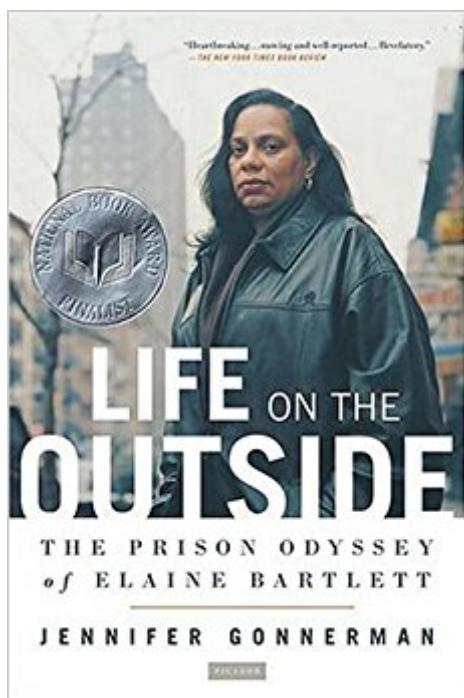


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# Life On The Outside: The Prison Odyssey Of Elaine Bartlett



## **Synopsis**

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 Rockefeller drug laws. The book opens on the morning of January 26, 2000, when Bartlett is set free and returns to New York City. At 42, she has virtually nothing: no money, no job, no real home. All she does have is a large and troubled family, including four children, who live in a decrepit housing project on the Lower East Side. "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 husband in prison, negotiates the rules of parole, and campaigns for the repeal of the laws that led to her long prison term. Russell Simmons, founder of Def Jam Records, says: "At a time when the prison-industrial complex is destroying African American families and neighborhoods, Elaine Bartlett is more than a survivor: she is a heroine. The future of our communities depends on women like her." Life on the Outside is a 2004 National Book Award Finalist for Nonfiction.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

A Village Voice staff writer's feature-turned-book about the impact of the Rockefeller drug laws on one family, this narrative begs comparison with last year's bestselling Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble and Coming of Age in the Bronx. Like Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Gonnerman has obviously done her homework. The story of Elaine Bartlett, a first offender sentenced to a staggering 16 years for drug trafficking, and the fate of her four children both during and after her incarceration, is told in

encyclopedic detail, sometimes to a fault-including the entire texts of many letters, minutiae of clothing and even full grocery lists. Unlike LeBlanc's graceful prose, Gonnerman's style is utterly artless, occasionally to the point of awkwardness. But Gonnerman makes an excellent argument for the ways in which the New York criminal justice system, particularly the "tough on crime" measures imposed in the last three decades, fails poor and less educated people. She skillfully uses Bartlett, a tough, assertive woman who struggles to hold a job and keep her family together after their enforced years of separation, as an exemplar of the wide-ranging impact of incarceration on both ex-cons and the communities they leave behind, a social problem just beginning to be studied. This book takes its place as part of a current broad reconsideration of the war on drugs and the unprecedented prison-industrial complex it has created in America. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

For two and a half years, journalist Gonnerman shadowed recently released prisoner Elaine Bartlett, providing an intimate glimpse into the multiple difficulties associated with attempting to reassimilate into a society that is ill-prepared and often unwilling to assist ex-convicts. Convicted under the unforgiving Rockefeller drug laws, first-time offender Bartlett served 16 years in prison for selling cocaine. Attempting to reconnect with her four children, find a job, and acquire decent housing were all herculean tasks for the undereducated yet fiercely determined Bartlett. Although undeniably attached to her subject, Gonnerman nevertheless paints a fairly objective portrait of both her strengths and her failings as she struggles to overcome and conquer societal pressures and expectations. Refreshingly and bluntly honest, Bartlett eventually achieves a personal triumph when she becomes an eloquent activist campaigning against the brutally harsh drug laws that dictated her lengthy sentence. Guaranteed to raise both eyebrows and awareness, this powerful testament to tenacity raises important questions about this nation's inadequately funded and poorly designed reentry system for paroled inmates. Margaret FlanaganCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Elaine Bartlett's story is at times mind-boggling. A product of an impoverished life in New York, Elaine decides to make quick money by delivering a drug package. Caught up in a sting operation, Elaine is sent to prison for 20-years-to-life in her first offense due to the stringent Rockefeller drugs laws in NY. Author Jennifer Gonnerman follows the story of Elaine from her life growing up in New York as one of a number of siblings who eventually face tremendous struggles with imprisonment

and drugs to her journey of trying to reestablish her life after receiving clemency 16 years into her sentence. Gonnerman writes in a simplistic, direct style that weaves the political and social climate with the details of Bartlett's personal journey. She gives a fair portrayal of Bartlett who is not altogether a saint nor completely an unredeemable sinner. This engaging story leads one to think deeply about strict, mandatory sentencing laws and their unbalanced impact on portions of the American citizenry. It compels one to think about the failure of prison to prepare inmates, particularly mothers, for life after their release. It leads one to consider whether the American citizen truly considers rehabilitation of offenders or simply focuses on isolation. This book is a testament to the power of a good biography to move the reader to think deeply about a number of important issues.

Although I felt the book ended kind of weakly I thoroughly enjoyed this. I grew up in the same projects on the lower east side and briefly knew some of the members. I've even seen the main character out and about. My grandmother knew Elaine's mother. All that aside the portrayal was real, gut wrenching, heart breaking, and inspiring. I wonder through every chapter how could one family endure so much grief and tragedy over and over again and still keep going. Somehow they do/did and whether the results were good or bad they never stopped living.

It held me attention from page 1. A lot of people make incorrect and/or uninformed judgment about incarcerated individuals and this book illustrates that.

Great book for my class

I learned a lot from this book and I think all criminal justice majors should read it. If you thought prison is horrible wait till you read the outside. It tells an ugly yet beautiful story.

Great condition

Jennifer Gonnerman tells the story of Elaine Bartlett, a young mother of 4, sent to jail for 20 years to life for a first offense of transporting 4 ounces of cocaine. As we read Elaine's story, and see how this chilling sentence affects her, her children and the rest of her family, we also learn about the failure of America's judicial system, prison system, and drug laws to deal with drug offenders in a way that is both humane and effective. Jennifer Gonnerman has woven Elaine Bartlett's personal story into the larger context of drug laws, prisons, rehabilitation or the lack of it, and the continual

punishment of "life on the outside" that greet the 600,000 ex-cons that leave our prisons each year. I was so carried along by Jennifer Gonnerman's compelling writing that I read this book in one evening. I wish that every citizen of voting age, and also every legislator on a local, state and federal level, would read this book, and then work for sensible changes.

Elaine kept it real, I was in Bedford when she was there, I could relate to her story...people..... this is real..... Much luv Elaine.....

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