



Marching Powder: A True Story of Friendship, Cocaine, and South America's Strangest Jail

By Thomas McFadden, Rusty Young

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Rusty Young was backpacking in South America when he heard about Thomas McFadden, a convicted English drug trafficker who ran tours inside Bolivia's notorious San Pedro prison. Intrigued, the young Australian journalist went to La Paz and joined one of Thomas's illegal tours. They formed an instant friendship and then became partners in an attempt to record Thomas's experiences in the jail. Rusty bribed the guards to allow him to stay and for the next three months he lived inside the prison, sharing a cell with Thomas and recording one of the strangest and most compelling prison stories of all time. The result is *Marching Powder*.

This book establishes that San Pedro is not your average prison. Inmates are expected to buy their cells from real estate agents. Others run shops and restaurants. Women and children live with imprisoned family members. It is a place where corrupt politicians and drug lords live in luxury apartments, while the poorest prisoners are subjected to squalor and deprivation. Violence is a constant threat, and sections of San Pedro that echo with the sound of children by day house some of Bolivia's busiest cocaine laboratories by night. In San Pedro, cocaine--"Bolivian marching powder"--makes life bearable. Even the prison cat is addicted.

Yet *Marching Powder* is also the tale of friendship, a place where horror is countered by humor and cruelty and compassion can inhabit the same cell. This is cutting-edge travel-writing and a fascinating account of infiltration into the South American drug culture.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This memoir of a British drug dealer's nearly five years inside a Bolivian prison provides a unique window on a bizarre and corrupt world. McFadden, a young black man from Liverpool arrested for smuggling cocaine, finds himself forced to pay for his accommodations in La Paz's San Pedro Prison, the first of many oddities in a place where some inmates keep pets and rich criminals can sustain a lavish lifestyle. The charismatic McFadden soon learns how to survive, and even thrive, in an atmosphere where crooked prison officials turn up at his private cell to snort lines of coke. By chance, he stumbles on an additional source of income when he begins giving tours of the prison to foreign tourists, a trade that leads to the mention in a Lonely Planet guidebook that attracts the attention of his coauthor, Young, who was backpacking in South America at the time. McFadden's unapologetic self-serving story will attract little pity as he freely admits to countless cocaine sales for which he was never held accountable. Once the authors chronicle the novel aspects of life in San Pedro, from which McFadden was released in 2000, the narrative loses momentum. The book would have benefited from some judicious editing and some objective perspective on the veracity of McFadden's story.

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From [Booklist](#)

On a whim, Young decided it might be interesting to visit notorious San Pedro Prison in La Paz, Bolivia, so he signed up for an illegal tour. The tour guide was Thomas McFadden, an inmate who had been imprisoned for drug smuggling. They struck up a friendship, and Young bribed the guards to let him stay "inside" for three months, where he recorded the particulars of life in one of the world's most peculiar prisons. San Pedro is like a city: inmates must "buy" their cells from real estate agents, drug lords live in the high style to which they are accustomed, and the destitute, as always, live a hand-to-mouth existence. Like most cities, San Pedro is a lively if decidedly cutthroat place, and Young, who teaches English in Colombia, writes about it as if he were Joseph Mitchell prowling Greenwich Village. The book is filled with characters ranging from outrageous to inspiring, and Young layers on the texture--sights, sounds, smells--until we feel as though we have visited the place. Travel literature of a very special and captivating kind. *David Pitt*

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Review

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