



Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

Orange is the New Black

My Year in a Women's Prison

by Piper Kerman

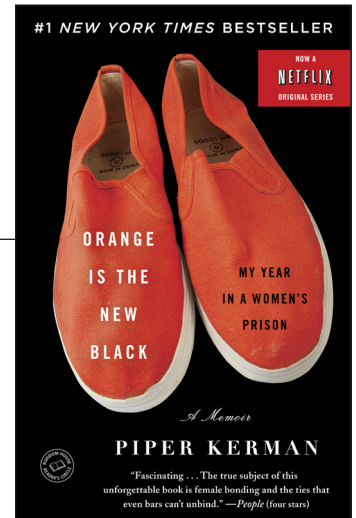
- Selected for Common Reading at:
Salem State University
University of California–Santa Barbara
University of Massachusetts–Amherst
- Now a Netflix® Original Series
- #1 *New York Times* Bestseller

Spiegel & Grau | TR | 978-0-385-52339-4 | 352pp. | \$16.00/\$19.00 Can.

Movie Tie-in Edition:

Spiegel & Grau | TR | 978-0-8129-8618-1 | 352pp. | \$16.00/\$18.00 Can.

e-Book: 978-0-385-53026-2 | \$11.99/\$13.99 Can.



about the author

PIPER KERMAN is vice president of a Washington, D.C.–based communications firm that works with foundations and nonprofits. A graduate of Smith College, she lives in Brooklyn.

discussion questions

1. At the beginning of her book, Piper Kerman takes the reader back to 1993 when she was twenty-four years old and smuggling money for a West African drug lord. She then juxtaposes this scene with her graduation from Smith College only the year before. Throughout the book, readers are taken on a journey that challenges them to think about mistakes and consequences. How does Kerman manage her emotional journey? In what ways does she accept the consequences of her actions? Which parts of her story reflect her desire for redemption? How does her encounter with Nora and Hester/Anne in Chicago reflect her acceptance of the consequences of her behavior?
2. Much of the praise for Kerman's memoir centers on the notion of female bonding and the ties that bind women together, even when in prison. While reading this book, which story of female bonding did you find most poignant? In what ways does Kerman bond with women she probably would have never otherwise encountered? How does she connect with women who are seemingly so different from her? How do those relationships sustain her during her stay at Danbury?
3. Kerman dedicates her book to her fiancé/husband, Larry, and to her mother and father. All three of these individuals provide solid emotional and financial support throughout her incarceration. She also dedicates the book to Pop. In what ways did Pop influence Kerman's experiences at Danbury? After their first encounter, when Pop warns Piper about threatening/joking about a hunger strike, did you anticipate the relationship that would blossom?
4. Several times, the book touches upon the idea of being "gay for the stay." What does this phrase mean? Why are administrators at Danbury concerned with sexual relationships between inmates? What is the punishment for engaging in sexual relations? How does this book challenge and reinforce some of the stereotypes of inmates being "gay for the stay?"

