

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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**Where does the prison  
system go from here?**

*Special Edition*

***Voices from the front line***

# Reviews

Book Review

***Songs from the Black Chair:  
A Memoir of Mental Interiors***

By Charles Barber

Publisher: University of Nebraska Press (2005)

ISBN: 978-0803212985

(hardback), 978-0803259751

(paperback)

Price: £14.99 (hardback), £10.99 (paperback)

Over the last twenty years, the most significant thing I have learned is this: if you slam doors now, you're less likely to kill yourself later (p. 198).

I read this book in two sittings. On the way to and from Paris (a city that features in the storyline, symbolising hope), with no time between journeys. I couldn't put it down, despite having to steel myself slightly to read it. It is human, vivid, tender, moving and breathtakingly insightful. What a contrast with the objectifying accounts of psychiatric illness found in so many scientific journals, with their stultifying labels and lack of human narrative. This is a moving life story, full of wisdom, with three main protagonists. There are many losses, and setbacks, and only one survivor. But the author tells us about more than one life. He makes sense of the self-inflicted deaths of close friends, at the same time he describes with sensitivity how difficult these tragic endings are to endure. At least one of these case descriptions (friendships that ended) made me cry.

The book is in the same league as *Stuart: A Life Lived Backwards* (Alexander Masters 2006), and *Elling* (Ingvar Ambjornsen 2007), in telling the story of being at the edge of

mental illness (obsessional compulsive disorder, in his case), violence, suicide, homelessness, and exclusion, drawing on intimate knowledge of the condition, and showing a deep sympathy for others who are similarly placed. In this case, the book includes a beautiful account of where the disorder abates (wearing new shirts, clean socks, writing) and the steps made towards recovery and professional flourishing, once Barber finds his way into research and writing on the condition from which he has suffered (like Kay Jamison achieved for borderline personality disorder before him in *An Unquiet Mind*, 1997). The importance of recognising his own early strangeness (those words, those intrusions, the avoidance, the anxiety) as symptoms, of finding therapies that worked for him, even when they seemed ridiculous, and of working out through his friendships that what unites people can sometimes be their unseen vulnerabilities, are beautifully articulated. Life felt better out of the rat race, when he could be 'his physical being', among disabled children who played, instead of trying to be a fully functioning professional Harvard student who talks.

The best part of the book is where he describes the role of hope and creativity on seeing Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, or William Styron describing in *Darkness Visible* how he heard Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody* and the world seemed beautiful, exquisite, and expressible. Excellence in art gave him 'something to live for' — the horror of the world transformed into something creative and meaningful. Or a book of interviews with John

Lennon, in which he acknowledged his own despair, and its passing. These pages add so much weight to the argument for 'the arts' (whether in prisons, hospitals, schools, or life more generally) as life affirming, rather than as 'entertainment' (as they have become branded in the prisons context). Later in the early stages of a hopeful turn in the book, Barber reenters the world of expression and language: 'it was like water flowing again'. One can recover the capacity to speak freely.

I loved the vivid portrayal of his satisfaction on contemplating a deep bite, inflicted by a befriended and disturbed child: now he had a deep wound to show to the world: 'see my tribulations' and feel for me. His anger at 'the well' and in charge (Dr's, Professors, and psychologists), and the world (cars, the universe, 'managed mental health care', and God) is rendered wholly understandable. The lessons he learns throughout his troubled recovery add up like a stack of gold:

*There are two types of deeply troubled people: those who inflict their pain on others, and those who do not (p. 132).*

*The trick is to know you can relate to clients in their general sense of dislocation, but to avoid specifically embracing, or endorsing, their pathology. Fitzgerald — my literary compass — wrote famously: 'The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function'. It is exactly that knack that is required to work*

*effectively with psychotic people: you must hear and understand as best you can their version of distorted reality, while remaining stably in your world' (p. 138-9).*

He intuitively from his own experience that listening sympathetically, not 'instructing', or 'arguing them out of their psychotic beliefs' — 'sitting where they sit' — offers comfort, support, and a gentle invitation to share thoughts and feelings that have meaning. He trawls through the assorted notebooks of a psychotic friend, presumed dead, and finds meaning (and an explanation) the way a detective finds clues. Good research skills and good clinical skills share this characteristic. No wonder he has turned to research.

