

Invisible Prisons:
Jack Whalen's Tireless Fight for Justice
by Lisa Moore and Jack Whalen (2024)
Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 277 pp.
Reviewed by Lucas Ridgeway

When Brittany Whalen attended the Bath Institution Book Clubs for Inmates (BCFI) special event on 27 September 2024, she remarked to me, “my Dad’s greatest escape was to be able to have the law changed”. Over a lifetime, her dad, Jack Whalen, has managed to break out of his psychological strongbox by putting one foot in front of the other and choosing to move away from the horror of his youth in a positive direction with courageous perseverance. Unlike our recent author visits from seasoned writers’ such as Heather O’Neill and Lawrence Hill, Jack Whalen is the novice co-author of *Invisible Prisons* alongside decorated Canadian author, Lisa Moore. When I asked about the title of their non-fiction debut, Jack shared, “even though I am outta’ there now, I go back to it every time I go to bed. So, for me it’s still an invisible prison”.

I was not *even* sure if Jack Whalen would be able to attend our BCFI meeting that Friday and I did not know what to expect until I was right there shaking hands with the skeleton of a man ravaged with cancer. With a light and gentle touch, that measure of Jack’s reality settled in on me at once. Then he graciously brought both of our brightened eyes towards his vibrant daughter, Brittany. Her juxtaposition of youthful intelligence overlaid upon his lifetime of hard-fought experience, provided a vivid contrast that was impossible to ignore. Jack had not been inside a federal penitentiary since he was eighteen and he looked visibly uncomfortable sitting at a makeshift dais in front of forty prisoners and staff, with an audience that included both the Warden and Deputy Warden. Despite all his challenges, he engaged the whole group in an authentic and genuine manner that projected the blunt honesty of someone who never spoke too loosely or verbosely.

If I had to pick just one of the childhood horrors that Jack Whalen was forced to endure, it would be the account of his coat of rats. There was a gigantic swath of rats, which lived just off the Newfoundland coastline of St. John’s in a sunken ship with a gaping hole in the side of its corroded shell, who were forced to flee during high tide. Late one evening when Jack was on the run from the police and their search dogs, he had to hide underneath a wharf near the downed vessel. He had already traversed over 60 kilometres on foot, without shoes, and needed to outwait the dogs. From

experience, he knew his wait would be lengthy and somehow, probably out of exhaustion, he temporarily fell asleep. As the tide rose to meet him, so did the tide of escaping rats. He was soon startled awake after he began to feel hundreds of tiny feet, tails, and snouts all over his torso. He could not reveal himself to the search team hovering above as the rats continued to crawl over every part of his semi-submerged body. Armed solely with the knowledge that if he moved, he would be discovered, he stayed silently immobile as the coat of rats squatted and squirmed all over his teenage figure (Moore & Whalen, 2024). This firsthand description of a horror, so specific, would have remained practically unimaginable to most readers, unless told to us by the survivor himself.

Lisa Moore is the bestselling author of several novels that have become finalists for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, CBC Canada Reads, the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, the Scotiabank Giller Prize, and the Man Booker Prize. Jack Whalen is a son, brother, husband, and father whose story of seeking vindication for those who endured solitary confinement as children is told therein. Jack came from a family of seven brothers and sisters who were raised by a widow, whose husband died in a car accident when Jack was three years old. In 1973, when Jack was thirteen, he was sent to the Whitbourne Training School for Boys outside of St. John's. Over the next four years and 24 escape attempts, he spent the majority of his time there in solitary confinement, once for four months straight.

Although neither Lisa nor Jack had ever written a work of non-fiction before, they agreed to talk about childhood trauma from Jack's point of view. *Invisible Prisons* is written to cover the entire scope of the horrors endured by Jack through examining the implications of a stolen childhood that can inexorably stain adulthood, along with both its personal and global repercussions. A few years ago, Jack constructed a replica of the barren cell in which he was only allowed a pair of pajamas, socks, and an overnight mattress. This life-sized facsimile fits into the back of his flatbed truck and he has driven this contraption from Newfoundland to Ontario to bring awareness to his legal battle to amend the statute of limitations against child abuse in the Newfoundland Superior Court.

