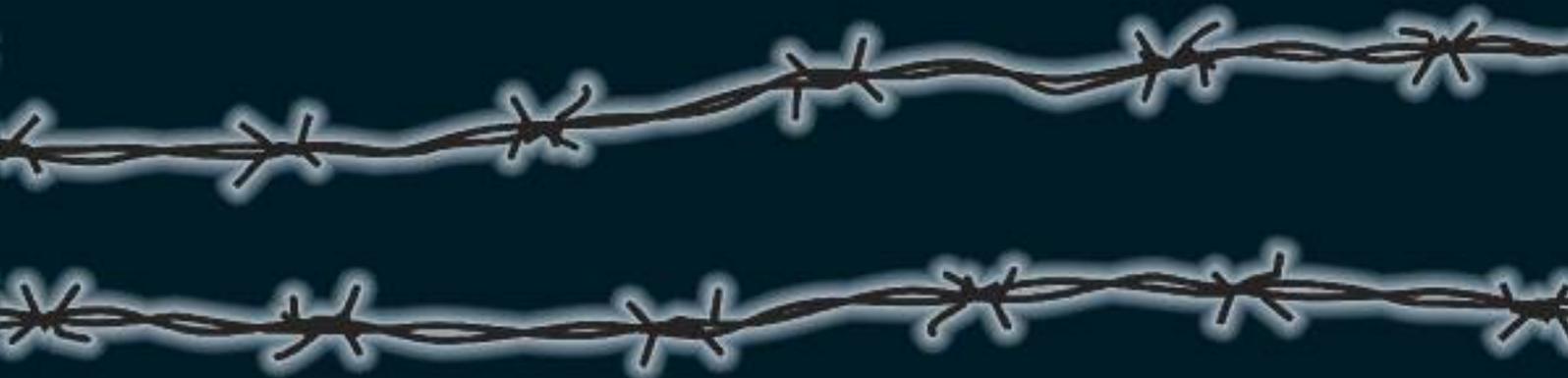


# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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Ethnicity Religion  
Gender Race  
Sexual Orientation  
Age  
Multiculturalism



# Reviews

Book Review

## **The Little Book of Prison: A Beginners Guide**

by Frankie Owens

Publisher: Waterside Press (2012)

ISBN: 978-1-904380-83-2

(paperback)

Price: £8.99 (paperback)

I was recently asked to advise a friend about what to prepare her son to expect when going into prison (as seemed likely at the time). I was not aware of any guidance that was readily available so I made up some suggestions based on my experience of working in prisons, particularly those that received people from court whose first time in custody it was. Sad to say the son was sentenced to custody and I was later reassured that my advice had come to be useful and reassuring. My advice was from a staff's perspective inevitably.

If this book had been available he would have got a fuller view of what to expect and an insider's guide on how to survive and get some benefit from the experience. This is a hard hitting set of survival notes from someone writing as they live their time in prison. It is grounded in reality.

Frankie Owens writes with sound practical advice which is not for the faint hearted. He takes prison seriously, recognising it as the worst place to be. The book may well not be one that staff recommend for although the advice is sound in relation to the experience it does not mention all the processes and procedures and decisions that go into a reception and induction process. But it is nevertheless helpful for prison staff to read this book to appreciate the pressures on and priorities of those

coming in. Knowing how sensitive and difficult the early time in prison can be prisons have developed extensive systems of assessment and observation to seek a safe experience for prisoners. But this book is from a person who is a strong prison survivor and is already aware of the needs of those who end up in prison. Indeed he was a provider of services for some of those needs in his previous employment, before he ended up inside himself.

Frankie Owens provides five excellent golden rules that will give a flavour of the content, they are:

1. Keep you head down, do your bird, ride out your bang up.
2. It's nice to be nice, be positive, entertain and see the bright side.
3. Don't believe everything you hear inside HMP.
4. Pay your bills if you borrow.
5. Never lose your cool.

This is great guidance for a surviving experience, and certainly more positive than my words were to my friend. The underlying message of not showing your weakness is sound but not always possible and not always helpful in relation to the programmes and activity the prison provides.

Sections on The Court Appearance, the First Night and Cell Etiquette are well described and particularly sensitive is the issue of 'personal time' when sharing a cell — when your cellmate is on a visit or at an interview. The last section is called Never Going Back in which Frankie Owens takes full responsibility for what he did and the consequences for himself and his family and friends (victims). He points out the benefits of time

inside for him, including getting and staying clean of drugs, looking healthier, losing weight and having time to write a book!

