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Kelly, Michelle, and Claire Westall (eds.) (2021), *Prison Writing and the Literary World: Imprisonment, Institutionalality and Questions of Literary Practice*, Abingdon, Oxon / New York, NY, Routledge. 284 Pages. Hardback. ISBN: 9780367616236. [Paperback 2023]

How does the literary world intersect with the realm of incarceration? What and under which conditions do people write behind bars? What specific challenges do we face when studying texts about prisons or written by people in prison? What impact do these texts have on the perception of incarceration and how do they foster discussions on human rights? Although it does not purport to be universal in scope, *Prison Writing and the Literary World: Imprisonment, Institutionalality and Questions of Literary Practice* seeks to address these inquiries through multiple contributions that reflect on the relationships between writing, prisons, and institutionalality.

Even if prisons constitute a global phenomenon, for Claire Westall, co-editor of this collection with Michelle Kelly, they “are particularly intriguing in this sense because their ‘public’ status, ubiquity and physical enormity sit alongside a common view of them as hidden and sealed spaces beyond the comprehension of those ‘outside’” (1). Despite their strong evidence and public presence, prisons remain beyond the reach of those who have never experienced their effects. Nevertheless, for Westall, prison writing creates a bridge between prisons and the outside world (*ibidem*), contributing to increasing the visibility of these spaces. Although Westall recognizes that prison writing currently “remains a relatively niche area” (3), the book illustrates how this genre presents challenges to literary studies, calling for interdisciplinary methodologies, and prompting debates on literature and human rights.

In the aforementioned introduction, Westall defines “prison writing” as “writing produced by authors with experience of incarceration – largely, but not only, prisoners and former prisoners”, but also as “writing, including fiction from beyond the prison, that seeks to engage the experience of imprisonment directly” (4). Westall explains that by adopting the term “writing” over “literature”, the editors “are taking a step back from the value judgements that determine whether or not particular texts are understood as literary and thereby worthy of attention and analysis” (5-6). Besides “reinforcing the need for legitimation and acceptance within an established (and institutional) understanding of literature” (6), the editors claim that “prison literature” also dilutes the very challenges that these texts actually entail for literary studies. In fact, these challenges are linked

to difficulties and complexities that are intrinsic to the writing process itself. According to Westall, “writing within and about prisons is never easy”, since “[t]here are always psychological, physical and institutional hurdles at work”. Or, as the author also highlights, “[w]riting can be prohibited, require contraband, demand secrecy and present risk” (7).

With very few exceptions, most of the works analysed in this volume contain testimonies about prison life and were written during or after experiences of imprisonment. Throughout the chapters, we understand that the abstract notion of prison assumes various configurations. Analysing examples from various forms of incarceration and from different temporal, linguistic, and geographical contexts, this volume presents various types of authors that were incarcerated: prisoners of war, political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, victims of arbitrary detentions, and so-called “ordinarily criminal[s]” (6). Regardless of the heterogeneity of genres and authors studied in the different chapters, all of them reveal that prison writing is “centrally about violence”, as previously stated by Joan Davies in *Writers in Prison*.

In the first section of this collection, “Problems and Silences”, Sarah Colvin focuses her reflection on prison texts written by criminalised people and highlights that “to be criminalised is among other things to be sent into narrative exile” (31). Colvin associates the cultural negligence suffered by prison writing with the lack of credibility attributed to incarcerated individuals, suggesting that this happens due to their lack of human status. For Colvin, the failure to listen to criminalised voices constitutes a form of silencing the knowledge they possess about the prison experience, preventing them from participating in narratives about the human experience.

In the second section, “PoWs and Purges”, Anne Schawn, in Chapter 2, analyses the newspaper *Stobsiade*, written by prisoners of war during the First World War. Schawn demonstrates how despite censorship and imprisonment, the incarcerated authors “exercised a degree of creative agency, offering a range of identities to describe the men’s lives” (54). In Chapter 3, Howard Caygill analyses the case of Nikolai Bukharin, a victim of the “Purges” of Stalin. Although writing was one of the techniques used in prison to obtain confessions, Caygill shows how Bukharin used writing to “protect his integrity both as a thinker and as a revolutionary” (74).

