was Steinberg himself a teacher, mentor, jailer, or baby-sitter? Sometimes he “quietly permitted modest amounts of dancing in the library,” or did online searches for inmates, or allowed loans of prohibited books, such as the black, urban pulp fiction novels of Triple Crown Publications. Once, breaking serious rules, he brought in a chocolate cupcake for a man celebrating a lonely birthday and allowed him to eat it in private in the library office. “Even the toughest guys I met said that anyone who tells you they didn’t cry in the early days of imprisonment, or still don’t, sometimes by themselves in the dark of night, is lying,” Steinberg notes.

Among those he became closer to was a former drug dealer turned aspiring television chef, Chudney; Steinberg helped him develop a plan of action, track down recipes, and plow through extensive applications to cooking schools. Another inmate, C.C. Too Sweet, a short, loud-mouthed attention-seeker, was writing his Magnum opus: an autobiography detailing his rise from a childhood of physical abuse by his mother to a successful career as a pimp. He and Steinberg together edited and shaped hundreds of pages of a handwritten manuscript over the course of a year. (Inmates may write only in prison-issued notebooks, using specially designed bendable pens.)

One inmate Steinberg befriended was Jessica, an addict and a Sylvia Plath fan (as were many women inmates) who came to his creative-writing class. She longed to reunite with the baby son she had left in a church pew with a note—who had turned up on the male side of the prison. From the library window, she silently watched him play basketball in the yard, but never came into contact with him. Surely one of her tasks, as Steinberg points out, was “to come to terms with the crime she was never charged with—abandoning her son.” He urged her to compose a letter and another inmate spent weeks drawing her portrait, both of which Steinberg had ambivalently agreed to deliver to her son. But as this once-removed encounter drew near, Jessica ripped up the letter and was initiated into an ancient club, those who cry alone in the darkness of prison.

By that time he had developed serious stress-related back injuries and had some unsettling run-ins with a few guards. One deliberately set off a foul-smelling spray to disrupt Steinberg’s most constructive movie discussion (on Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet, a modern take involving Verona Beach street gangs shown during the library’s Shakespeare Festival). That caused chaos and justifiable fury among the inmates. Meanwhile, he writes, even though the “book-slinging sheriff persona still worked wonders at cocktail parties,” the reality “was starting to give me acid reflux. I wasn’t a visitor in this prison. I held a key and was beginning to feel infected by it. Frankly I was falling apart, headed toward something of a mental and physical breakdown.” To top things off, he was mugged at knifepoint on his way home one night by a former library patron. Though he recognized Steinberg—“You’re the book guy”—the mugger still took Steinberg’s wallet and ran, turning back to yell, “Hey, I still owe you guys two books!”

Five months later, Steinberg left the library. For him, that incident “encapsulated the humor and sadness of prison life, and the fact that not everything has a redemptive ending. It made my decision to leave a little clearer.”

He is now a full-time writer in Philadelphia, still sorting through the depth of his prison experience. Much of what he saw and heard he did not write about, preferring to focus on the “human stories” because “I want people to see that this place cannot be reduced to a message or, as it is so often, a political spin.” The guards, for example, deserve a whole book to themselves: “I know they encounter inmates in much more trying circumstances than I saw in the library.” Still, he suspects his book will not be on the shelves of the Suffolk County House of Correction—or touted by his Orthodox schools.

In the book, he details an episode from Torah camp in which he and two friends unwittingly trespassed into a Palesti-