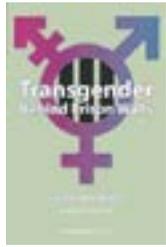


Book Review



Transgender Behind Prison Walls

by Sarah Jane Baker / Review by Clare Barstow

ISBN-13: 978-1909976450 / Publisher: Waterside Press / Price £13.99

This book, which gives vital information about everything you need to know regarding the Prison Service regime for transgender prisoners, is a must read for everyone involved in the Criminal Justice System. Sarah Jane Baker has used her experience of being a transgender lifer who has served over 25 years in 30 male prisons to give a true insight into what the prison system provides to cater for transgender needs, as well as areas where it falls short in providing an adequate service.

The foreword is by Pam Stockwell, who first visited Alan Baker as a prison visitor before he transitioned into Sarah. Despite her initial shock, she has continued to support Sarah throughout her journey and gives an objective view of how others can be affected by those who choose to take the difficult decision to transition.

Sarah writes about her difficult experiences in various establishments where the bullying, violence and lack of staff sympathy was incredibly hard to take when she first decided to choose to be identified as a woman. Whilst things have improved slowly since the Gender Recognition Act of 2004, the Equality Act in 2010 and various Prison Service Instructions regarding guidelines on the treatment of trans-

gender prisoners, there is still a long way to go, as the recent suicide of two prisoners demonstrates.

Sarah encapsulates the whole journey a transgender must face from first coming into reception through to cell allocation, work, clothes, make-up, wigs and other necessary items and special provision. I was truly moved by the heartfelt stories of other men and women who had struggled with being recognized in their chosen genders by staff and prisoners. The bad media coverage has also made it hard for some to decide to come out as transgender, particularly if they are high profile.

This book is a mine of information and gives important details of who needs to be informed when a prisoner decides to transition. Having had a number of transgender friends in the prison system, I understand totally how difficult it has been for them and the battles they have faced. The 2016 Prison Service Instruction on the care and management of transgender offenders has gone some way towards improving the situation but there are still areas that need to be improved. The legislation is also gone through with a fine-tooth-comb to ensure that anyone can understand how it is relevant to the topic and what changes have occurred recent-

ly to update new guidelines.

Sarah also gives useful details on where to receive medical treatment and about practitioners who are experts on gender dysphoria in the National Health Service. Useful magazines and books are also mentioned. I was very impressed with the amount of research carried out in writing the book, which is written in a clear and concise style, concentrating mainly on the necessary facts. There are areas where the emotions come through when she talks about her personal experiences but this balances well with the information to give a true guide for transgender prisoners or indeed anyone who works with or has friends or relatives who are transitioning.

I am really pleased that I had the opportunity to read this book and am left with a much greater understanding of the problems faced, as the author has taken the time to explain everything in a thoughtful and considerate manner. She has definitely taken us on a journey and I hope that everyone will get the opportunity to read this as it will open up your mind to things you might not have thought about and give you a much greater understanding of how the prison system deals with one area of diversity that has been neglected for far too long.



Reading Group Round-up

Promoting reading and reading groups in prisons

The report this month comes from Bullingdon, where the group discussed Neverhome, Laird Hunt's novel about a cross-dressing soldier in the American Civil War.

"I was strong and he was not so it was me went to war to defend the Republic. I stepped across the border out of Indiana into Ohio. Twenty dollars, two salt-pork sandwiches, and I took jerky, biscuits, six old apples, fresh underthings and a blanket too. There was a conflagration to come; I wanted to lend it my spark.

Meet Gallant Ash: hero, folk legend and master of war. Ash is a leader of men and a brutal and fearless soldier. Will look you dead in the eye and kill for no reason. But Ash has a secret. Gallant Ash is a woman. This is her story..."

The group was on fine form, full of energy and enthusiasm, and we had a great discussion. A couple of the men had found it tough going and a bit hard to connect with. But more had been gripped by both the story and the voice of the narrator. One member declared: 'I was hooked from that opening sentence' and he went on to quote it from memory: "I was strong and he was not, so it was me went to war". Another added, 'I loved that fierce independent girl, she was like Mattie Ross in True Grit' (a book we had read in the group many months before). 'I felt swept up in her life and I loved the language like when she writes "I miss you fierce"'. Other comparisons were to Cold Mountain (another reading group book from a long way back) and the film Slow West.

There was lots of discussion of Constance and Bartholomew and their reversed roles. We debated at length why we all admired her strength and courage but were less comfortable with Bartholomew's 'feminine' sensitivity.

For one member the 'lynchpin' of the book was the meeting between Constance and the slave woman who had also gone to fight in disguise. 'It's a moment of sharing their experience as women when they talk about their children, but it's also a reminder of what a white person can't imagine about a black slave's life. It's all in that phrase "Tell you what"'.

The crux came when someone reminded us that Constance turns out to be an unreliable narrator and then challenged us: 'Does that change the way we think about her?' Some of us admitted that we hadn't really taken it on board but for Paul it was a shocking discovery and forced him to go back and re-think her: 'And that was hard because the childish part of me wanted her to be heroic in an easy way so I could have a feel-good ending. This was much tougher'.

The letters in the novel tied in with a poem we read at the end of the session. This led us to

letters in prison and the pleasure for some in writing and reading them. 'I never really wrote letters til I was inside and I like the way writing them makes you think about the other person and what you really want to say. Very different from texts and Twitter'. Another man talked about how the handwriting in a letter seems to create a physical connection and that sometimes the way the writing moves can let you trace the feelings behind it.

It was a great meeting and I think we all left on a high. Many thanks to Penguin Random House for generously donating copies of the book.

Letter

*Here is a letter
come across the ocean
over the back of a world
curved like a whale.
I unwrap it, like tissue,
and sentences spill out,
as though the seal on a jar has broken,
coils of cornflower blue
on paper thin as shell.*

*I saw a sailor's valentine once
in a museum in Nantucket Sound,
a mosaic of broken scallop
glued in a compass rose.
'Writ from the heart' it said.
Words come best like that:
in ink or blood,
when the source is from a major vein.*

*I read, and understand this much:
if ink sees off time and miles, then so must love.*

Hugh McMillan (b. 1955)

The Bullingdon group is supported by Prison Reading Groups (PRG). If your prison doesn't already have a reading group, encourage your librarian to have a look at our website www.prison-reading-groups.org.uk. PRG is part of Give a Book www.giveabook.org.uk

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