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Going Inside? Frankie Says...

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This short article is a critical analysis of Frankie Owens's (2012) *Little Book of Prison (LBP)*, which recently won a Koestler Award, and is also informed by subsequent interviews undertaken with Owens for a separate research project. The LBP is based on Owens's experiences of serving a sentence of less than 12 months, at a single unnamed institution — which he has since revealed to have been HMP Winchester — and therefore the extent to which his experiences are generalizable is open to question. Even so, given that the provision of information for offenders regarding expectations of and preparations for serving a prison sentence appears to be a somewhat under-researched area, a case study about what one prisoner thinks other prospective prisoners might need to know about prison to help them adjust to prison life is worthy of scrutiny.

This is not to deny that there are a range of hard-copy and electronic handbook resources produced by the state and third sector, upon which prisoners and their families are able to draw.¹ There has also been a contribution to this subject by Charles Bronson.² Nonetheless, there has been little critical analysis of these handbooks, particularly the extent to which they meet the needs of a diverse population of prisoners, and it is implicitly argued here that the extent to which prisoners are prepared (or not) for their prison experience is an important area of research. Certainly from Owens's own perspective, this was a book he'd have found useful to read:

I was educated with a degree and a master's degree. I did not come from that background

and so it was absolutely new to me. I hadn't visited any family in prison..... so you know it was very alien. I was very much in 'cuckoo' when I arrived in there.³

Academic research about what prisoners' expectations about what prison was going to be like have been informed by a variety of sources including previous experiences of prison;⁴ 'comparable' life events such as service in the armed forces;⁵ stories from friends⁶; guidance from fellow prisoners;⁷ and media representations.⁸ The latter despite the variation between realities of prison life and portrayals of prison in popular culture noted elsewhere.⁹

How then would all of this compare with the experiences and advice that Frankie might give? Might there be value in having the LBP more widely available to newly received prisoners, who in turn might better respond to what Frankie says?

Reactions he received while in prison seem to bear this out:

When I finished it ...I managed to type it in the computer and print in out. I gave that to about 4 or 5 in-mates from different areas and different sentences and (asked) what do you think? And they all come back with positives to be honest which was great.¹⁰

General Observations

The critical analysis of the LBP consisted of three main stages. Firstly, whilst reading though the

1. See for example Citizens Advice Bureau 2012; Direct Gov 2012; Prisoners Advice Service 2012; Prison Reform Trust 2004; Prison Reform Trust 2008.
2. Bronson, C. and Richards, S. (2007) *The Good Prison Guide*. London: John Blake Publishing.
3. Owens, F. (25th April 2012) *Interview*.
4. Harvey, J. (2005) Crossing the Boundary: the transition of young adults into prison, in Liebling, A. and Maruna, S. *The Effects of Imprisonment*. Cullompton: Willan.
5. Crawley, E. and Sparks, R. (2006) Is There Life After Imprisonment? How Elderly men Talk about Imprisonment and Release, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 6 (1) pp. 63-82.
6. See n.3.
7. Rowe, A. (2012). Women Prisoners. In Crewe, B. and Bennett, J. (ed) *The Prisoner*. London: Routledge, pp. 103-116.
8. See for instance, Jewkes, Y. (2002). *Captive Audience: Media, Masculinity and Power in Prisons*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing. Jewkes, Y. (2012) Identity and adaptation in prison. In Crewe, B. and Bennett, J. (ed) *The Prisoner*. London: Routledge, pp. 40-52. Souza, K. and Dhami, M. (2010). First Time and Recurrent Inmates' Experiences of Imprisonment. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 37(12), pp. 1330-1342.
9. See for instance, Wilson, D. and O'Sullivan, S. (2004). *Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama*. Winchester: Waterside. Wilson, D. and Groombridge, N. (2010). "'I'm making a TV programme here!": Reality TV's "Banged Up" and Public Criminology', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 49/1: 1-17.
10. See n.3.

handbook, I noted down some general observations relating to factors such as structure and length. Secondly, a mapping exercise was conducted, recording the presence or absence of topics on a grid. Finally I embarked upon a more detailed exploration, commenting upon the nature and depth of coverage of topics and groups of topics in the LBP.

The first general observation is that the LBP is, as its' title states 'little', and runs to only 111 pages in length. It is also pocket sized, and proceeds in chronological order: getting to court; getting to prison; getting through induction; getting through first weeks; 'getting on with your bird'.¹¹ The LBP also covers some subjects in depth, whilst others are only rather superficially mentioned. For example, while the fear of violence was noted as a key concern in the literature exploring prisoner expectations of prison,¹² there is only a very brief reference to violence in the LBP — reporting upon an incident which happened during association but not giving a detailed account.¹³ Indeed, as the LBP is written from the prisoner perspective, the literature would lead the reader to expect to see the fear of violence as a prominent theme but it is not addressed to any real extent in the handbook.

