

*Alex Cavendish – Jail Mail*

There's no shortage of prison memoirs these days. It seems that pretty much every literate prisoner is inspired to put pen to paper, whether they be Jeffrey Archer or Denis MacShane. Perhaps the idea of writing a book about your life in the slammer seems like a good way of fighting the deadly boredom of prison, or perhaps it's a means of recording what, in so many ways, can be a surreal experience.

I must admit that having served what is now regarded as a longer sentence (i.e. four years or over) whenever I've been asked to read and review another book about having done time in an English prison, my heart sinks. Too many of these slim reads, often written by ex-cons who have only been in for a few months, are little more than indignant, self-righteous whines about the unfairness of being sent down in the first place. I'm delighted to be able to write that Jonathan Robinson's first book about prison – *IN IT* – doesn't fit the usual stereotype, but then he wasn't a stereotypical con.

Robinson, a former helicopter pilot – who readily admits that he deserved to get a stretch after having pinched £80,000 from his employer following a meltdown in his own personal life – doesn't write from the point of view of a fallen celebrity or politician. However, he does observe much of what went on around him with a blend of astonishment, wry humour and insightful analysis.

Like many prison memoirs, *IN IT* is written in the form of a daily diary, originally penned, as Robinson observes, on HMP paper “invariably two feet or so from a lavatory”. He relates in detail his entire journey into the underworld of our prison system from sentencing – he got 15 months for theft – through a month or so in a Cat-B local (HMP Bedford) to the time he spent at a Cat-D (HMP Hollesley Bay).

This rapid progress to open conditions will be a familiar to pretty much every white collar first-timer in for theft or fraud: a few weeks in a grim Cat-B, followed by a swift transfer for the rest of the custodial part of the sentence. In all, Robinson served four months inside back in 2011.

However, although for most seasoned prisoners this would be seen as little more than the proverbial 'shit and a shave', Robinson's time in jail did provide him an opportunity to get a feeling for some of the day to day pointlessness and insanity of imprisonment, as well as a clear sense of the many wasted opportunities that characterise the way in which our prison system fails to achieve one of its own stated objectives: rehabilitating those committed to its custody.

He writes with wit and humour, although much of his subject matter is pretty grim and unpromising. Like many prisoners who aren't in the grip of dependencies or severe mental illness he manages to see the funny side of some of the absurdities that make up a short custodial sentence.

Robinson also has something of the caricaturist's ability to paint pictures with his words. Many of the characters he meets along the way, whether prisoners or members of staff, are likened to famous people that they resemble in some way or other. Like Marmite, these descriptive methods will either be loved or hated.

Although his darkest fears about going to prison – being raped or murdered – are, as most cons will confirm, very unlikely occurrences our diarist experienced all the usual 'joys' of adjusting to sharing a tiny pad with a difficult pad mate. He also documents the sheer levels of ineptitude, incompetence and laziness he witnessed around him. And that was just among some of the members of staff he encountered along the way.

In common with other articulate cons from similarly well-educated backgrounds, Robinson sought out useful things that he might be able to do to inside in order to make a difference while banged up. He followed a well-trodden path and trained as a Toe by Toe peer literacy mentor although his account of his struggles to find a meaningful job in the education department will be familiar to any prisoner who has ever tried to make a positive contribution during his or her time inside.

Having served nearly a year in an open nick myself at the end of my own stretch, I found Robinson's descriptions of life in a different Cat-D fascinating. If anyone who has no personal experience of an open jail has ever wondered just how these strange institutions differ from prisons within the closed estate, then this is definitely the book to read. In many ways I found his observations much more informative – and entertaining – than I did the third volume of Archer's prison memoirs.

Above all, Robinson's diary entries provide an insight into the mind-numbing monotony of everyday life inside. He offers readers, most of whom will have little or no experience of prison – other than having watched *Porridge* on TV – a guided tour of what is essentially expensive human warehousing on an industrial scale. In fact, the importance of a book like *IN IT* lies in the revelation that little or nothing is actually done inside to help cons change their lives around or to prepare them for release – and this is an issue about which Robinson feels very strongly.

Unlike many white collar ex-prisoners who just want to put the whole sorry saga behind them, he genuinely believes that something needs to be done to make prison work – or at least produce much more positive outcomes, both for inmates and for society as a whole. And he has ideas, which as we all know, can be very dangerous things to have in prison.

Having ruffled a few feathers with his first book, Robinson has since followed it up with a sequel – *ON IT* – in which he focuses on the failure of politicians, bureaucrats and those running our prisons to address the central question of why prison often fails to work. Some of his ideas may be controversial, but he's obviously not a man to give up easily.

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