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Amanda Camia, 35, shares what she wrote in a creative writing exercise inspired by the book “Push” by Sapphire during a book club meeting. (Photo Credit Anna Watts)

In This Space, No Bars on Their Imagination.

By Liz Krieger

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The plastic chairs were arranged in a circle inside a sparse classroom, where inspirational posters with messages about perseverance and possibility lined the cinder block walls. A dozen women in tan sweatsuits were engaged in intense conversation. Their talk touched on marital infidelity, childhood sexual abuse and their collective impatience with people who indulge in self-pity when life goes haywire.

The women were discussing a novel called “The Paper Palace,” by Miranda Cowley Heller, in which the heroine must choose between her husband and her childhood love. But for many members of this particular book club, inside the women’s jail on Rikers Island, the broader themes had particular resonance, and their thoughts drifted beyond the literature itself, drawing connections to real life.

“You’d be surprised how intellectual certain inmates or detainees can be,” said Chantel Loney, who has been at Rikers on burglary charges since mid-October. “We’re not all ignorant people. Some of us were in the wrong place at the wrong time or made bad choices.”

The monthly club, not quite a year old, has become a lifeline for its members who cycle through the jail — some staying for weeks, others for months as they await trial or serve short sentences. It provides a few hours to relieve the boredom and unhappiness of their current lives, to imagine a different sort of existence, to talk deeply with others.

And at Rikers, which has been plagued by violence and dysfunction, it is also a rare opportunity. The library at the women’s facility is closed, its space repurposed for other needs. The prison complex has been under federal scrutiny for years, and the city faces a deadline to close it by August 2027 — a timeline it is unlikely to meet.