The author describes the combined experience of illness and good health — there are 'islands of functioning' in among the craziness. In the end, he tames 'the violent threats of his own OCD' and finds work he loves, researching how to get people into psychiatric treatment:

*I found it exhilarating. It was exhilarating that people like John entrusted me with their stories, and it was exhilarating to observe him appear to get better. I felt like I was doing something with my life, which was an unaccustomed, somewhat odd, and deeply pleasurable sensation' (p. 173).*

There are other gems in the book — how do a group of 'psychotic (and self-absorbed..) clients' respond to the suicide bombing of the Twin Towers?

*I puzzled over the clients' bizarre stability, their incredible lightness of mood right after the attacks. And then I realised that on that day only, the world's trauma matched their own. They live out the violence and despair*

*and bloodiness and trauma of 9-11 every day, and it was an enormous relief that for one or two days the world experienced that same level of trauma. They weren't alone any more, and they felt good and ... normal. For once, everybody else felt like them. That's what mental illness does to you. (p. 176)*

Laura, when she appears, becomes a figure with therapeutic strength — with her sensible pragmatism, her lack of judgmental feeling, and wise sticking power. The account ends hopefully:

*What a wonderful, miraculous, extraordinary thing stability is, it doesn't matter how you get there, I thought, as I headed home...' (p. 188).*

Even in the depth of his confusion, Barber had recognised that there were things he wanted to do — 'travel, dance, go to Paris, meet A S Byatt'. He could see that 'the world was extreme and divergent, terrible and beautiful at the same time' (p. 195). Parts of the book's underlying message reminded me of Mary Midgley's more philosophical memoirs in *The Owl of Minerva*. A different story, but the same conclusion, her title drawn from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: that 'the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk'; that sometimes great insight or wisdom is possible only when things become dark and difficult. We should explore the darkness, and deal with new confusions, rather than turning our backs on everything difficult and doubtful. Barber's book is a perceptive and moving testament to this truth.

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Book Review

***Drugs, Crime and Public Health: The political economy of drug policy***

by Alex Stevens

Publisher: Routledge (2010)

ISBN: 978-0-415-49104-4

(hardback)

Price: £75.00 (hardback)

When you pick up a book with the words 'political economy' in the title, you know you have picked up a book that leans to the left. *Drugs, Crime and Public Health* is no exception. Its aim, says author Alex Stevens, is to change the way you think about the links between drugs, crime and public health. Certainly, the bold approach of this work goes a long way to challenging received wisdom about the drug-crime connection.

Stevens, who is Professor in Criminal Justice at the University of Kent, begins by looking at the historical context of drugs laws in Britain and the USA where, from the nineteenth century, legislators have sought to control the danger of imported drugs and the new immigrant populations that were perceived to be responsible. Thus it was, argues Stevens, that right from the start government policies on both sides of the Atlantic have identified the drugs problem with unwanted foreigners. The underlying theme of this book is that the causal link from drugs to crime is exaggerated, and that the focus of attention of legislators and law enforcement has been strictly on the poor and minorities, blaming them for the drugs menace. In particular, Stevens is heavily critical of the 'tripartite framework' which he feels is too readily accepted as the basis of thinking in many studies on the subject of drugs misuse and, consequently, in policy development. The tripartite model, elaborated by Paul Goldstein uses a tripartite

conceptual framework for examining the drug-crime relationship. In this model, there are three possible links between drugs and violent crime: psychopharmacological, economic compulsive, and systemic. Psychopharmacological effects of drug use are proposed as direct causes of violence while drugs users are thought to initiate economic crimes in order to pay for their anti-social habits. Systemic violence is said to derive from the inherently violent characteristics of the trade in drugs. For instance, in Goldstein's view, violence may be used by drug dealers to control markets and territories, to enforce payment and otherwise to regulate a market that cannot be regulated by legal means.