The one bit of advice I gave which Frankie Owens also gives is to keep a notebook of the experience so you can process calmly what is happening to you and how best to respond.

This is a good book promoting how to make the most of the worst experience.

*Tim Newell is a retired prison governor and was formerly Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.*

Book Review

## **The Little Book of Prison: A Beginners Guide**

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ISBN: 978-904380-83-2

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Price: £8.99 (paperback)

Frankie Owens was a prisoner until August 2011. He landed in prison after a tempestuous period in his life including co-dependency on drugs and alcohol. He was arrested 25 times in seven months of what he describes as a 'manic hyper bender'. Owens felt it would be useful to others if there was a manual for those about to experience prison for the first time. In the introduction he opens by describing himself as a 'first time offender'. However, given his seven month manic hyper bender, he should perhaps more accurately revise the term to 'first time HMP

resident'. Nevertheless, this is a minor complaint, Owens offers great insight, capturing the quintessential elements of the, at times monotonous, experiences of prison life. This he does with entertainment value up there with modern stand-up comedy.

Owens covers many of the ups and downs, constraints and demands of being in a local prison. The opening page boasts a list entitled 'Golden Rules of LBP' (Little Book of Prison) The rules include 'Keep your head down' which implies staying out of trouble; 'Ride your bang-up' meaning you must cope with your time behind your cell door, and 'never lose your cool' among others like 'never believe everything you hear' and 'paying your bills'. The opening sets the tone, with Owens' writing enticing the reader with its conversational style and assembly of memorable quotes, discussion and testimonies. The personality of Frankie Owens comes through strongly.

Entwined with the comedy of Owens there is a seriousness and good knowledge on the subject of addiction. He has done his research and even provides insights into the business side of drugs and their intellectual property status. He also explores desperate situations including withdrawal. His sometimes outlandish advice includes duplicitous strategies for doctor's appointments, known as the 'Doctors Blag' and he even draws upon his personal experience to suggest the best medication available for those experiencing drugs and alcohol abuse.

Making the right first impression is addressed by Owens whilst discussing court appearances and entry into prison. He suggests that essentials should be carried including tobacco, known as 'the prison currency', and the importance of bringing a toothbrush. He also offers the handy hint that having a 'skinhead' haircut and being clean shaven is a

good way to look 'hard' on arrival to prison. However, I imagine these points of advice may be unpopular among Rastafarians, Muslims and The New Romantic movement die-hards.

The book is littered with duplicitous techniques or blags, such as claiming claustrophobia in order to avoid an uncomfortable journey from the court in an escort vehicle, or 'sweatbox'. These are sometimes so outlandish as to be purely satirical, for example, suggesting that 'sweatbox' drivers should be asked to stop at the nearest Burger King drive through with the sweetener of offering to pay the bill. Others are more revealing, for example where he describes his feelings approaching the prison for the first time as: 'your arse going 20 pence 50 pence'. There came a point when I wondered how long Owens thought the tricks and blags would have the given effect now that they are out in the public domain by publishing them. Although he appears to be a proponent of upholding the so called 'Inmate Code', in my opinion, his paradoxical desire to uncover this publically, suggests a sign of his silent yearn for change.

The book continues through reception on arrival in prison. Owens quotes inmates' comments and conversations, giving the reader a true feel of what can be expected going through the reception process. The prison induction process is described as a comedy of errors, with an anecdote of a stolen TV bringing the process to a premature halt. Owens seems to be a natural and confident comedian and his stories are highly entertaining, whether that is stringing out yarns or riffing on topics such as the absence of pockets in prison tracksuits. One of my favourites is his conversation with a CARATS worker called Viv, who claimed she had not seen any of their faces before. Owen replies

'We have met Viv', 'Have we?' she replies. 'Yes you were drunk at the nightclub and I lent you a score (£20), I'm just here to pick up the 20 quid' says Owens. Laughing and joking clearly made life inside more bearable for him, and in fact he recommends a sense of humour as a necessity. However, the laughter is sometimes bitter sweet. Later in the book, he uses the book to rekindle his broken relationship, indirectly talking to his ex wife with declarations of love. At this point there is a sense of regret beneath the mildly mischievous tone.