On the other hand, in support of the importance of social relations with other prisoners and staff, which was identified as another concern within academic literature, applying to both first time prisoners and those with prior experience of incarceration,¹⁴ the LBP devotes significant attention to the nature of a prisoner's relationship with his cellmate, emphasising consideration, empathy and solidarity.

Cell etiquette is a particularly central theme. To cite two examples, 'Blow your nose and clear your throat

before bed and ask your pad mate to do the same as this will minimise the snoring',¹⁵ and with reference to toilet etiquette, 'Taking a dump, dropping the kids off at the pool, this needs to be humane to your cell mate. Choose association and leave windows and doors open to air the room'.¹⁶ In addition, a reference to the paying off a cellmate's debt highlights the way in which prisoners are associated with each other, 'I ticked some burn and split it with Dave as he may be gone before his canteen arrives so I'll be stuck with his debt (bollocks)'.¹⁷ In addition, the LBP identifies particular facilitators of positive relationships with other prisoners and effective strategies for creating a good impression upon arrival, particularly through the use of clothing:

*New trainers will give you some status with seasoned inmates, Nike Air Max new design or originals, Addidas Gazelle or some classic Nike Cortez. No High Tech as you're more likely to get pushed around the landing, dropped down the queue for a game of pool, or when using the phone or at dinner.*¹⁸

The LBP makes frequent reference to 'screws'¹⁹ and occasional mention of 'lady screws'²⁰ However, whilst this

would appear to emphasise the homogeneous way in which prisoners perceive prison officers, the LBP does include references to jovial social interactions with prison officers,²¹ appearing to challenge the 'us and them' theme identified in other literature.²²

Rules, Regulations and Getting On

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11. Owens, F. (2012). *The Little Book of Prison: A Beginners Guide*. Hampshire: Waterside Press, pp 91-104.

12. See footnote 3.

13. Owens (2012: 33).

14. See n. 3 and 5.

15. Owens, (2012: 34).

16. Owens, (2012: 37).

17. Owens, (2012: 49).

18. Owens, (2012: 23).

19. Owens (2012: 25, 27, 37, 60, 76, 82, 93, 97).

20. Owens (2012: 62).

21. Owens (2012: 43 and 62).

22. See, for example, Crawley, E. (2004) *Doing Prison Work: The Public & Private Lives of Prison Officers* Cullompton: Willan.

to which the lived reality of what appear to be clear and unambiguous is often shrouded in complexity and difficulty. Examples of this include contact with friends and family and Owens details the frustrations of becoming aware of additional, important information. Examples include the regularity with which phone credit can be purchased and the often long queues for use of the prison telephones, all of which can act as significant barriers to making use of this facility. Personal hygiene provides another example. The LBP casts light on the often problematic nature of showering:

Take regular showers, sounds obvious but a definite once you get over the stereotype of getting jumped...Another prison lottery is the fun game of chasing the hot water. This runs alongside finding the best block and the best cubicle if you have them...Showers when you get all the above right are a welcome treat even though you are stuck with prison issue shampoo and soap.²³

There are several topics that appeared within the LBP which might suggest that these topics have the potential to highlight the ways in which the lived experiences of prisoners may differ from the perceptions held by HM Prison Service. For example, boredom was a central theme in the LBP and, in particular, the difficulties of finding things to occupy time. Owens referred to the value of afternoon naps;²⁴ frustrations at having obtained a pack of playing cards only to find that a cellmate did not know how to play;²⁵ drawing upon memories of childhood;²⁶ and trading possessions with other prisoners.²⁷ The LBP also referred to the importance of 'personal time' in terms of opportunities for masturbation, a topic which is strikingly absent from more formal handbooks related to starting a prison sentence. Owens refers to this as:

Personal time (PT) is aka self-abuse...you know knocking one out...spanking the monkey...flogging the dolphin might be your thing but this is a tricky one if you don't have a single cell...Even if you have the place to yourself you are still chancing getting caught.²⁸

The LBP is also good at explaining the importance of tobacco and reveals hidden, but important dimensions of smoking essential for everyday life in prison. Rather than simply being an activity in need of regulation and cessation, the LBP sheds light on the way that tobacco is used and traded as a prison currency, swapped for toiletries, pens, paper and luxuries²⁹ and subject to varying

exchange rates depending upon the newness of the prisoner trading it — 'The going rate is 50 per cent but as new fish you will be stung for double bubble all day long'.³⁰ Indeed, the LBP states, 'So even if you don't smoke, you will need tobacco.'³¹