Stevens provides substantial research evidence that may be used to question the veracity of the Goldstein model. 'Looked at closely,' says Stevens, 'the tripartite framework and many of the studies that have inherited its blinkered approach to the drug-crime link fail to match up to the complex social reality that is increasingly visible through the work of sociologists and anthropologists'. He goes on to propose an alternative way of thinking about the drug-crime link. Drugs and crime, to Stevens, are both instances of a process of 'subterranean structuration' and linked together by powerful forces of attraction to those who 'have been relegated to the underside of later modern employment and consumption'. From this perspective, although many people from all walks of life may journey into damaging patterns of drugs use, it is mainly the poor who journey into crime. In order to break the drug-crime link, says Stevens, we must reduce social inequality. He also argues that any drug-crime causal link can work either way. Offenders, for

instance, may be attracted to drug use by increased resources and access. Moreover, problem drug use and offending may well go hand in hand because those who offend or misuse drugs often come from the same deprived backgrounds. In which case, the link may not be causal at all.

The book does not ask readers simply to accept this alternative discourse at face value, but seeks to demonstrate the failings of the Goldstein model with a critical look at some of the research that supplied the justification of the tripartite theory. In numerous examples, it is shown how the relationship between crime and drug use or drug users has been an assumed relationship based on the prejudice of the observer at the time. For instance, in one example in New York, a 26 year old attempted to rape, and then murdered, his 56 year old babysitter. The offence was recorded as being crack-related, even though the perpetrator was drunk at the time and, himself, put the offence down to alcohol. Another case was classified as psychopharmacological because the perpetrator stated he believed the victim was about to rob him to finance a drug habit, even though there was no evidence of an attempted robbery. These and further examples show how much of the evidence may have been shoehorned into the desired classification in order to demonstrate how the tripartite model works in practice. There would also appear to be a dearth of subsequent testing of the Goldstein model. Thus, to Stevens, 'The tripartite framework may have 'intuitive appeal' but it still has little empirical support'.

Such selective use of evidence is even more prevalent in policy making where, to Stevens, it provides the means to highlight drug motivated crime and to

ignore other harms from illicit drug use such as death of users, the spread of diseases such as HIV and hepatitis B and the neglect of children. It follows that the argument in favour of control of illicit drug use and treatment of drug users is boiled down to a cost-benefit analysis showing that a reduction in drug use will result in a reduction in crime and therefore a reduction in the cost of crime. Any health benefit of increased access to treatment programmes then becomes secondary to the cost benefit of an expected reduction in offending.

The book provides an interesting discussion of the controversy over the reclassification of cannabis, contrasting the government decision to follow recommendations to downgrade cannabis from class B to class C in 2004, with the decision to return cannabis to its class B status in 2009 in advance of an impending general election, despite expert advice against this U-turn. This discussion (based on contemporary research) shows that the reclassification decisions prior to 2009 were based on selective use of research by people within the machinery of government who are in a good position to make policy decisions. Stevens argues that decisions such as these may be made before the evidence is selected in order to support the foregone conclusions. To Stevens, this demonstrates what he calls 'the willingness of people who hold power to listen to stories which do not challenge that power.'

Stevens goes on to challenge the belief in the power of the Drug Interventions Programme (DIP) to reduce drug related offending. Although he accepts that DIPs can help reduce offending, he argues that there is insufficient research work done using control groups to establish the extent of that effect.

Research may suggest that DIP regions see a reduction in offending while offending has also fallen during the same periods in non-DIP regions. Any difference between DIP and non-DIP reductions in offending, suggests Stevens, may not be justified by the cost of the programme in the DIP region.

*Drugs Crime and Public Health* should not be seen simply as a cynical swipe at policies and programmes aimed at reducing drug related offending. The book acknowledges the benefits that have derived from the increased availability of drug treatments, including the reduction in drug related offending. However, the flip-side of the perceived drug-crime link, argues Stevens, is the huge increase in the number of drug users in prison and the targeting of the poor and black and other minorities by law enforcement, since white affluent drug users are hardly touched when it comes to arrest and conviction for drug offences, despite the fact that drug use itself is widespread through all social strata. The only disappointing aspect of this book is that, although it decries the lack of emphasis on the health related harms of drugs misuse, it does not delve deeper into the health impact of drug treatment policies.

A thoroughly researched and convincingly argued treatise against prevailing attitudes to the drugs crime link, *Drugs Crime and Public Health* provides a useful grounding in the subject for the casual reader as well as a deeper insight to anyone reading from a professional or academic perspective. This work is highly recommended to anyone interested in drug policy and drug related offending.

