

is when they are released. It makes no economic sense that politicians accept the failure rate of the prison system. Every single failure results in another victim in the community, as well as the cost of keeping the person in prison (pp. 309–10).

This remains a profoundly important message in 2017. Nonetheless, it is a message that is likely to be ignored because of the vested interests involved in talking up some crimes, especially crimes of violence, although not, of course, the social harms generated by corporate criminality, or domestic, racist and homophobic violence. The nefarious presence of private companies, and third sector interests, have only added another vested interest to the penal mix and another layer to the withering contempt towards prisoners (and indeed welfare claimants) burning within the wider political and popular culture in the first decades of the twenty first century.

Those who have any interest in prisoner rehabilitation, and any desire to develop penal practices that are radically transformative, should read *A Sense of Freedom*. It lays the foundations for not only thinking about what it means to be a human being but also it provides a blueprint for building something truly different which prisons, with some honourable exceptions, miserably fail to do at the moment; change individuals for the better, reduce recidivism and ensure public protection. *A Sense of Freedom* provides this moral foundation. Forty years on, it remains one of the finest, and most humbling books, I have ever read.

**Joe Sim** is Professor of Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University.

#### Book Review

#### ***Redeemable: a Memoir of Darkness and Hope***

By Erwin James

Publisher: Bloomsbury Circus

Publishing, London (2016).

ISBN: 978-1-4088-1397-3

(hardback)

Price £16.99 (hardback)

Erwin James writes a powerful account of his life, depicting a dysfunctional childhood and family. In a raw and unapologetic manner he recounts his life both before he was imprisoned and during, and he details the lifestyle and circumstances that led to his crimes. The book feels dark and gritty on every page and James presents the distorted explanations for his difficult choices. He talks about life experiences that are, by definition, uncomfortable and he does so in a frank and connecting manner. The reader is drawn uncomfortably close to the very upsetting events that constitute a life that has contained so much tragedy.

*Redeemable* charts James' life in three main acts: the point at which he resigns himself and returns from service in the French Foreign Legion to surrender to two murder charges; his life before prison, which explores some of the most troubling aspects of his life, including the impact of domestic violence and the complex psychological damage of childhood tragedy; and finally, James' navigation of the prison estate, which included high security prisons and his eventual re-entry into society.

*Redeemable* describes deeply personal events, thoughts and perspectives. James' brutally honest description of turmoil and transformation is as disarming as it is disturbing. This reviewer can relate, through his own personal experiences, to the fact that even the most shameful and socially disagreeable feelings and logic of a man who is psychologically damaged are all here: James has not diluted or

censored anything. James establishes his brave and honest delivery on the very first page as he admits to resenting the 'dignified conduct' (p. 1) of his victims' families because it seemed to exaggerate his own sense of shame. Not only is this candid, it also begins to describe some of the distorted and highly contradictory thoughts of serious violent offenders, who can often demonstrate an understanding of guilt and empathy at an intellectual and abstract level but *feel* personally cold towards them.

James' account continually offers insight into the psychology of someone with deep social issues. Initially, his decision to surrender to the authorities appears as a virtuous pilgrimage (p. 18) but this serves to further illustrate the distorted logic of a person who has found himself transient, violent and, ultimately, incarcerated. By page 39, his façade of outward justification and the minimising of his awful decisions begin to lift and, where we could assume that a sense of relief and optimism would replace it; there is a dark connection to the void often felt when one divorces such a large part of their own identity.

This review could become entirely about my own personal connection to the writer's experiences. However, it is important to note that the theoretical framework which applies to serious violent offender research is apparent in James' memoir. There are obvious intersections between James' account and what we know, for instance, from Farrington et al.'s Delinquent Development Study, that '[t]he most important childhood risk factors for offending are criminality in the family, poverty, impulsiveness, poor child-rearing and low school attainment...'<sup>1</sup>

There are further echoes of psychological and criminological theory about deviancy, the effects of long-term imprisonment and

1. Farrington, D. et al. (2006): 'Criminal careers and life success: new findings from the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development.' Home Office #281. Crown Copyright 2006.

