

Prison(er) Auto/biography, ‘True Crime’, and Teaching, Learning, and Research in Criminology

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Abstract

The main aim of this essay is to explore prisoner life writing within the specific, richly and multiply dependent context of teaching and learning undergraduate criminology at an English university, from the authorial viewpoint of a teacher and her students as budding criminologists and co-authors. This article seeks to redress a continuing resistance to life history approaches in criminology, despite the discipline being formally devoted to the understanding of the meaning and experience of imprisonment in all its forms and consequences. What follows is a reflection on what students had to say on the fascinating subject of prisoner auto/biography and its place in popular and expert discourses on crime, criminality, and punishment, contextualised within the academic discipline of criminology.

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Imprisonment has emerged as a crucial theme in contemporary globalised society, whether considered in its practical manifestations as a punitive system for locking up increasing numbers of people, as a potent metaphor for what is widely regarded as the carceral society, or as a noumenal trope for exploring philosophical, political, moral, and/or cultural possibilities of freedom, creativity, self-expression, and transformation through the notion of confinement.¹ Across these diverse, shifting, and interweaving narrative constellations – and more – there is a vast and growing corpus of research literatures on imprisonment and (life) writing and their implications for individuals and societies from a range of historical, philosophical, sociological, cultural, legal-judicial, and/or other perspectives. A comprehensive review of the literature on prisoner life writing, an important subgenre in its own right, is realistically beyond the scope of this essay. It is important to recognise that even this (sub)genre cannot be extracted and construed in isolation from these other literatures and perspectives without some distortion; as Anita Wilson observes, the relationships between prisoners (and also the panoply of others who inhabit prisons) and literacy/ies is ‘multiple and context dependent’.² The main aim of this essay is to explore prisoner life writing within the specific, richly and multiply dependent context of teaching and learning undergraduate criminology at an English university, from the authorial viewpoint of a teacher and her students as budding criminologists and co-authors [hereafter referred to as ‘student collective’]. This intervention seeks to redress a continuing resistance to life history approaches in the teaching of criminology, although the discipline is formally devoted to the understanding of the meaning and experience of imprisonment in all its forms and consequences.³

What follows is a truncated narrative of what students had to say on the fascinating subjects of prisoner auto/biography and its place in popular and expert discourses of crime, criminality, and punishment. My experience of re-reading and reconstructing a unified analysis from the writings of students has been an eye-opening one for me as a lecturer and researcher, exposing a richer, more multidimensional, and ‘high definition’ perspective on student understandings of crime, punishment, deviance, victimisation, and more, in stark contrast to the myopic individualistic viewpoint necessarily adopted for the process of marking essays and exams. Until I started to read the essays together as a whole, I was unaware that students had collectively raised such a diversity of issues and with such nuanced perception and understanding, based on two sessions in the course devoted to prisoner life writing: one on biography; the other on autobiography. To be as authentic as possible to the dataset of student writing, the excerpts cited are anonymised and appear here as they did in the original essays, without corrections.⁴ Taken together, these student writings on prisoners and expert writings on crime and punishment are a testament to their intelligence and invention. In many ways they represent a challenge to the extant academic culture and pedagogical/ research praxes of

criminology that typically ignore prisoner life writings and also disregard students' prior or 'ordinary' knowledge of punishment and modes of learning in the digital information age as untrustworthy, trashy, worthless – at best too unruly or naive, distorted, or undisciplined to take seriously, at worst a contaminant and 'dumbing down' influence on the discipline. In this respect, their engagement with prisoner life writing gives enticing glimpses into possible futures of criminology as an academic discipline and its positioning in expert, policy, and popular understandings of crime.

This article begins with a more general discussion of the status of prison auto/biography in the discipline of criminology and popular culture, before proceeding to address some of the related issues from the student perspective, including comparisons between prisoner life writing (sometimes as a subgenre of true crime, sometimes as a genre in its own right) and criminological writing; theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical issues on prisoner life writing; and criminology. The essay concludes with reflections on the disciplinary challenges posed to criminology by prisoner auto/biography, and vice versa, based on the student point of view.

Background and Context

The current attitude to prisoner-led discourses such as prisoner auto/ biography is illustrated by what Shadd Maruna and Matt Matravers recently identified as the need to 'revive' within criminology scholarly interest in what was, prior to the positivist turn, a key text in the criminological canon of the Chicago School, Clifford Shaw's *The Jack Roller*.⁵ Generally speaking, what exists in terms of subsequent scholarly analysis of prisoner life writing within the social sciences and associated interdisciplinary research has tended to concentrate predominantly on the therapeutic, educational, training, and/or policy ('what works') dimensions of the narratives of personal change and reformation contained in them.⁶ While there are a number of seminal and widely cited examples of qualitative research based on the life stories of former or serving prisoners, researching, teaching, and learning about prisons from the point of view of those who live, love, and work (and sometimes die) there, relies overwhelmingly on researcher-mediated method(ologie)s, most prominently participant and oral/life histories interviewing, and/or ethnographic observation.⁷ While some researchers declare that they 'unashamedly' embrace such researcher-led methodological approaches to conducting research on or using prisoner life writing, others are less sanguine about the dominance of such methodologies within criminological research on prison(er)s.⁸ Steve Morgan, one of the early promoters of prisoner life writing in the discipline of criminology, was from the outset critical of the epistemological 'hierarchy of credibility' underpinning the ordering of such texts by criminologists who