In the third section, “Prison Spaces and Nation (Re)Making”, the three chapters included suggest that prisons, both in Algeria during the War of Independence and in South Africa during Apartheid, played a key role in the construction of resistance narratives, which underpinned the reconstruction of these nations. Furthermore, Jonny Steinberg, one of the authors featured in this section, argues that the criminal classes “*did* in fact on several occasions during the twentieth century appear on the political stage to play a vital role” (117), suggesting that the history of South Africa is intimately tied to the history of prison gangs.

The fourth section, “Censorship, Advocacy and Text Creation”, encompasses the analysis of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970) (Chapter 7), the

study of the history of the PEN (Chapter 8) and the testimonies of Mohamedou Ould Slahi, a former detainee in Guantánamo Bay, and Larry Siems, his editor (Chapter 9). Overall, this section demonstrates that writing in prison can serve as a guarantee of the survival of stories of incarcerated lives. However, it also emphasizes that prisons, while limiting the exercise of writing in freedom, can shape the prison narratives that reach the outside world. The coercive power of institutional forces can inhibit authors from expressing their genuine thoughts, and the content of texts produced within carceral settings may undergo modifications and deletions due to censorship.

In the fifth section, “From Life to Fiction”, Chapter 10 examines some examples of metafictional narratives in Arabic prison novels to demonstrate how these texts explore “the capacity of language to represent macro- and micro-violences, not just of detention but also of the power and forms of official state narratives, especially as they shape the lives of the detained” (176). Meanwhile, Chapter 11 reflects on the originality of two works authored by Alison Spedding, a British anthropologist, while she was incarcerated in Bolivia. The first is a work of science fiction adopting a utopian and abolitionist perspective, while the second is thought to be, according to Whitfield, “the only ethnography of a prison by a professional anthropologist who entered prison not in order to study it, but entirely against her will” (190).

The sixth section, “Women, Theatre and Clean Break”, introduces the history of Clean Break. This is a feminist and women-only theatre company founded by two women in prison with the intention of bringing to the stage the experiences of women in the prison system. Alongside exposing the injustices that women face in the prison context, this section demonstrates how Clean Break, after four decades since its founding, has produced a distinct repertoire of plays and expanded its scope of action, notably through the development of writing workshops in prisons. In this section, we also gain access to the testimony of Clare Barstow, one of the participants in these workshops, for whom writing was crucial during her period of incarceration: “I would not have survived without a pen and paper as writing became cathartic and healing and really allowed my personal well-being to stay intact” (233).

In the final section of the book, “Literary Workshops”, Claire Westall offers an insightful account of her own experience teaching film and prison writing. Alongside addressing the ethical and pedagogical dilemmas posed by the inclusion of prison writing in her classes, Westall explains the potential of discussing prison texts that are normally excluded from university curricula and absent from literary canons. By doing this, she sheds light on some of her seminal methods and shares with readers some of the interesting reactions of her students.

In summary, this book presents a comprehensive view of the connections between writing, and incarceration. It reminds us that prison writing remains understudied and can constitute a highly compelling field of research, both due to its marginal position within academia and its contemporary relevance. In addition to inviting us to read and

reflect on what lies outside of literary canons, this collection also prompts reflection on the role of the University and its responsibility regarding the world of prisons. Despite being a global phenomenon, prisons remain largely invisible spaces, and prison writing offers us a gateway to this complex universe, granting access to the singular lives that have lived or continue to live behind bars. Therefore, it is fair enough to conclude by quoting an excerpt from the poem that closes this remarkable piece of work. Written by Roger Robinson, the 2019 T.S. Eliot Prize winner, this poem – “Folsom Prison Writing Workshop” – reflects the author’s professional experience within the California prison system.

[...]

Poems can make minds move freely,
books are a portable paradise;
and I’m faced with all my guilty freedom.
In seventy years he won’t be leaving
he’ll never again smell Monsoon rain.
I leave these bolted gates uneasy
and I’m faced with all my guilty freedom.
(256)

NOTA

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