Finally, the LBP makes direct reference to the representation of prison in the media. This had been noted in the academic literature as something upon which first-time prisoners relied to inform their expectations of

prison,³² despite the wide gulf between the realities of prison life and media images of prison.³³ The LBP recommends films and television programmes that are useful in informing expectations, placing particular emphasis upon one programme and suggesting that in relation to Owens' prison experience, life did imitate art to an extent:

But the crème de la crème is the comedy series 'Porridge' with Ronnie Barker and Richard Beckinsale. That show will know you off your arse, it's hilarious and it gives you the right mentality for prison.³⁴

. . . boredom was a central theme in the LBP and, in particular, the difficulties of finding things to occupy time.

23. Owens (2012: 34-35).
 24. Owens (2012: 63).
 25. Owens (2012: 64).
 26. Owens (2012: 64).
 27. Owens (2012: 65).
 28. Owens (2012: 63-64).
 29. Owens (2012: 23).
 30. Owens (2012: 54).
 31. Owens (2012: 23).
 32. See for instance Harvey (2005) n.4, Souza and Dhami, (2010) n.8.
 33. See n.8.
 34. Owens (2012: 40).

Discussion

The LBP seems to work best when it attempts to bring official guidance about prison to life, highlighting complexities, frustrations and misinterpretations. Furthermore, there is an overtly *human* theme running throughout the LBP which adds to its interest and charm. In the LBP, Owens shares with the reader thoughts and feelings that are distinctly personal and private; his self-perception; his relationship with his family; and things within his life that have meaning for him.

In interview he has made the *human* experience of going to prison more explicit still:

... what I was doing was emotionally shutting down in front of other people and saying this is what is happening and not really caring. The 'devil may care' kind of persona. When you are behind a door and you do actually open up and you think about who you've hurt and what you've done and why you are there and that kind of stuff, so it's kind of an emotional roller-coaster that you are riding.³⁵

This enhances the authenticity of the handbook and may indeed serve to build the reader's trust in the advice and guidance that is being given. After all, personal insights are not a feature of most official guidance about prison, and while this might suggest that HM Prison Service would do well to have the LBP issued to all new prisoners — in itself, not a bad idea — there is also one obvious problem with LBP and the advice that Frankie offers.

The LBP is a written resource, and this presents challenges for a significant proportion of the prison population whose literacy levels would prevent them from engaging with such a resource. Indeed, 48 per cent of prisoners are at, or below, the level expected of an 11 year old in reading.³⁶ Furthermore, the nature of a prisoner's familiarity with the English language presents further barriers. This does present significant problems for the LBP. Even if the LBP was translated, for example, care would need to be taken with the book's extensive use of metaphors and slang and it could be argued that the removal of such features would

compromise the very authenticity of the book. This again raises the issue of the relevance of such a handbook to a diverse prison population and the generalizability of what Frankie says in the LBP. After all, it could be claimed that the book reflects some of Owens' social and personal characteristics, which might be relevant to those sharing these characteristics, but of limited value to those who do not.

Owens himself acknowledges those differences, while recognising some commonalities with the other inmates:

I moved away from the estate that I grew up in whereas these guys stayed in their environment. I'd kind of moved away from that. So like I say I was a bit like a cuckoo really but ... it was pretty alright I had street smarts as well. So originally you grew up in the estate and you know the way things are and you know how to behave and you know how to be respectful and you kind of you mind your manners.³⁷

Conclusions

This critical analysis has explored a relatively under-researched area, that of the prisoner handbook and was formed around a critical analysis of the LBP. Having duly acknowledged the issue of generalizability it nonetheless seems fair to conclude that the LBP has the potential to better engage with prisoners than those handbooks written by state and third sector organisations. Above all, in documenting a personal journey, it could be argued that prisoners would find this prisoner-authored handbook more convincing and relevant through the empathy that Frankie conveys. Whilst issues around literacy and language do need to be considered and alternative formats explored, it still seems possible to make a strong case for the LBP in its potential to aid adaptation to life in prison.

This is no small matter for, as Souza and Dhimi³⁸ note, adaptation to prison life may contribute towards successful resettlement and have a positive impact not only on prisoners, but for all stakeholders in the criminal justice system.

35. See n.3.

36. Hansard, House of Commons Deb (2007). Col. 548W.

37. See n.3.

38. See n.8.