The day-to-day challenges of prison life are covered throughout the book. Owens goes through the nuts and bolts of canteen, phone credit and other entitlements. He talks about the boredom and uncertainty, and doesn't hide away from the base human needs such as toileting and masturbation, but also talks about how to insulate against bad memories. The subculture of prisons is also exposed. He describes 'hooch' (homemade alcohol) as a 'Cell made delight' with reasonably clear instructions on how to produce it. He also gives advice on getting hold of sleeping tablets. This he does whilst also sermonising to the reader to stay away from drink and drugs.

The most impressive aspect of this book is the way that Owens establishes a rapport with the reader. He does this with a chatty, informal style, chastising himself for his own gossip and rants, and also cheekily prodding the reader occasionally darting at them with 'You little Rat'. By the end of the book, I felt like Frankie Owens was my cell-mate. His style and execution is either perversely skilful or an absolute fluke, but whatever it is, it is certainly good.

**Norman Reid** is a prisoner at HMP Grendon.

## Book Review

### **Controversial Issues in Prisons**

By David Scott and Helen Codd

Publisher: Open University Press

(2010)

Price: £22.99 (paperback)

ISBN: 10 0335223036 (paperback)

*Controversial Issues in Prisons* is an accessible text discussing eight specific penal controversies in England and Wales; among them, the number of mentally ill people locked up, suicide and self-harm rates among prisoners, the treatment of sex offenders, the incarceration of immigrant detainees and foreign nationals, the drug culture in prisons, the number of women and children behind bars, and the effects of imprisonment on prisoners' families. Each chapter has a common framework: how have people conceptualised this penal controversy? What does the official data tell us? What is its historical context? What are the contemporary policies? Are they legitimate and, if not, what are the alternatives? The eight controversies are bookended by an initial chapter titled 'Thinking about controversial issues in prison', and a final chapter on 'Abolitionism'. The controversies are painted with fairly broad brushstrokes and throughout most of the book, Scott and Codd's criticisms of the toxic environments they describe are largely voiced through the work of critical criminologists, including Pat Carlen, Joe Sim, Barry Goldson and Diana Medicott.

Evident throughout the volume is the inextricable link between prison and poverty and in the final chapter the narrative becomes personal, polemical and impassioned. Here the authors speak of incarcerating children as 'institutionalized abuse' (p. 163) and describe a penal system 'in crisis, riven with deep divisions, unnecessary suffering and waste of life' (ibid). Their partial solution is a

policy of deliberate exclusion from prison of vulnerable people; a strategy of 'selective abolitionism'. However, they remind us that the failure of the prison service to deal adequately and humanely with prisoners reflects society's failings. Social exclusion tends to be repeated over entire lifecourses and in the wider economic, social and political context, they say, the Capitalist State has 'blood on its hands' (p.106).

The visceral and emotive language adopted in the final chapter both serves as a 'call to arms' and underlines the difficulty that scholars and reform groups face when highlighting the problems, degradations and injustices inherent in imprisonment. The accusation can always be levied that we are simply tinkering at the edges and doing nothing to fundamentally challenge the institution of the prison itself. Indeed Scott and Codd go so far as to berate liberal penal reform organisations for being co-opted into maintaining the existing penal apparatus (p. 168) and while they could not be accused of this themselves, there is surely an unresolvable tension between writing academic books and seeking to upend the status quo. The critical, abolitionist stance taken by the authors also precludes them from highlighting much that is positive or progressive within the penal system; for example, about successful individual prison communities, pioneering penal 'experiments', or about enlightened governors trying to change the system from within. It is as if to illuminate pockets of good practice, however small, would undermine their overarching message, which is that prisons are 'places of sadness and terror, harm and injustice, secrecy and oppression' (p.170).

Given the potential scope of 'controversial issues in prisons', this is a relatively slim volume and the chapters are quite short. Inevitably

the choice of eight controversies raises questions about selectivity and omission. Indefinite detention, chronic overcrowding, issues of privacy and surveillance, poor education provision, inadequate training, pointless, exploitative or injurious prison labour and the dominance of psychology and psychologists in prisons, are among the many subjects that I would deem controversial, but which are mentioned only in passing, if at all. Nonetheless, this book is an engagingly written and well-researched introduction to the topics covered. Practitioner-professionals and university students will welcome Scott and Codd's clear and lucid approach and *Controversial Issues in Prisons* is a valuable teaching contribution to debates on the most pressing problems facing prisons and penology.