established understandings of routes to desistance. For example, the passage which illustrates the very difficult process of dealing with 'dead time' (p. 45) could easily be a case study from Dr Ben Crewe's analysis of life sentence prison experiences as presented in his 2016 paper.<sup>2</sup>

Although, academically speaking, one view of one life experience is rarely considered empirical; it is possible to find confirmatory acknowledgements of sound criminological research throughout what is essentially narrative data from a successfully desisting, former life-sentence prisoner. James' life continually assents robust social theories, as with the two examples given above. However, perhaps the most optimistic of these provides an insight into how he began to re-imagine his identity in a way that allowed him to move away from the label of being a 'serious violent offender' to one as a positive member of society. This is detailed extensively in Bottoms' Sheffield Desistance Study where '[d]esistance perspectives stress that the process of change exists before, behind and beyond the intervention'.<sup>3</sup> Bottoms also analyses the impact of the agency and language afforded to would-be-desisters; and, James infers this on page 286 with his building connection to a psychologist who effectively believes in his potential: '[...] yet I had to hang on to the idea that I wasn't inherently a bad person.'

Ultimately, though, *Redeemable* is an evocative insight into a difficult life and must be understood, perhaps like all dysfunctional life stories, in its human context before anything else. The impact of imperfect social institutions, such as the care system to which James was subjected, are all too often considered in terms of social policy or socio-economic data

rather than through the lens of its emotional consequences. James' account gives a comprehensive perspective on the complicated and often dissonant processes of: dealing with trauma, neglect or abuse; the impact serious, and even fatal, offences have on the perpetrators' psyche and ability to find internal redemption independent from public stigmatisation; and, the development of more substantive and pro-social coping strategies from entrenched attitudes such as 'I must have deserved it...' (p. 129) and 'I wondered if now that I am a criminal it meant that I am a bad person' (p. 130). *Redeemable* offers a narrative of desistance that is an extraordinary demonstration of personal triumph as well as a beacon for all who are attempting to change the psychological and social structures which interact with those who are at risk of committing the most serious of offences.

James' most valuable achievement, for readers of the *Prison Service Journal*, is the potential to affirm faith in the humanist motivations for entering into criminal and penal vocations. There are many obstacles to helping people to align their futures with something that is compassionate and social, but what James has provided is hopeful evidence for people who work with, for or 'on' offenders that everyone has the capacity to impact on how kind people can become and how successful even the most 'lost of causes' can be. Although choices to go straight are ultimately individual, James is able to remind us of the influence people have around us and how their attitude towards us can help to shape us in positive ways. James' 'psycho office' (p. 286) appointments with a woman called Joan cause me to hope that the people I have met through my experiences within the criminal

justice system will be able to say that their care and compassion have helped me to live the rest of my life in a positive and meaningful way. There is a reason why it pays to remember the value of each human being, regardless of what they have done and, as James explains it, it is that when they finally make the decision to be someone other than an offender it will be the people who support them who will most significantly affect how they view and realise their, ultimate, success.

*Redeemable* has the potential to be an important tool for criminal justice practitioners and theorists as it offers a striking insight into the life and precedents of a perpetrator of serious offenses. James' ability to contribute so valuably to our understanding in this field, in ways which are intensely personally tragic and socially compelling, gives vigour to criminal justice reform movement. He invites people to look harder at how social institutions are failing in heartbreaking ways, and yet he never does so with nothing other than his own perspective of his own life. This is an honest portrayal of a very unpalatable journey which, sadly, continues to be shared by too many people within the criminal justice system. James offers an intimately powerful narrative which is tragic but ultimately inspiring. He characterises key theoretical knowledge about the roots of crime and how people build towards a positive, law abiding life within, and independent from, the criminal justice system, but he also manages to vividly bring them to life. He connects us to social theories and this underpins the need for continued theoretical work and compassionate social practices.

**Gareth Christopher** is a social sciences student and a former resident of HMP Grendon.

2. Crewe, B., Hulley, S., and Wright, S. (in press) 'Swimming with the tide: Adapting to Long-term imprisonment' *Justice Quarterly*.

3. Bottoms, A. (2012): 'Desistance from Crime.' *Forensic Practice in the Community*. Ashmore, Z. and Shuker, R. (ed). Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, London, p.268.