



LIVING DANGEROUSLY

Living Dangerously by Roger Graef

Harper Collins Publishers
1992

Roger Graef, author, broadcaster and film-maker, has recently completed a book based on his experiences as an observer on the Sherborne House programme. He kept track of the offenders who finished the course and caught up with them a year later. The bulk of the book consists of Graef's interviews with these young men. Hence its sub-title "Young Offenders in Their Own Words".

We are very grateful to Roger Graef, and to his publishers Harper Collins, for permission to reproduce some extracts here, which come largely from his conclusion.

"One in three British males are convicted of a non-motoring criminal offence by the time they are thirty. Read that again: *one in every three British males will have been convicted - not just arrested - for a non-motoring criminal offence by the age of thirty*, according to the Home Office Cohort study of three generations."

"Interview with a prospective candidate for Sherborne House:

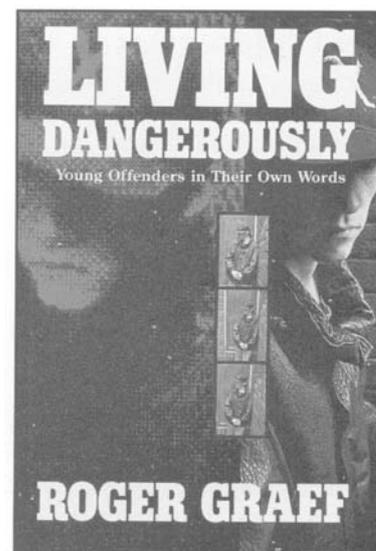
Jack: What was your childhood like?
Young offender: (pause) My childhood. (pauses again) My childhood wasn't."

Throughout my time with these young men, I kept looking back on my own teenage years, on the support and tolerance I had for my misdemeanours at school and university: I lived in a protected time zone until the age of twenty-one. I looked at my own children - a son aged twelve and a daughter nineteen - and those of my friends - some of whom were and are lost or in trouble and on drugs. Many of my son's better off school mates carry Swiss army knives for fun, not self-defence - and indulge in the dangerous pastime of setting light to aerosol deodorants. They are all fashion victims. They all watch television and are excited by the style conveyed in advertisements. They seek to define themselves through what clothes they wear, the cars they crave, and how they furnish their rooms. In an echo of the streets, they listen to the same music, wear the same trainers, baseball jackets,

track suits and jeans and have people around them that drink too much and use drugs. But for them it is only an uncertain foreground in a picture which has a more secure perspective in the background, unlike the street culture from which their music and body language comes. Our children know that when they finish school, if they cannot support themselves, we will look after them. Being middle class is in part defined by this possession of the freedom to explore the world around you in your teens, or even on into your twenties. We, their parents, are their safety net. This security allows them to find themselves, to rebel in less socially disruptive ways.

But these young offenders have no such future: they are testing their masculinity when the usual outlets for their rites of passage are gone. Apprenticeships for honourable blue-collar jobs like mining and the docks, and national service were all routes that channelled teenage testosterone productively. However brutalising in other ways, the army at least offered an escape and sometimes useful training in a contained environment - like a residential college. Both offered a safe haven from family politics while preparing for life as an independent adult.

Now these young men leave school and home early and hit the streets aimlessly. We expect them not to react as young males have always done through the ages: to establish their own territory, to fight when they feel insulted or threatened by their peers, or the police, to assert a sense of self, albeit a self under siege. Yet these reactions are normal. Such wayward behaviour is usually indulged in the armed services and in university sports clubs. They



George Bush won universal applause for drawing a line in the sand to prove he is not a wimp. Can we expect young men on the street, to whom face and respect are all-important, not to do the same?

legitimise the use of force to test one's masculinity, a crucial part of the rite of passage.

What positive examples do they have of the restraint demanded of them? They have been bombarded since birth with macho imagery from Rambo to Margaret Thatcher. These young men are video veterans not just of violent fiction but of the Falklands and the Gulf War. George Bush won universal applause for drawing a line in the sand to prove he is not a wimp. Can we expect young men on the street, to whom face and respect are all-important, not to do the same?



The Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, on a recent visit to Sherborne House.

Sherborne House