

BOOK REVIEWS

Hell Is a Very Small Place
by Sarah Shourd, James Ridgeway
and Jean Casella (eds.)
New York: The New Press (2016), 242pp.
Reviewed by Lucas Ridgeway

Hell Is a Very Small Place examines how the practice of solitary confinement in American prisons is tantamount to torture. This form of isolation is known predominantly as administrative and disciplinary segregation in Canada. Inside, 25 authors provide a range of firsthand accounts that vary between the penal system, the medical establishment, the educational body, and the social justice community. The three editors who have assembled these interpretations have managed to create a collective work that far surpasses any initial expectations the reader may have when choosing to delve into a book of this genre. This is a credit to the authentic nature of their personal experiences, professional integrity and academic investigations. Indeed, this collection constructs a bridge spanning a wide spectrum of truth that weds dominant ideologies with a diversity of voices by establishing agency for informed citizenship.

Each writer has a genuine stake in exposing the everyday struggles of those locked inside a cage. Fittingly, in between the professional and academic discourses we find a bevy of prisoner testimonies, manifestos, and pro-social accounts related to this type of imprisonment. Most selections are reprints from blogs, journals, essays and excerpts from published books such as *Writing My Wrongs* by Shaka Senghor. Senghor is a convicted killer who went from incarceration in a maximum-security prison to being a Director's Fellow with the @MIT Media Lab. Another testimony of note is that of William Blake, who has served over 27 continuous years in "the hole" after he shot a court officer to death during a botched escape attempt. He reminds the reader that prisoners are still human and that we are all relational beings. His story examines how solitary confinement is actually a form of social death due to the mental anguish the isolated mind must endure without any contact to the outside world. The balance of content is integrated in a manner that provides each outlook a potential say in the reformation of both the criminal justice system and correctional services.

Many authors are literally writing out of the darkness of their tiny cells and have suffered further consequences for articulating their thoughts. In

some circumstances, punitive measures were levied upon the authors for making their contributions public. Editor Sarah Shourd, who wrote the foreword, certainly believes that this type of mistreatment should serve as a call to action to introduce new social justice paradigms such as autonomous restorative justice. Autonomous restorative justice is an approach whereby all parties with a stake in a particular offence come together to resolve collectively how to deal with the aftermath of the offense and its implications for the future. In terms of the use of solitary confinement, Shourd's research demonstrates that the USA is the number one perpetrator of this form of human rights abuse. She reports on some of the most crucial violations and their after-effects at a time when Canada has finally tabled and passed legislation, Bill C-83, with the stated aim of eliminating the use of segregation.

Sarah Shourd's personal experience is also shared in this book. Born in Los Angeles, Sarah worked in education in Damascus, Syria with a passion for teaching Iraqi refugees English. On 31 July 2009, Shourd and two male friends were hiking in Iraqi Kurdistan and, in accidentally crossing into the border of Iran, were taken into custody by Iranian border guards. All three were charged with illegal entry and espionage. The latter charge may carry a death sentence in Iran. Iranian officials placed her in solitary confinement and held her incommunicado without any phone privileges for 6 months. Her mother eventually got a visa to visit her 3 months later. During her 14 months of lockdown, Shourd suffered mental health deterioration and was denied treatment for serious health problems.

The Sultan of Oman ultimately stepped in with nearly half a million dollars US bail to secure her release on "humanitarian grounds", although her poor health prevented her from returning for trial. Despite her challenges, Sarah became a journalist, activist and writer who elected to arm herself with the sword of the truth. After writing her memoir, *A Sliver of Light*, she committed herself to studying the consequences of forced segregation worldwide, which ultimately gestated into this book. Her research reveals the ugly realities, the aftermaths, and the repercussions of this stagnant US policy. Her findings evoke extreme images of prisoners eating their own feces or successful attempts at self-castration and suicide.

The general argument offered in *Hell Is a Very Small Place* stipulates that with the power to scrutinize comes the corresponding obligation

to respond and that that response must be a social interaction, which promotes equanimity as opposed to social inequality. The declarations contained therein frequently expose hierarchical power structures within the current system of governance that formulates normative behaviour. In the introduction, co-editors James Ridgeway (no relation) and Jean Casella coin the term ‘A Sentence within a Sentence’ and argue that even within a purely punitive model of incarceration, people are supposed to be sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment. Accordingly, if you want to give those with less power equal respect, you need to listen to them and make sure that your views about them are not false. Hence, a desire to seek and know the truth is the guarantee of equal respect for those who value liberty in a free and just society.

Until such virtues are adopted, the truth contained within these pages can act as a leveller between those with less power and those with more power. This manuscript is distinctive in its field because of its broad scope of perspectives. Receiving this knowledge serves as a reminder that if power takes precedence over truth by defining the ideologies we hold in common as a society, then we are no longer living in a liberal democracy. When the government is allowed to shape and define reality through the arbitrary application of justice, socially fabricated boundaries are simplified into intangible mnemonic devices, as the prisoner is left to rot in their cell.

Hell Is a Very Small Place is suitable for anyone interested in criminal justice reform or restorative justice practices. From journalists held in captivity, to psychiatric treatises, to experts in the arena of solitary confinement, to prisoners’ testimonies, it explores America’s morbid fascination with a scheme that thrives on Nietzsche’s oxymoronic political paradigm, which states that, “It is impossible to get wholesale agreement on the truth”. For that reason, the interminable use of solitary confinement in American prisons continues to torture convicts within this paradoxical correctional construct while the ruling party of the day is content to lie in hemostasis. Hopefully community dialogues, such as those sparked by this book, will follow and impact change.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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