*Yvonne Jewkes is Professor of Criminology at University of Leicester.*

## Book Review

### **Prisons, Punishment and the Pursuit of Security**

by Deborah Drake pp.220

ISBN: 978-0-230-28293-3

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

(2012)

Price: £55.00 (hardback)

ISBN: 9780230282933 (hardback)

The overarching premise of *Prisons, Punishment and the Pursuit of Security* is that security within the penal system has run parallel to its rise in prominence in a post 9/11 society. A study of all five men's maximum-security prisons in England, one of the aims of the book is to demythologise both the prison and the high-security prisoner. Acknowledging that few of us have first-hand experience of

deep immersion in these establishments, author Deborah Drake takes seriously her mission to use this experience to reflect on social problems, dominant political ideologies and gaps in knowledge and understanding. She dissects the notion of 'evil', arguing that we must separate the action from the perpetrator and avoid essentialist explanations that overlook the social origins of violence and cruelty. She notes that in her interviews with long-term prisoners (which numbered over 200) she encountered no monsters; a fact which she admits she found unsettling for it is these popular characterisations that underpin the politically endorsed belief that the 'wilful exclusion, segregation or exile of certain members of society is an appropriate response when particular, socially censured acts are committed' (p. 24).

Having established a case for the prison being the preferred method of crime control globally, Drake focuses on the establishment of long-term max security imprisonment in England following the abolition of the death penalty in 1965 and the Mountbatten Report (1966) which adhered to a model of security and control based on the premise that long-term prisoners should retain the expectation that they will be released. Now, of course, many countries, including England and Wales, are introducing strategies that limit the release prospects of even those people who manage against the odds to preserve or develop pro-social skills in prison and who would pose minimal public safety threat on release. Additionally, as Drake says, many of her respondents were Category B inmates and were housed in maximum-security conditions 'by chance, not by necessity' (p. 77).

The watershed moment in English prison history which accounts for the transformation in attitudes to and practices of security

was the escapes from Whitemoor in 1994 and Parkhurst in 1995. The inquiries into these events, headed by Woodcock and Learmont respectively, ushered in a new regime of security and control, including a dramatic reversal of policy on all privileges that could be presented by the media as inappropriately conceived indulgences to an anti-social population. With a growing political and public appetite for punitive punishment to be inflicted on the 'worst of the worst', the escapes that precipitated these erosions of humanity were viewed politically as a fortuitous catalyst for change.

Drake's commentary never fails to be anything but thoughtful and thought-provoking and is augmented by interview data from a group of prisoners who are rarely given a voice. I found two passages particularly affecting. Reflecting on the life sentence as compared with the death penalty, one respondent says: 'even if they hang you, it was all over with, wasn't it? There's no messing around, you're not going to have people digging you up every few days and saying 'you're still a guilty bastard' and putting you back in your coffin' (p. 100). Another interviewee encapsulates the role of the prison psychologist: 'they want to peel you like an onion...They want you to reveal your soul to them...And then they want to clothe it with their clothes and send you out into the world a broken, defeated, soulless person' (p. 101).

Such quotes are used sparingly and arguably there was an even greater opportunity to give character and dimension to the individuals who are usually flattened out by politicians and journalists into over-simplified cardboard cut-outs and caricatures. Where interview transcripts are included they do more to convey the pointlessness of imprisonment than any scholarly treatise. That notwithstanding, *Prisons,*

*Punishment and the Pursuit of Security* is an elegantly written exposition advancing measured arguments and is a bold study of imprisonment in a risk-attuned and retributive society. Deb Drake's great achievement here is to shine light on the very 'deepest' end of the penal estate at a time when security has risen to a level of prominence that eclipses every other consideration, including what it means to be human in such environments.

*Yvonne Jewkes* is Professor of Criminology at the University of Leicester.

Book Review

### **Firesetting and Mental Health**

Edited by Geoffrey L. Dickens, Phillip A. Sugarman and Theresa A. Gannon.

Publisher: The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2012)

ISBN: 978-1-908020-37-6 (paperback)

Price: £ 35.00 (paperback)

This book contains key contributions from a wide range of both academic and clinical settings from a number of countries worldwide. The consensus from the opening pages appeared to be the apparent wealth of literature available concerning juvenile firesetting, but the clear lack of literature available on the subject of adult firesetting. The assessment and treatment of firesetters has been the subject of growing interest from researchers more recently, which previously had been described as sporadic, especially where adult firesetters are concerned. This book aimed to highlight the gaps within the firesetting literature, and to bring

current research and contemporary views in both areas of theory and practice into review.

