

jumping off points for classroom discussion.

Prisoners on Prison Films provides both a powerful analysis and analytical framework. This brings me back to the transformative power of cinema that I alluded to above. In the acknowledgments to the text, one of the authors mentions the thrill of first encountering Scorsese's (1976) *Taxi Driver* as a teenager and being exposed to its heretofore unseen world. I can point to 1986's *The Mission* (dir. R Joffé) as similarly starting me on my own cinéaste's journey. Without being too grand (and I realise that this is somewhat difficult having just referred to myself as a cinéaste), this is what art does. It challenges us. It introduces us to new ways of thinking or offers new perspectives on the familiar. To emphasise a point that the authors make in their introduction, the research participants 'are the people who are least heard [and yet] most directly affected by the consequences of representation' (p.3). In accessing the participants' insights, we are exposed to fresh readings of cinematic texts and new light is thrown upon familiar penological literature. In sharing in that collective experience of the film screenings — albeit at a slight remove — our own thinking about the lived experience of imprisonment can be transformed.

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The Big Issue # 1454

12th March 2021

Special Edition 'Locked Up in Lockdown'

The subtitle of this special edition of *The Big Issue* is 'a unique look at life behind the bars when

the world closed, by people who were there' (page 1). Unlike frequent uses of the word 'unique', here it is accurately employed and not as hyperbole. There are 15 articles in the edition which range from thoughtful opinion pieces to insights into the personal experience of the pandemic of five prisoners. It also includes reflections of some of those, not prison staff, who have sought to help alleviate the additional burden the pandemic has imposed on prisoners. Jonathan Aitken's description, with detail of specific operational changes which made positive differences, of how uniformed staff at Pentonville prison have responded ensures some consideration of the unsung work of this group of frontline workers. As the part-time chaplain at the prison and a former prisoner himself his perspective is unique. Together the varied pieces amplify some important messages — about the purpose of imprisonment and the potential of those imprisoned as well as the skill and imagination of many who work with them.

The series of articles which highlight initiatives to relieve some of the added stress lockdown in the pandemic has caused are very brief, sometimes just a few paragraphs. They serve to shine a light on what may well be less widely known initiatives and energy. They include, the 'Making it Up' project which enables prisoners who are parents to make a story book for their children; "InHouse Records", which before the pandemic provided workshops across the spectrum of music making skills and which in lockdown has provided 50,000 copies of a magazine, *AUX*, to prisons in the South-east of England and in the East of the USA; the 'Penned Up' project at Lewes prison which encouraged prisoners to write; and a prison

librarian who reached in to provide books remotely ordered (Amor Towles' *A Gentleman in Moscow*, Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* have been favourites). It also includes the recipe of a Bangladeshi chicken curry which the charity 'Food Behind Bars' sponsored and which proved a hit at Brixton prison.

The five prisoners' experiences of COVID inside highlight the impact of lockdown on mental health. Two of these accounts are provided by women who were prisoners (one from the perspective of being an imprisoned mother). They emphasise the hardship (and the mental health implications) which little contact with other prisoners as well as visitors caused. One of the other former prisoners, a man recalled to prison having had his licence revoked for eight months in 2020, describes the quarantining of new receptions and interestingly asks whether the reduction in assaults and drug taking will justify much more restricted regimes once the pandemic is made manageable. Another male prisoner picks up a theme of the edition's opinion pieces, commenting 'We allow our thinking about our justice system to be driven by populism and vindictiveness...We recognise that morality is not always black and white and laud complex characters in fiction, yet are sanctimonious, judgemental, and vengeful in reality' (page 16). That's a neat way of highlighting the inconsistencies in society's value system. The piece goes on to mention that prisoners also 'clapped for carers' and donated to charities.

The editorial draws attention to the tiny proportion of prisoners who will not be released as a means of underscoring the importance of rehabilitation. It focusses on the importance of helping the high proportion of

prisoners who cannot read well. It concludes by stating, 'If we're to understand the impact coronavirus has had [on prisoners] . . . we need to listen. Because sooner or later those inside will be out' (page 7).

The standout article was Erwin James' 'letter to my younger self'. It encapsulates many of the insights his various writings have previously provided. The importance of having hope and purpose, he tells himself, are key to being 'who you should have been' which only he can see.

However significant the teacher in education (as it was for James in prison) or other members of staff who validate a prisoner's sense of self-worth, it is the prisoner who has to do the change. Enabling that change is, or should be, the principal concern of all those who work in prisons. As prisons often differ markedly, one wonders how typical was the creative enabling work Jonathan Aitken records the governor and uniformed staff at Pentonville doing. The hope must

be that the learning from the pandemic enables more of what Aitken describes as the 'innovative jail craft' of first-line managers and arrangements which 'broke the mould of the old hierarchical divisions in prison management' (page 23). This is perhaps more significant because it was achieved in a prison which has attracted few plaudits in recent years.

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