

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor

As this issue addresses the concern and problems of drugs I felt it would be incomplete without some reference to non-UK couriers. The report requested by the Home Office about non-UK women in British prisons remains unpublished despite being completed in 1992 during my period of research with the Child Care and Development Group, Cambridge University. The contents of the report are not for general release yet but the following poem may indicate the flavour of the forthcoming report.

*Pusher probes in seedy bars  
For hapless moon-eyed frailster  
Pound-flash sights soar guilty up  
Past life toil to gold-taster*

*Secreted drugs are condom-packed  
In wigs, boots, bras - well fattened  
Air borne from Lagos - Bogota -  
Cash-dream careers are flattened*

*No warning marks the tarmac,  
Behaviour oddly swayed  
By guilty load - is custom-eared  
Immigration is obeyed*

*Bags searched and body frisked  
Intimate revelations  
Judge, jury and then prison bound  
Ignored protestations*

Other prison poetry contributed to a talk about the experiences of non-UK women and men given during 'Women's Week' at Roehampton Institute of Higher Education. Issues concerning non-UK prisoners can be addressed in a talk without reference to the unpublished report, as contributions made during prison visits with South American prisoners.

Yours sincerely,

Nikki Batten Dip. Crim. BA MSc

## • BOOK REVIEWS • BOOK REVIEWS •

**WOMEN DRUG USERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A FEMALE INJECTING COMMUNITY.** Avril Taylor. Clarendon Press, Oxford. £22.50.

Drug use like most social activities is highly gendered. This basic observation has been, however, overlooked by many who write books on 'the drug user' and amongst those who assume that either patterns of drug use are identical for both men and women or those who believe that drug taking amongst women is so rare that it does not warrant investigation.

In this welcome contribution to the subject Avril Taylor looks at the experiences of a group of female intravenous drug users in Glasgow. Based on fifteen months participant observation Taylor claims to offer the 'first full ethnographic account of the lifestyle of female drug users.'

This book aims to redress this imbalance in the literature and simultaneously challenge certain (mis)conceptions about female drug users - particularly those relating to their supposed 'psychological and social inadequacy'. These conceptions Taylor argues have been perpetrated mainly by those who have only studied drug users undergoing treatment. Examining drug users within their social and cultural contexts provides, she argues, some insights into the organisation of the daily lives of users, and by allowing them to 'speak for themselves' a richer and deeper understanding of the significance of drug use is possible.

The book is well organised and each chapter is designed to take the reader through the various stages of drug use rather than present a series of individual case studies. Each chapter is liberally punctuated with quotations from the

women who were interviewed which are given to provide some understanding of the meaning of drug use within a number of contexts.

The book is based on a sample of twenty six women living in Glasgow and therefore there are limits to the generalability of the findings. However, it does provide a useful and interesting account which brings the issue of gender to the foreground and may well serve to encourage more extensive research on drug use in which gender is centrally integrated into the framework of the analysis.

Roger Matthews

**YARDIE (Pan Books) 185pp £3.99 and EXCESS (The X Press) 230pp £5.99.** Victor Headley

Rarely is fiction taken as a reliable source and guide for academics and practitioners involved in the criminal justice enterprise, even less so or in the cases of fictional accounts of gang war and drug use. However, last year Victor Headley, a Jamaican born writer living in London published a thin paperback - Yardie - with a sequel this year - Excess. The difference between much fiction and these books however, is that they do not fictionalise reality - rather they tell it like it is.

Through the medium of fiction, Headley has managed to describe the experiences of black people in Britain - their deprivation, their marginalisation, their frustration and their attempts and responses to the situation. Yardie - slang for Jamaicans new in London - charts the arrival of D., a Jamaican youth into England, armed with a kilo of cocaine, a stolen passport and a rough set of contacts old and new, and charts his creation of a crack empire that earns him respect

amongst the subculture of London, especially in Hackney and Harlesden. Excess, the sequel to Yardie, sees D return to the subculture of drugs in London after a forced exile in Jamaica. While the latter book attempts to develop the characters and personalities introduced in Yardie, its power lies in its ability to examine and contrast the hard, violent and often conflicting criminal drug cultures of black youth in London, with the energy of the local community.

Despite the thriller genre structure evident in both books which ensures the reader's attention, the real force of Headley's work lies in the way in which it realistically portrays the experiences of black people in England, and their attempts both legal and illegal to lift themselves out of the situations of poverty in which they find themselves. This latter reference to crime, and the rationalisations for it, are highlighted in a discussion between D and Piper, an older generation Jamaican living in London 'Black people cyan get a break in dis time unless its t'rough music or sports. If a man don't have dem form of skills, him still ha fe make a living differently. Dat is why we must take some risks, try fe de best'. Moreover, its depiction of drug subcultures highlights the nature, extent and impact of the criminal drug underworld, portraying a fascinating insight into a culture which appears frightening to many of us, and which raises awareness of the problems which need to be realistically tackled in order to reverse the epidemic of hopelessness that underpins the drug subcultures. The success of these books despite a lack of any formal advertising or plugging, stresses the need for honest explorations of the black experience in Britain.

Peter Francis