This book contains fourteen chapters in total, and is divided into two main parts. The first part outlines important theoretical questions surrounding the issue of firesetting in a broad context of populations in terms of definitions, rates of prevalence, typologies, and theoretical models. The second part focuses on the assessment and treatment of firesetters, picking up themes from the first part of the book, and acknowledging a diverse and wide range of implications and recommendations for practitioners.

There are several key features within the chapters from the first part of the book to mention. Chapters explore the particular challenges presented by a range of firesetter characteristics — adult and juvenile firesetters, offenders, male and females, firesetters with intellectual disability, personality disorder and mental health issues, demographic and developmental characteristics, and brain abnormalities. What is clear from the chapters covering characteristic considerations is the need for more research studies to be able to draw valid conclusions from such a heterogeneous group. Chapter two focuses on providing a framework to apply to firesetters, and highlights the need for theoretical models to provide a basis for risk assessment and treatment by being responsive to different typologies. An interesting point is raised here in terms of ensuring typologies can facilitate understanding of underlying processes and functions of behaviour, which is essential when considering any risk assessments or treatment pathways.

There is particular inclusion of the role that intellectual ability has within firesetters. Evidence from the research presented within the

book suggests that firesetters are generally seen to have a lower intellectual ability, which appears to hold across male, females, and differing ages. However, what is made apparent, as with most other areas of firesetting literature, is the lack of conclusive research studies to draw any meaningful and generalisable conclusions and the need for developing a research base. Furthermore, there are recommendations for those practitioners working with firesetters to increase knowledge and awareness when working with firesetters who have intellectual disabilities. In addition to the inclusion of intellectual ability, the motivations of the broad range of firesetters identified within earlier chapters are extensively explored. In an era where risk assessment and rehabilitation is focussed upon, these chapters aim to address some important considerations around both motivation and dangerousness. What is reflected within these chapters is the main focus of current literature on motivation, not recklessness. There is a call for future research to consider the idea of recklessness, due to the destructive and dangerous potential of arson on endangering life. That said, there are some consensual opinions of motivations highlighted such as revenge, excitement, vandalism, crime concealment and profit based gain. Overall, the area of motivation is also suggested as being under-researched, and the overwhelming message is that of countless opportunities for future studies on a range of firesetters.

There is a wide variety in subject matter and a good balance of issues discussed within the second part of the book. Initially, the focus begins with both historical and current guidelines in terms of law. Interestingly, a point

raised with this chapter highlights how sentencing laws largely consider the seriousness of arson; something that this book suggests is an under-developed area of research. When considering the assessment of firesetters, a number of chapters explore the difficulties of differentiating firesetters from other types of offenders. Assessment of firesetters is outlined as requiring the inclusion of a number of factors, such as historical, individual characteristics, dynamic characteristics, as well as the assessment on any previous firesetting that may have occurred. These chapters clearly add to the discourse of assessing firesetters, however, there is a call for more research to develop and validate risk assessment tools to specifically focus on the act of firesetting.

Following on from the chapters considering assessment, the final chapters move on to explore treatment considerations. There are clear messages translated to the reader in terms of treatment programmes, that there are no clear empirically validated treatment programmes. Of the treatment programmes that do exist, the majority are educationally based designed for young firesetters. Suggestions are highlighted within the book for treatment models that are inclusive of therapeutic multi-modal approaches to treatment, including behavioural and social approaches. What was apparent to me was the lack of research on treating firesetting offenders within the prison service and mental health settings, and perhaps due to working within a therapeutic community, the failure to identify that future research could consider how this particular multi-model approach could be a helpful intervention for some.

The overriding message within this book is the countless

opportunities for research to help in guiding both theoretical and practical knowledge within the area of firesetting. This book accomplished a much-required task in bringing together the firesetting literature and highlighting the apparent gaps,

whilst giving a thorough and comprehensive review. There are a number of enjoyable chapters focusing on the diverse and unique nature of firesetters, which I believe, broadens the book's appeal beyond academics and practitioners, to those who may

have an interest in reading about individuals who set fires.

**Laura Jacobs** is a Forensic Psychologist in Training working at HMP Grendon.



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