



Castaways: The Penikese Island Experiment

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Cadwalader, a Marine captain severely wounded in Viet Nam, recuperates but is unable to return to combat. Strongly influenced by his experience in the Marines, he recruits a small band of unlikely teachers, well-educated social drop-outs, and launches an experiment in the rehabilitation of hard-core juvenile delinquents. The site he selects is Penikese, a remote island off the Massachusetts coast. Once a leper colony, Penikese is slowly transformed by the students and staff into a school community.

The Outward-Bound atmosphere the author and his staff create on the primitive island involves construction, boat-building, farming, and nature study. If the wood isn't chopped, there's no heat; if the vegetables aren't harvested, there's no food. Cadwalader and his cohorts treat the kids consistently, and try to hold them accountable for their actions.

Buffeted on all sides by the weather, the violent unpredictability of the kids, jittery surrounding communities, and a rudderless criminal justice system the author undergoes some painful changes as he confronts the stark irrationality and rock-hard recalcitrance of his juvenile criminal charges, some of whom he takes into his own home. The admonition of an old Marine sergeant comes back to haunt him: That son-of-a-bitch was born bad, and aint you or anyone else gonna change him.

But Cadwalader and his colleagues persist, and despite setbacks, the school survives.

The dialogue is raw and gritty. The narrative moves from the hilarious to the somber and back again as the author chronicles the lives of the boys who come to Penikese. Castaways is a true story, a tale of idealism tempered but not surrendered an intensely human portrait.

Castaways: The Penikese Island Experiment Details

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JZ says

Disclaimer: I used to work for George, indirectly, on the island. When the boys went home for 'home' visits, I was a caretaker on the farm.

George is a true hero. A man of deep convictions, and a form and tender heart, he tried so very hard to make a difference in the lives of 'throwaway' boys. His character and dedication comes through in his writing. The incident with the guinea hens and chickens broke his heart. There are so many other stories that couldn't be told, and he doesn't brag about all the work that went into making this school for lost boys happen.

Despite my fondness for the subject, I was surprised that it was such a good read. I just recently got my copy back from someone who had it much too long, and am looking forward to a reread. It's been 25 years since my time there, and I'd love to go back, if only in the pages.