5. During Piper Kerman's incarceration, Martha Stewart is charged and tried for insider trading. Why is Stewart's trial so significant to the inmates and administrators at Danbury? Why do staff and administrators not want Martha at Danbury? Why are "Barbara" a.k.a. Levy's comments to the *Hartford Courant* so troublesome to the women at Danbury? How do Piper's comments about the "ghetto" relate to the false images of Danbury portrayed by Levy?
6. Kerman has many critiques of the criminal justice system in her book. One continual critique she brings to bare is the impact of the "War on Drugs." Her commentary, however, shifts throughout the text. In what ways does Kerman's criticism shift during her stay at Danbury? How has the "War on Drugs" influenced the racial and gendered makeup of many correctional facilities, including Danbury? Describe how Piper feels about her role in the "War on Drugs." Which inmates help shift Kerman's feelings with regards to her own role in the "War on Drugs?"
7. As we can see from Kerman's descriptions, there appears to be significant variation in how rules are followed and enforced at Danbury. And, from her writing, we can assume that the same may be true at other correctional institutions. From obtaining contraband items to visitation/telephone privileges, inmates seem to have some small freedoms amidst severe regulation. What examples stood out to you about the accessibility of contraband items? What benefits does Kerman get that other inmates do not receive? Why does she get these benefits? What role does contraband food play for prisoners at Danbury?
8. Part of what has drawn people to Kerman's story is the fact that she could be any one of us—yourself, your sister, your best friend, your girlfriend, etc. In what ways does Kerman's story resonate? Why do you think it has received such acclaim and been turned into a television series?
9. In addition to her critique regarding the mass incarceration courtesy of the "War on Drugs," Kerman also paints a dismal picture of the prison health care system. Her critique is not only about Danbury but all of the institutions in which she stays. According to Kerman, getting sick is not in a prisoner's best interest. Whether it's her depiction of the "pill line" or her unpleasant trip to the OBGYN, Kerman provides several examples of the lack of preventative and other health care for women in these facilities. What is Kerman's overall critique of the care provided to women at Danbury? Give examples that support this critique.
10. In her book, Kerman tackles many issues regarding problematic power dynamics and the abuse of power that occurs at places like Danbury. Many of the problematic dynamics revolve around issues of sex and sexual harassment. According to Kerman, "Sex and power were inseparable behind prison walls" (p. 55). This statement relates not only to sexual relations between inmates, but also the sexual component of many inmates' relationships with guards, bosses, and staff. Discuss some of the examples Kerman provides regarding the use and abuse of power by guards and other prison employees. What happens to Kerman while working in the electrical shop? What are the broader implications of the specific instances Kerman discusses?
11. One aspect that Kerman finds difficult is observing women who have children on the outside. She continually discusses how hard it is for mothers who are incarcerated. What are some of the stories that resonated with you regarding how incarcerated mothers do (or do not) maintain a relationship with their children? In what ways might the experience of incarcerated parents be different for men and women? How did you feel while reading the stories of women who have spent years behind bars and constantly miss out on significant portions of their children's lives?
12. In her early days at Danbury, Kerman describes life within the prison as being dictated to a certain extent by "tribes." She makes several early references to the importance of tribes, particularly when an inmate first arrives. What are these tribes? How are they composed? Throughout your reading, did you find these tribes to have rigid or permeable boundaries? Why are these tribes so significant in Kerman's retelling of her experiences at Danbury?

13. Class status has significant implications for Kerman's story. Throughout the book, her class status is relevant for how she interprets her own experiences. In what ways does Kerman's socio-economic status matter? Describe instances in which readers are able to understand the significance of money and social capital on an inmate's life.
14. Kerman states, "Social class is the most impenetrable barrier in America" (p. 203). Describe what she means. How is social class more impenetrable than race or gender? How does social class dictate a person's interactions with the criminal justice system from the point of arrest through incarceration? Do you believe social class contributes to a person's conviction and/or his/her ability to cut a deal? What other aspects of the justice system are influenced by social class?
15. Quite a bit of uproar occurs when Vanessa Robinson, a male-to-female transsexual, arrives in Danbury. Why is her presence so notorious? Transgender and transsexual inmates often face violence and harassment during their incarceration. What are the implications of the guards insisting on calling Vanessa "Richard?" How does Vanessa's experience fit within Kerman's critique of the health care provided to inmates? How do the women in Danbury respond to Vanessa?
16. There are several structural issues that Kerman adamantly critiques throughout her book. In addition to the "War on Drugs" and the health care system, Kerman is critical of the programs in place for women within the prison. Describe the significance of the re-entry classes for inmates getting ready to leave Danbury. What skill sets are prisoners taught while housed at Danbury? Why is so little of Danbury's (as well as other institutions') budget spent on education and rehabilitation? What does this say about the priorities of the United States prison system?
17. After her stay at Danbury, Kerman is able to return to a relatively normal life. She has a social system in place that secures her a job, she is able to provide for herself financially, she has a stable place to live, etc. What influences Kerman's circumstances? How are these circumstances different for other women exiting Danbury?
18. Kerman's final critique of the prison system follows her claim that "lack of empathy lies at the heart of every crime—certainly my own—yet empathy is the key to bringing a former prisoner back into the fold of society" (p. 298). Kerman claims throughout the text that our justice system is more about punishment and less about rehabilitation. Who does Kerman hold accountable for this? Before her stay, an acquaintance told Kerman that she would never have a day go by that she did not think about her prison stay and the people she encountered. How does this ring true for Kerman? What has her prison stay done for her activism? In her final thought, she quotes Thomas Mott Osborne, the former warden of New York's Sing Sing Prison who vowed, "We will turn this prison from a scrap heap into a repair shop" (p. 299). What does this mean? How does this help us reframe the ways we currently conceptualize incarceration in the United States?

→ about the guide's writer

SARAH PRIOR holds a Ph.D. degree from Arizona State University's Justice Studies program. She is currently a Lecturer at Northern Arizona University in the Criminology and Criminal Justice Department. Her research and teaching interests center on intersecting identities and social inequalities, particularly around issues of gender, race and education.

• notes



Penguin
Random House
ACADEMIC RESOURCES

Random House Academic Resources, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

www.randomhouseacademic.com • www.commonreads.com

QUERIES: commonreads@penguinrandomhouse.com