**Ray Taylor** is a prison officer at HMP Pentonville.

Book Review

***Positive Practice Positive Outcomes: a handbook for professionals in the criminal justice system working with offenders with learning disabilities***

By Department of Health  
Publisher: Department of Health (2011)  
Price: available as a free download<sup>1</sup>

The handbook, *Positive Practice Positive Outcomes* (PPPO), was first published in 2007. This latest edition, produced and published by the Department of Health and Valuing People in March 2011, is an updated version of the original publication. It is described as being 'best practice guidance' providing 'information, practical advice, sign-posting and best practice examples for criminal justice professionals working with offenders with learning disabilities and learning difficulties'. Although the primary focus is on offenders with learning disabilities, content on specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, and on autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) is also included. The target audience is broad and includes professionals working in healthcare, offender health, adult and children's social services, commissioning and specialised commissioning, as well as criminal justice professionals such as the police, probation services, the prison service and the courts.

PPPO (2011) contains an introduction, eleven numbered sections, a section on resources and a 'useful local contacts' page, which encourages the reader to complete his or her own list of local contacts. The first seven sections provide information relevant to the whole target audience, and these are:

1. What is a learning disability and a learning difficulty?
2. Learning disability and the criminal justice system
3. The health and social care needs of people with learning disabilities
4. Recent developments
5. Key legislation
6. Getting help and support
7. Effective communication.

Four further sections follow on information specific to the police service, the courts service, the prison service and the probation service.

The handbook is well laid out and the use of diagrams, 'positive practice' examples, case studies and quotes from practitioners help to make it readily accessible and relevant to the reader. The list of 'actions' at the end of each section is helpful and encourages the reader to obtain further information and resources, and to create their own data set of local information.

This review will consider the introduction and each of the eleven sections in turn, followed by an overall comment on the handbook.

The introduction is clear and concise. It sets out the importance of the subject matter and provides a context for the handbook; it states the intention of the handbook, which is to provide '*an introduction to working with offenders with learning disabilities*' and informs the reader that the handbook is '*not a diagnostic manual*'.

Section 1 defines what a learning disability is and provides practical examples of what it means to have a learning disability and the sort of help that people with a learning disability might need. It informs the reader that people with a learning disability are

1. Available from [http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_124744.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_124744.pdf)

'people first' and, while they will have shared characteristics, they are all 'individual' and will have different support needs. Descriptions of specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and ADHD are given, alongside the kinds of problems and support needs that people with such conditions might have. Autism and Asperger syndrome are included and the reader is informed that many people with autism also have a learning disability. Two short lists of 'actions' encourage the reader to seek out further information on specific learning difficulties and autism spectrum disorder, and include details about further resources such as *Autism: a guide for criminal justice professionals*, which can be downloaded from the National Autistic Society website.

Section 2 informs the reader that people with learning disabilities who enter the criminal justice system should be identified and provided with the necessary support so they are able to participate effectively in the criminal justice process. The number of people in the criminal justice system with learning disabilities and learning difficulties is highlighted, and some simple questions are given that will help staff to recognise if an individual might have a learning disability.

Section 3 introduces the reader to the particular health and social care needs frequently experienced by people with a learning disability and highlights the need for a multi-agency response to help prevent further offending.

The fourth and fifth sections provide the context and legislative framework as it relates to offenders with learning disabilities. In particular, Section 4 *introduces the reader to Valuing People Now*<sup>1</sup> and the four guiding principles promoted for people with learning disabilities; *The Bradley Report*<sup>2</sup>, which is Lord Bradley's review of people with mental health problems or learning disabilities in the criminal justice system, and the Prison Reform Trust's *No One Knows and Out of Trouble* programmes<sup>3</sup>. While Section 5 considers disability discrimination and the Equalities Act (2010), the Mental Health Act (1983 and 2007) and the Mental Capacity Act (2005). Further, Section 5 highlights specific policies and guidance relevant to the different criminal justice agencies, such as Prison Service Order 2855 on prisoners with disabilities.

