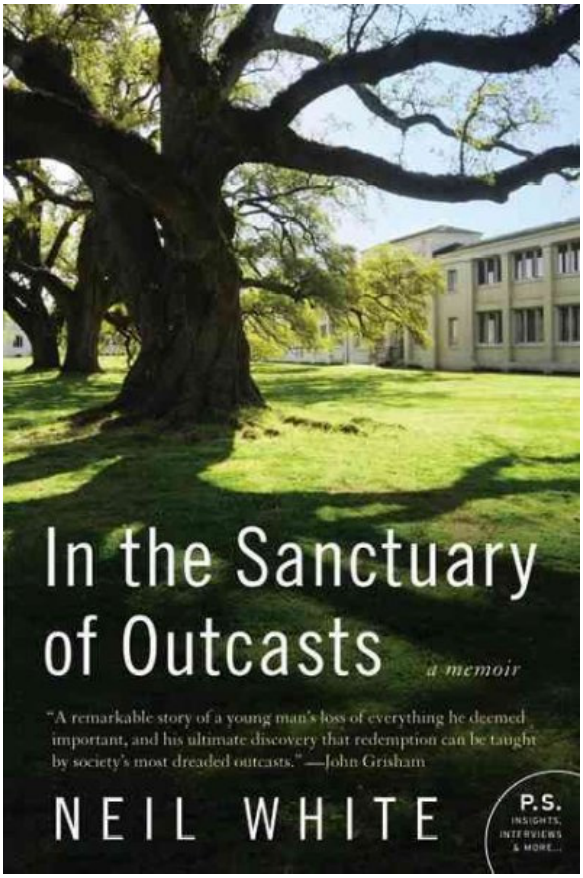

Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
Everson
Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org

the best place to begin

whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- Go to www.wcls.org
- Click on “catalog”
- In the Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Before you read *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, what did you think of when you heard the word "leper"? Did the book change your impressions?

2. When he was in the cafeteria, White would eavesdrop on the patients. He heard them call themselves "secret people." Why did they call themselves this? Did the name fit them?

3. From the time he was a young boy, White’s mother told him "you were put here to do great things. Don’t ever forget that." How did his mother’s attitude shape the man White was both before and after Carville?

4. White began his publishing career fighting for underdogs and the disadvantaged. What happened to those initial hopes? How can someone else escape the "success" trap that ensnared White and so many others?

5. "For as long as my children could remember, I had ignored fences and boundaries and rules. Nothing much had prevented me from getting what I wanted, and I made my children know it," White admits. How did this attitude land him in Carville? Do you see a correlation between White’s attitude and that of our wider society? How did the two reinforce each other? How did White eventually break free from this kind of thinking?

6. White came into contact with a variety of diverse characters during his year Carville, including Ella, Link, Doc, Jimmy Hoffa’s lawyer, Frank Ragano, Jimmy Harris, Steve Read. Talk about some of these people. What role did they play in White’s life while he was there? What did he learn from each of them?

7. White looked forward to seeing another leprosy patient, Sister Teresa Pazosas. Though the disease had ravaged her nose and fingers, "just being in her presence made me feel light and peaceful," White writes. "I didn't fully understand why she had that effect on me, but I was beginning to feel certain about one thing. Carville was a sacred space." What made Carville a sacred place? Why was White able to see what many of the other inmates could not?

8. Why was White so drawn to Ella? What was the importance of the Coke bottle story?

9. How did someone like White who'd "spent my life surrounding myself with beautiful people," find such solace among the disfigured at Carville?

10. What lessons did prison teach White? There were a number of turning points in his transformation. Map the arc of events that led to his metamorphosis.

11. How did White's view of his father change after he was at Carville?

12. While in high school, Neil White took a hard stand on the treatment of inmates. "When I was debating the merits of drug testing on prisoners, I never dreamed that I might someday be one." Why does experience tend to change our opinions or open our minds? Why aren't many people able to empathize with others until they have been in their place, as White discovered in prison?

13. Before he arrived at the prison, White writes, "I had no idea of the absurdity, complexity, tragedy, and magic that was Carville." Explain how each fits this place, using examples from the memoir.

14. How did George Plimpton inspire White's ambition to chronicle his time at Carville?

15. White tried to help the leprosy patients "rebrand" themselves. What suggestions might you have to help them change public perception?

(Questions provided by HarperCollins Publishers.)

