



Rough Books

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Toby Forward on Fiction with Young Offenders.

I'd never heard of **Flowers in the Attic** until Martin told me about it. It's the story of a woman who keeps her four children locked up in the attic and pretends to the world that they just aren't there.

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By Toby Forward.

Martin told me to read it. I'm trying; I haven't got round to it yet, but I will. I will, not just because I want to do what Martin told me to and because I promised him I would, but because Martin is himself one of the flowers in our attic, and by us I mean all of us, everyone who feels safer because there are people in prison.

Martin is one of the young men I met and talked with about books behind the thick Victorian walls of Her Majesty's Young Offenders Institution, Aylesbury. It's a maximum security prison for people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two. The security has to be good because the crimes were often violent and the sentences are often long. When a young man of eighteen finds himself behind the walls with no limit on his sentence, no release date, detained at Her Majesty's Pleasure, then it's a fair bet that he'll try to escape if there's any chance. In fact, one of the men I spoke with talked about his own attempt which failed and placed him in category 'E', E for escaper. It was all a bit of a joke to the others, and he made light of it himself. We were talking about sentencing policy and justice. 'You do your offence and you serve your time,' he said. 'I'm not complaining. It's right.' The others fell about, some with laughter, others with indignation. 'You tried to escape,' they said. 'What you talking about? Course I did. Course I tried to escape. Who wouldn't?' Who indeed? I tried to smooth things over by pointing out that he lost his remission by trying to escape: he had played by the rules and lost. 'No,' he corrected me. 'No remission for what I done.' It was then that I realised he was there for the duration, no release date. I didn't know before because that was one of the first rules I learned years ago when I first went into a prison. Never ask what someone's in for. It's bad manners. If they want you to know, they'll tell you when they're ready.

But in a way, they're all category 'E'; there has to be some sort of escape, an escape into a world made available through books. While we talked I grew more and more aware of the need they had for books and the benefits they got from them that I never could. This doesn't mean that the books they read are what we would classify as 'escapist', but that their cells are so small and walls so thick that they can only be penetrated by the imagination. The books don't need to take the prisoners away from the reality of life but to let them enter into a richer and wider life than prison offers, and that's an escape.

When you sit on your bed, under the giant poster of the Porsche, what do you read, where do you disappear to? And when you look around at the glossy pictures of impossible women, pouting at you and posturing for you and provoking you, except that it's not for you, not you at all, where do you escape to?

One thing that interested me was that they did not escape into fantasy. Only the week before I had been in a sixth form,

asking them the same questions about what sort of books they read. There was a wide spread, but quite a lot of the books were fantasy of the Sci-fi, dungeons and dragons type. In Aylesbury they didn't go in for that at all.

I'll use different names for the people because they have already been too generous in giving me their time, and inviting me into their cells to take photographs.

Is it any surprise that Martin wanted to recommend **Flowers in the Attic**? Martin is 'lifted off, so he knows what it's like to be locked away. He reads voraciously, recommending **A Song in the Morning** by Gerald Seymour, a book about South Africa; and **Wild Justice** by Wilbur Smith, an intelligent, well-researched thriller; and **A Sense of Freedom**, Jimmy Boyle's autobiography telling of his time as a prisoner in Barlinnie.

There was no stopping Martin once you asked him what books he liked. Charles Kray, **Me and My Brothers**, and the autobiography of someone whose name was difficult to remember but came out as something like Joseph Bonanno, **A Man of Honour** - he was a Mafia boss. Okay, so there's something holding these books together for Martin, a common theme of violence and crime and punishment. But there's more to it than that, more than just a young man looking for support from others who have made it good after being in prison, people who have done something 'on the out'. Martin is a reader, a natural reader who, like most of us, starts by reading things that relate to his experience and then gets led on to other things through the simple love of books. And his reading is helping him to interpret his present experience. I hope the prison library has got a copy of **Crime and Punishment** because that ought to be next on his list.

Heads were nodding as Martin called out the names of the books. Some of these were old favourites of the group, especially the Jimmy Boyle and Charles Kray books. 'Yeah,' agreed Earl, 'that's a rough book.' 'A rough book? It's no good?' I asked. Collapse of researcher. Learn the language first. A rough book is a stupendously good book. Like what else? Well, Earl suggested, like **To Kill a Mockingbird** by Harper Lee. 'Now that IS a rough book,' he assured me. I was only too happy to agree. I had met fourth and fifth form kids, doing the book for exams, who were bored to death by it. But Earl, strong and black and in prison, knows what is going on in it, knows far better than I do. And he went on to tell me about two books by Mildred D. Taylor, **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry** and **Let the Circle be Unbroken**, books about the period after the American Civil War. Also **Gone With the Wind** books, but written from the black point of view.

Bennie wanted me to read **Cathedral** by Jack Higgins. Martin came back (again! - he always had another book to suggest) with **Roots** by Alex Hailey. These were all getting the nods of approval. I had time to admire their English teacher who was sitting in on this group, They were not ashamed, as lots of their friends on the out might be, to share their enthusiasms with me, although I was a stranger to them. More important, perhaps, they were not ashamed to share their enthusiasms with each other. I saw more love of books that morning, shared love, than I have often seen in A-level English groups or even amongst undergraduates reading for English degrees. It was a tribute to them and to the Governor and the Education Department.

In the end I came away with mixed feelings of respect and regret. Here was a group of young men who had committed crimes that made it safer for the rest of us if they were not free. But I was perplexed, am perplexed. Is there something in these young men that is bad and brutal and that means that we must lock them up? Or are they victims of a brutalising background who would be perfectly safe if only they could be helped? Certainly the regime at Aylesbury does everything it can to help them, and yet 60 to 65% of them re-offend within two years of being released. The average sentence is seven years, the minimum is three years, and fifty of them are in for life. Now, I want fewer people in prison. I want prisons to be more open, more relaxed places. And yet, and yet, these are brutal crimes and they frighten me.

When the prison was built in 1847, the men were marched up under guard from the old gaol house in the town. The need was so great to prove that justice was for ever, they even dug up the corpses from the old gaol house grounds and re-buried them in the new. That was a time when punishment was more public than it is today. Crowds of up to five thousand used to collect outside to watch the public hangings at Aylesbury. The men were hanged right on top of the great gates, a superb act of theatre. In fact, it was not liberal sentiment that brought public executions to an end in

England, it was public order. There was such enthusiasm for the events that crowds were uncontrollable; they were the football rioters of their day. It's all much more secret today. But the punishment goes on, and young men in Aylesbury and young men and women in prisons all over the country turn to their books to escape from the hard reality of imprisonment. I don't know what image to use, what to borrow from their list of books: these people are the flowers in our attic, they are the mockingbird that sings unheard, they are the thunder that rolls in silence, they are the pilgrims seeking their cathedral, in e.e. cummings' terms. Locked behind those huge gates, they are the cathedral itself.

Toby Forward retired recently from being a parish priest in Brighton to become a full-time writer. His latest novel, **Neverland**, was published in November 1989 by Simon & Schuster (0 671 65330 X, £8.95). Half of his royalties will be donated to Great Ormond Street Hospital.

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