Learning to recognise that an individual might have a learning disability is important, but knowing how to get the appropriate help and support can make a significant and positive difference for people with learning disabilities who come into contact with the criminal justice system. The sixth section provides helpful information about the range of statutory and non-statutory organisations that can provide help and support locally, while recognising that not all local areas will have access to the same levels of support — for example, only around a third of magistrates' courts have access to criminal justice liaison and diversion

schemes. The 'positive practice' examples in this section are especially helpful in demonstrating what can be done locally to ensure that help and support is forthcoming, and the list of 'actions' at the end of the section suggests that a proactive approach is needed.

Section 7 provides an extremely helpful introduction to effective communication including what can go wrong when a person's communication needs are left unrecognised and unmet. It describes the different ways people communicate, for example, spoken and written communication, listening, body language and the importance of checking an individual's understanding. This section provides a wealth of practical tips and techniques for more effective communication.

Sections 8 to 11 provide information for professionals working in or with each of the different criminal justice services including police, courts, prison and probation. Collectively they provide a valuable overview of the criminal justice system as it relates to suspects, defendants, offenders and prisoners with a learning disability. Each section contains detailed information about 'Rights and Responsibilities', relevant policies and guidance, and 'positive practice' examples.

Overall, *Positive Practice Positive Outcomes* claims to be 'best practice guidance' providing 'information, practical advice, sign-posting and best practice examples for criminal justice professionals working with offenders with learning disabilities and learning difficulties'; it does all

1. *Valuing People Now: a new three-year strategy for people with learning disabilities 'Making it happen for everyone'* (HM Government, 2009).
2. *The Bradley Report: Lord Bradley's review of people with mental health problems or learning disabilities in the criminal justice system* (Department of Health, 2009).
3. *No One Knows* was the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) programme that examined the experiences of people with learning disabilities and difficulties who offend. A number of publications were produced and a series of recommendations were made. See, in particular, the publication, *Prisoners Voices*. *Out of Trouble* is the PRT programme to reduce child imprisonment. An integral part of the programme considers children with particular impairments and difficulties, including learning disabilities. See, in particular, the publication, *Seen and Heard*. Publications from the *No One Knows* and *Out of Trouble* programmes can be downloaded free of charge from the PRT website, [www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk).

of that and more. It provides a comprehensive and straightforward introduction to the subject; it assumes little in the way of prior knowledge and so avoids the creation of 'knowledge gaps' for the reader. However, should the reader require further clarification, the lists of 'actions' throughout the handbook and the section on resources provide a wealth of further information and practical guidance. It also encourages activity and further learning; the tone throughout is one of application — what can the reader do to enhance his or her way of working? Similarly, the reader is introduced at an early stage to the need for multi-agency working and the importance of forging good working relationships between criminal justice, health and social care. There are many misunderstandings concerning people with learning disabilities, in particular what it means to have a learning disability, the differences between learning disabilities and learning difficulties, and between learning disabilities and mental health problems. PPPO provides clear and concise descriptions for the reader, including the different names, terminology and labels used. The reader is clearly told that people with a learning disability are 'people first' and should be treated as such.

Many individuals and organisations have contributed to the revised version of PPPO, and these are acknowledged in the publication. Special thanks and congratulations should, however, be given to the primary author, Neisha Betts, who has created such a valuable handbook, and to members of the Working for Justice group — people with learning disabilities with direct experience of the criminal justice system — for their insight and advice.

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Book Review

***Correctional mental health: From theory to best practice***

Edited by: Thomas Fagan and Robert Ax

Publisher: Sage Publications

ISBN: 9781412972567

(paperback)

Price: £33.99 (paperback)

Correctional institutions have become the primary providers of mental health services in the United States. American prisons and jails house 775 000 seriously mentally ill people compared to a population of 55 000 in state mental hospitals. However, the editors of this volume note, correctional mental health is under researched and developed. With this text they aim to provide a practical guide on how to establish and manage a correctional mental health practice.

The first section introduces the context in which forensic mental health operates, describes the various stages and forms the criminal justice system takes, compares and contrasts mental health services in community and correctional settings, and ends with a chapter detailing the specific challenges of managing mental health services in a correctional environment. The material will be familiar to anyone experienced in the field, nonetheless the last chapter of the section does a respectable job of summarising the conflicts that can arise between the objectives of security and care, and would be instructive for students lacking experience of secure environments.

