

***Prison Voices***  
**edited by Lee Weinstein and Richard Jaccoma**  
**Kingston: John Howard Society of Canada /**  
**Black Point (NS): Fernwood Publishing (2007), 176 pp.**  
*Reviewed by Patrick Derby*

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Developed as a means of encouraging literacy within as well as outside prison walls, *Prison Voices* highlights the creative writings of 12 Canadian prisoners. While prison writing is the grounding force of this volume, the authors' lives are also portrayed through photographic portraits, biographies and short interviews. This collection includes various forms of expression, from poetry to short stories and fables. Some of the pieces for this compilation were written in moments of pained self-reflection, dedicated to loved ones, or meant to provide long distance parental guidance to young children.

Of noteworthy quality are the writings of Jon Brown and Mike Oulton. Members of a writing workshop at Matsqui Institution (Abbotsford, British Columbia), Brown and Oulton have shared short vivid works portraying their prison experiences. In his piece "Ten hours in the Valley", Brown writes of his experience being transferred from a provincial detention centre to a federal penitentiary, while in "Five bucks'll getcha burned", Oulton describes an act of violence which he witnessed at an American prison. Each of these pieces provides a glimpse of the inhumanity that is suffered in prison, at the hands of both correctional staff and other prisoners.

Not only does this collection of prisoner authors represent a cross-section of Canada's federal prison population (in terms of age, race, gender, offence, and geography), but their writings also address a cross-section of issues and debates within criminology and penology. The primary theme which weaves its way through this volume is that of *pain*. In most cases the contributors describe a pained childhood, and/or experience while living within society, and such pain continues - in some cases worsens - inside prisons. Certainly this book addresses the traditional discussions of the pains of imprisonment, which tend to focus on the prisoner's experiences of the deprivation of liberty, autonomy and security. However, the material moves beyond these themes, opening the door for the reader to consider the pains of imprisonment as experienced by the family and loved ones of prisoners.

*Prison Voices* goes into the "black box" that is the prison and does something that many critical academic criminologists are struggling to

accomplish. That is, it presents critical criminological discourse (in this case specifically on the topic of imprisonment) in a manner that is accessible and appealing to a diverse public. Lay persons and academics alike will find the volume educational and engaging. While members of an increasingly conservative public may not empathize with the many pains experienced by the so-called “criminal other”, as is illustrated by the not uncommon refrain “you do the crime, you do the time”, they may accept that imprisonment has the capacity to destroy families - the so-called cornerstone of conservative values.

This volume is designed in such a way that it can be read cover-to-cover in one sitting, or it can be read in snippets. Be warned, however, that once you begin reading you will find it nearly impossible to stop. *Prison Voices* has the power to challenge readers’ assumptions about the alleged benefits of incarceration and their perceptions of prisoners. One cannot read this collection without acknowledging that the contributors are more than “inmates” or “offenders”. They are mothers, fathers, children, grandchildren, brothers and sisters. Above all, they are fellow human beings with voices that need to be heard.

#### ABOUT THE REVIEWER

**Patrick Derby** is a PhD. Student at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. His current research interests include the sociology of criminological knowledge, as well as the political economy of surveillance and social control. His MA thesis is entitled, *Interrogating the ‘selective gaze’ of Canadian CCTV operators: Perspectives from behind the camera’s lens.*