In this polished tale that belies the author's raw origins, Masters (Finding Freedom), who has been imprisoned on San Quentin's death row since 1990 and become a devout Buddhist, recalls the neglect, abuse and cycle of crime and hopelessness that relegated him to prison by age 19. As a child in the late '60s, Masters and his siblings were shut up in their house in Long Beach, Calif., because their mother and stepfather had turned the place into a heroin den. Filthy, starved and whipped, the children eventually attracted the attention of neighbors, then were scattered among foster homes. Despite a happy period spent with a caring, elderly Christian couple, Jarvis was once again uprooted, this time to a hardened, joyless home where the other foster boys quickly taught him the ropes to survive. Dispirited, he ran away repeatedly from age 10 on, and the book largely follows his trajectory from one institution to the next, from McLaren Hall, where he enjoyed a sense of belonging, to the abusive Valley Boys Academy, where he was trained like a pitbull to fight the other boys. Being united with his extended family in Harbor City was both a blessing and a curse, because they gradually dragged him into a downward spiral of robbery, violence and jail. Masters's claim of innocence in the murder that landed him on death row is beside the point in this work that's a frank, heartfelt rendering of a young life that should have mattered. (Oct.)

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