The second section provides an overview of the research relating to clinical assessment, treatment and psychopharmacology in correctional settings, to issues around multicultural assessment and treatment, and to

interdisciplinary working. A good overview of various available psychometric instruments is offered, alongside accounts of the evidence base regarding difficulties such as socially desirable responding and the applications of the interventions in multicultural contexts.

The third section contains a series of chapters each dedicated to specific populations such as juveniles, women and those with co-morbid disorders. Evidence on prevalence levels is presented, followed by guidance on treatment options with reference to their evidence base where present. At this stage the book becomes a frustrating read as the chapter authors return to much of the material already raised in previous chapters. Topics such as screening and barriers to treatment are discussed without adding greatly to the coverage in earlier chapters. At the same time, some topics are only raised in the themed chapters even though they are far more broadly applicable — for example the only discussion of therapeutic communities occurs in the chapter on women. Having said that, the chapters read well as standalone primers on their respective topics.

Approached as a complete text, the book suffers from attempting to cater for too broad an audience. At times it reads like an elementary text book and at others like a professional reference book. The editors say that the book is intended for primarily for academic use across the disciplines of psychology, sociology and criminal justice, but also that it addresses correctional mental health practitioners and correctional administrators. As an academic resource it would best serve the needs of students needing an introduction either to mental health or to secure environments, whilst also offering a platform for exploring the

evidence base in more detail. As far as practitioners are concerned, the greatest contribution made by this book is the second section which collates a large quantity of empirical evidence and best practice guidance relating to the provision of mental health services in prisons. This section would be an excellent resource to assist the design and planning stages of such services.

Many of the influences that have contributed to the large and growing mental health needs in the US context have parallels in the UK. The current mental health needs in our prisons have been shaped, as in the US, by the deinstitutionalisation of mental health care and by substantial growth in levels of imprisonment. Therefore many of the dilemmas and general themes that this text refers to closely reflect those encountered here in the UK. However, from the perspective of a British reader, it is a limitation of the book that the legislation, case law, and standards referred to in the book are all American. Moreover, for anyone using the book as a guide to service planning in the UK, it would be necessary to explore the extent to which the psychometric research and psychological programs referred to have been validated in a British context. Thus for British readers — even more than for American readers — this book will be of most value when used as a platform from which to further explore the evidence base that could and should underpin the much needed mental health services in our prisons.

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Book Review:

***Not Bad for a Bad Lad***

By Michael Morpurgo  
Publisher: Templar Publishing  
(2010)  
ISBN: 978 1 84877 308 0  
(hardback)  
Price: £9.99 (hardback)

As this retired governor hurtles towards second childhood it is perhaps apt that he should now revert to children's literature. In truth, it was the 'A' board that did it. Revisiting Woodbridge after some thirty years, the local bookshop was advertising this work as 'a story set at Hollesley Bay'. Since that was also the setting for my early story, the urge to purchase was overwhelming. A book from the former Children's Laureate will have been eagerly anticipated by young readers and, in terms of a simple but cracking story, it does not disappoint. But — oh dear.

A grandfather decides to set the record of his life straight by revealing his dark secrets to his grandson. The fourth of six children, raised in wartime by a single mother, he often preferred exploring bomb sites to education. At school he was publicly branded 'a brainless, useless good for nothing waste of space' by his headteacher. And if the headteacher said it, then it had to be right. The head was just one of very many authority figures who defined him as a bad lot. But at least he was good at that and, since it made him the centre of attention, it imparted some sort of status. The exception among the teachers was Miss West, who taught music, with whom a trusting rapport and a love of music developed. But she left the school for no apparent reason and the vilification continued.

Wandering the streets led to petty thieving, fights, joy riding, fencing of stolen goods and

burglary. And eventually, to borstal. But one thought remained with him. Miss West had spoken for him at court, explaining that he was good at heart and that he would 'come right one day'.

The borstal was Hollesley Bay Colony and his induction was terrifying — of which more later. Redemption was around the corner when he was chosen to work with Suffolk Punch horses at the borstal stud farm. He became trusted by the stud hand, Mr Alfie, and was given the care of a particular horse. It was Mr Alfie's encouraging words that give the book its title and the narrator a hope that life might take a turn for the better. Mr Alfie left, just like his father and Miss West before. But to reveal more of the story would be to spoil it for those who read the book. There is a somewhat contrived but happy ending that children will love. It involves growing up, horses and music.