In the midst of-writing the 277 pages of *Invisible Prisons*, Jack was diagnosed with an aggressive form of bone marrow cancer and another rare associated disease named amyloidosis that has produced a stiff plaque around multiple internal organs, including Jack's heart. The rush was on to give the

public an opportunity to be able to examine the assembled evidence, which explores his tireless fight for justice. His story was so powerful that when Jack first told it to his then 16-year-old daughter Brittany, she immediately declared that she would become a lawyer to fight for her father and others who suffered similar abuse in Newfoundland as children. She did, in fact, become a lawyer, against all odds, and fought alongside her father until 28 May 2024 when the House of Assembly in St. John's voted in their favour to allow them to seek civil damages against the government.

1. Lisa Moore wrote a full-page opinion article in the Saturday, September 23, 2024, edition of the *Globe & Mail* where she elucidated the salient points from the legal battle. Brittany Whalen and Lynn Moore fought to change the statute of limitations on physical child abuse and for financial compensation in court for the physical and psychological torture Jack had endured under the care of the Newfoundland government.
2. This would allow victims to sue the government for compensation at any time, instead of the allotted years imposed by the limitations, usually two years after the age of maturity.
3. In the end, Jack and his family, and others who were advocating for the same change, succeeded in getting the *Limitations Act* amended. The entire House of Assembly applauded Jack's efforts.

Over the years, multiple lawyers including Lisa Moore's sister and Jack Whalen's daughter fought through the horror and subsequent redemption that arose from the legal battle pro bono. Brittany believes that oversight and accountability has been improved due to the mandatory reporting now being enforced in these institutions. During their BCFI visit, Brittany also helped us out immensely when it came time to clarify the legal ramifications of Jack's victory in the recent Newfoundland House of Assembly vote. Jack had watched the proceedings from a hospital bed while undergoing chemotherapy, but noted to us that he had indeed been uncharacteristically unrestrained, as a spectator, during the actual debates prior to the ruling. Everybody laughed.

Surprisingly, the true storytelling style found in this book has a grounded and blunt personality reminiscent of gathering around the woodstove in the kitchen to discuss the neighbourhood news during a family dinner. A fitting

throwback and tribute to Jack's mom, Alice, who, as a single mom raised an enormous family while collecting welfare. Both authors are born and bred in Newfoundland, and richly amplify this saga by lending the distinctive cultural undertones and dialect from down home. The light storytelling style thus allows us to wade through a very heavy subject matter with relative ease and without being able to ignore the horror of that which Jack has borne. Moore ultimately asks the reader, "what kind of cognitive dissonance or willful blindness was employed, not just by a few, but by a whole society?" (Moore & Whalen, 2024). Lisa expounded on her storytelling methodology in her *Globe & Mail* opinion piece:

I believe stories are always a conversation, and the act of telling a story is an important act of democracy, of reinventing the world as we go along. We can imagine a scene in fine detail: the way shadows fall and deepen as night approaches when a child is on the run in the forest, heading east, heading home; how a guard removes an expensive watch by putting a finger under the expandable strap to make sure the watch isn't damaged before he beats a child with his fists; the hot breath of a police dog on an child's cheek as he lays still on the ground. The accuracy in describing how these things felt as they unfolded is just as important as the brute facts. And I believe that when readers imagine these things, we are also training our imaginations to conjure justice (Moore, 2024).

During the BCFI occasion to meet with Jack, I asked him if he felt his vindication was complete. He replied, "yes, I do. Justice was served for me in the end. Even if I could change it, I don't think I would because it has made me the person I am today. I can sleep better now" (Ridgeway, 2025). Another Bath Book Club for Inmates special event participant commented, "Although my time with Jack Whalen was but a brief glimpse; as he reached over the table to shake my hand, I remember these three very important words that he has left with me during our visit, 'It gets better'" (Murray, 2024).

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