Quotes from *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*

"Almost every day as I walked to Father Reynolds's study, I passed Sister Teresa Pazos. She was one of the Sisters of Charity, but she was also a patient…Whenever we passed, a visceral warmth flowed through my body. Just being in her presence made me feel light and peaceful. I didn't fully understand why she had that effect on me, but I was beginning to feel certain about one thing. Carville was sacred space." (107-108)

"As I listened to the inmates' schemes to reenter the world, I did not miss the irony that we were being released while the innocents remained behind. We were the scourge on society. We were the "lepers." (271)

10. "On a Saturday morning, I stood in the breezeway entrance and watched Ella crank her wheelchair toward the patient side. Even after fifty years, she had not perfected a synchronized crank. Standing behind her, I saw her waver. She would veer off a bit to the right and then adjust with a longer crank to the left. She constantly adjusted her course. And as long as she paid attention, she would never hit the corridor wall. Ella veered and corrected, veered and corrected, a thousand times a day." (282)

Author Bio: Neil White

Photo courtesy of the author

Source: *Mississippi Writers and Musicians* (http://mswritersandmusicians.com/writers/neil-white.html).

Born December 5, 1960, in Gulfport, Mississippi, author Neil White currently lives in Oxford, Mississippi. Neil is the oldest child of Neil W. White, Jr., and Jane Stanley and he has four siblings. White has written plays and edited the anthology *Ten-Minute Plays* from Oxford. He has been a newspaper editor, magazine publisher, advertising executive, and federal prisoner. The latter resulted from his desire to keep his magazine business afloat. He began transferring funds he didn't actually have between bank accounts (a practice known as check kiting) and ended up in federal prison in 1993 on charges of fraud. He served almost eighteen months of his sentence in Carville, Louisiana, at a federal prison that also housed the last leper colony in the United States. In his memoir, *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, White tells about his experiences and the people he met there.

When he was released from prison, Neil White found that he had lost his reputation, his marriage, and very important time with his two young children (who are now college age). However, while he was imprisoned at Carville, he learned some lessons about living which he has written about in his recently-published memoir.
Today White operates a small publishing company, writes plays and essays, and currently travels talking about his memoir. Before his incarceration, White served as editor of *The Oxford Times* newspaper, *Coast* magazine, and *Coast Business Journal*, as well as publisher of *New Orleans* magazine and *Louisiana Life* magazine. He currently publishes Samir Husni's *Guide to New Magazines*, an annual review of magazine launches as well as several other magazines. His essay "A Journey in Journalism: From Idealism to Bankruptcy" was published in Joseph B. Atkins's book *The Mission: Journalism, Ethics and the World*.

Neil White is now married to Deborah Hodges Bell, a law professor at The University of Mississippi. They have three children: Lindsay Bell, Neil White IV, and Maggie White.

Reviews

Booklist

★ *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts,* Neil White. William Morrow, $14.99 (352p) ISBN 978-0061351631

White was a successful magazine publisher in 1993 when he was convicted of fraud and check kiting and sentenced to prison in Carville, Louisiana. He knew he was facing 18 months without his wife and two young children; he knew his enormous ego and ambition had landed him in prison; he knew he had to figure out a way to save his marriage and somehow rebound financially. What he didn't know was that the isolated 100-year-old facility at Carville was home to a leper colony of 130 patients. He learned that the patients (some severely disfigured and disabled) and the 250 inmates eyed each other suspiciously across the corridors and breezeway, each thinking the other was the scourge of the earth. Because his work detail brought him into frequent contact with the patients,

White developed strong relationships with them. His favorite was Ella, a dignified and beatific elderly black woman, who had lived at Carville for more than 50 years. Among the inmates, White encountered counterfeiters and tax evaders along with drug traffickers and carjackers. When the Bureau of Prisons decided to evict the leprosy patients, tensions built on both sides. White, near the end of his sentence and struggling to come to grips with the consequences of his crime, is caught in the middle. He offers a memoir of personal transformation and a thoroughly engaging look at the social, economic, racial, and other barriers that separate individuals that harden, dissolve, and reconfigure themselves when people are involuntarily thrust together over long periods. --Vanessa Bush

"A surprisingly gentle, sometimes hilarious memoir." (***USA Today***)

"A moving story of growth and transformation. Among the lost, [White] found humility, beauty, courage—and himself. " (***Dallas Morning News***)

"Vibrant and readable." (***Harper's Magazine***)

Suggested Readalikes

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, Michelle Alexander.

Moloka'i, Alan Brennert.

Cabin Fever, Tom Montgomery Fate.

One Thousand White Women, Jim Fergus.

Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal, Conor Grennan.

Take Good Care of the Garden and the Dogs, Heather Lende.

The Things Between Us, Lee Montgomery.

The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates, Wes Moore.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, Lisa See.

Running the Books: The Adventures of an Accidental Prison Librarian, Avi Steinberg.

The Colony: The Harrowing True Story of the Exiles of Moloka'i, John Tayman.

The Chronology of Water, Lidia Yuknavitch.

Web Resources

Encyclopedia of Louisiana, Carville/National Leprosarium entry:
http://www.knowla.org/entry.php?rec=576

Video & images from the author's website: http://www.neilwhite.com/book/images-videos-documents/

Information on leprosy from the World Health Organization:
http://www.who.int/lep/en/