The book allows Michael Morpurgo further to explore the relationship of man and horse that we saw in *War Horse* and in *Farm Boy*. He and his wife Clare are renowned for their charity, Farms for City Children. In conflating this interest with the Hollesley stud the reader becomes aware of the institution's reliance on agricultural work as 'a panacea for the displaced city boy'<sup>1</sup> rather fulfilling the Gladstone Committee's 1895 aspiration that the institution 'should be situated in the country with ample space for agricultural and land reclamation work'<sup>2</sup>. This was traditionally seen to be 'healthy outdoor work' and 'very valuable training for borstal boys'<sup>3</sup>. If only such simple formulae had been grasped by one of my former Hollesley trainees whose work reports from the stud farm were

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1. Hood, Roger (1965) *Borstal Reassessed*, London, Heinemann, 127.  
2. Report of the Departmental Committee on Prisons (1895)  
3. Gilmour, Sir J (1934) and Hoare, Sir S (1938) HC Debates cited Hood, R. (ibid).

exceptionally good but who confided that 'The trouble is, we ain't got many stud farms on the Caledonian Road!'

On 23 February last year Michael Morpurgo told *The Guardian* that among his set of rules for writing is that:

*'The notion of a story is, for me, a confluence of real events, historical perhaps, or from my own memory, to create an exciting fusion.'*

This does not excuse or explain, no matter how rattling a story it is, the errors that abound here. These are both factual, in sentencing and allocation terms and also in the careless stereotype of borstal training Michael Morpurgo applies to Hollesley Bay Colony.

Borstal training was an indeterminate sentence. In the 1950s, when the story is set, it could last between nine months and three years (later reduced to six months and two years) depending upon the behaviour of the trainee. Magistrates had limited sentencing powers and could only recommend borstal training to the higher court whose job it was to sentence. Here the magistrates, unlawfully, sentenced the boy to a twelve month determinate term.

He was taken from police cells directly to borstal thus bypassing the Borstal Allocation Centre where, in those days, he would have been interviewed by a

visiting 'house master' from Hollesley Bay to assess suitability for its regime. Rogue staff do exist and can be cruel but since the Hollesley of those days was widely recognised for its pioneering and liberal ethos, it is unlikely that contemporary induction procedures included a gratuitous exemplary beating while stretched over a vaulting horse in front of a cohort of new receptions.

Hollesley Bay Colony had been self-sufficient in home grown food since its days as an agricultural college and, later, as resettlement scheme for the London unemployed. The borstal operated a farm shop, open to the public, many decades before these became fashionable. Yet here, the food was 'always as disgusting as they could make it.' Further, the normal response to absconding would have been one of disciplinary hearing and transfer but in Michael Morpurgo's Hollesley it is one of yet more beatings.

More errors display a basic lack of research. The central character 'liked the two mile run we had to do before breakfast, because that's when we got to go outside the walls'. Hollesley Bay Colony was an open borstal, without walls. Morpurgo's words might be taken as metaphorical but for one of Michael Foreman's delightful illustrations showing the central character being released through a barred prison gate lodge by a prison officer attired in a uniform. Uniforms were not worn in borstals until about

quarter of a century later; officers wore civilian clothes. Further, in an appendix entitled 'The Facts behind the Story' we learn, surprisingly, that:

*'In 1982 the British Government decided to replace Borstals with the Young (sic) Custody Centres we have today'.*

Would it have been too much to hope, in a section purporting to set out 'the facts', that the author might have informed himself that borstals were replaced by *Youth Custody Centres* and, in turn, by the Young Offender Institutions we have today?

Is this mere penological pedantry? Is it fair to criticise the text for such inaccuracies when, after all, they will not detract from the story for most readers? I think it is. I draw a rough parallel with historical content of Sarah Waters' novels where the portrayal of prisons and other institutions is based upon meticulously accurate research. Michael Morpurgo is not a lawyer, a criminologist, a penologist, or a prison administrator. He is a wonderfully engaging writer and is universally acclaimed as such. He might not be expected to know much of that for which he is criticised here. But he could easily have found out.

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