with Henry's own tale. Henry seems increasingly real as the book progresses; there are even a few flashbacks to his life before his imprisonment. The question of why Tommy is the only person to seek the truth about him in generations looms. Danger and discomfort are generated by these unusual circumstances—and as Tommy contends with other prisoners and threats from those who wish to keep Henry's imprisonment a secret.

But the story also careens between extremes. At times, it focuses on the hilarity of its situations; elsewhere, there are examples of violence and destruction. And it sets Tommy's poetic and introspective voice against the gritty background of prison life. Still, Tommy's hopeful trajectory is gratifying.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (July 9, 2023)

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