position themselves as gatekeepers or *amanuenses* between prisoners and published auto/biographical research.⁹ Since Morgan's original critique, the complexities of gatekeeping, access, and representation have been exacerbated by major ethical and methodological issues arising within penological research, not least the over-researching or exploitation of prisoners as a captive sample group; this has been further complicated by the persistence of fundamentally unresolved questions posed by criminological researchers, and indeed prisoners, like 'whose side are we [criminologists] on?'.¹⁰ As researcher access to prison(er)s becomes more restricted from a bureaucratic perspective and the willingness of prisoners to participate in academic research increasingly depleted, a need for other methodologies capturing the prison(er) viewpoint from a less mediated and policed perspective that acknowledges the agency, legitimacy, and ambiguities/faults/ fissures/contradictions of prisoners in their own words arises.¹¹ There are now examples of research being conducted, particularly in the burgeoning fields of cultural and existentialist criminology, which more enthusiastically and directly engage with prisoner life writings in all their messiness, indiscipline, and complexities.¹² But even so, the incorporation of auto/biographical methodologies that highlight the socially and culturally constructed nature of the 'life', in addition to imprisonment, and their attendant normative narratives as represented in auto/biography is not yet as developed or embraced as it has been in and by other social science disciplines.

Beyond the purviews of academic research, the analysis of life writing by prisoners and/or practitioners (e.g. prison officers, prison clergy, lawyers) features little if at all in the criminology undergraduate curriculum. Such life stories are, from what Morgan describes as the 'commonsense ... public orthodox' perspective, often understood as a way of pursuing an alternative and self-interested agenda (such as seeking parole) by misrepresenting the self by accident or design, in order to deflect responsibility for individual moral agency, or simply to manipulate the 'facts' in a way that is elementally and sometimes even shamelessly untrue.¹³ What such a view of prisoner life writing fails to acknowledge is that *all* auto/biography is inherently susceptible to such partiality, distortion, and self-interest.¹⁴ What is more, when it comes to the auto/biographical project, the 'power of writing' can be multivocal, shifting, complex, contradictory, and ambiguous in its representations and implications for anyone who adopts the auto/ biographical 'I'.¹⁵ While such contentious and even vexatious aspects of auto/biography have been actively if not enthusiastically embraced in the post-War period by disciplines such as 'area' studies (e.g. gender studies, 'race' and ethnicity studies, American studies, slavery studies, film, media, and cultural studies, and so forth), this trend has not been as observable in criminology. In his commentary on this state of affairs in criminology, Morgan cites criminologists such as Garland, Burton, and Carlen and draws *inter alia* on Foucault's critique of criminology first issued more than three decades ago, to argue that a resistance towards the

auto/biographical is consistent with the reductive and binary nature of criminology as a social science. Conventionally, criminology seeks through its disciplinary discourses to 'silence' and 'render insignificant' offender discourses in order to maintain the power hierarchies fundamental to the 'criminological monologue'.¹⁶ Despite the passage of time, such critiques from within and without the discipline, the proliferation of life writings emerging from prison(er)s around the world, and the prominence of offender biographies in popular non-fictional crime genres like true crime, the impact is barely discernible in the criminological curriculum. One is much more likely to find such texts read and discussed in English departments or in those cited above, than in the discipline devoted to the understanding of and policymaking on prison and imprisonment. In a world where 'ordinary' understandings of crime, punishment, and justice are significantly informed by popular discourses such as true crime and where academic criminological explanations remain largely undisseminated outside of academia, the refusal to seriously engage with prison life writing is becoming increasingly untenable. A critical assessment of such life writings can play a significant mediating role, as expert and populist discourses of crime become more polarised, and public knowledge and policymaking less well and critically informed.

Alongside prisoner auto/biography, another genre devoted entirely to telling the 'real story' of crime, criminality, and punishment in a popular and accessible format that is generally ignored by academic criminology but enthusiastically embraces offender life writing is what has become widely known as 'true crime'. Indeed it is possible to read or categorise prisoner life writing as a subgenre of true crime (and possibly vice versa). True crime is a potent, ubiquitous genre foundational to popular or 'everyday' explanations of crime in the collective or public imagination.¹⁷ Highly accessible, whether in the form of books (with varying degrees of literary aspirations or none at all), magazines, films, television shows, documentaries, comics, games, and more, offender auto/biographies function as primary explanatory frameworks for constructing popular/ordinary/everyday criminal epistemologies. It would seem that there is a widespread public perception that when terrible things happen as a result of law-breaking activity by 'evil' people, the place to look to make sense of these events, acts, and identities is in the past, specifically the life history of the person or people responsible, as a way of establishing understanding and even identifying the most viable evidence of motive and causation. According to Jean Murley, the rise of, and preoccupation with, criminal biography, historically speaking, marked the end of the conventional 'execution sermon' typically delivered at the execution of violent offenders at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries.¹⁸ Whereas the execution sermon emphasised the comparatively abstract or transcendental 'spiritual condition' of the murderer, the new preoccupation with the 'killer's biography' denoted a shift of narrative from one of spiritual transgression

(assigning culpability for the sin and the restoration of justice in the punishment) to one of gothic horror and gore (depicting the offender as ‘other’, a ‘monster’, and rendering visible the gory details of the crimes). This biographical narrative convention developed further and has more recently been framed within the supposedly objective and detached conventions of scientific discourses like forensics, medicine, and psychology (which in many respects are even more glaring and hyperbolic in their reliance on dichotomies of moral and social normality versus pathology).¹⁹

In his definition of true crime, cultural critic Alex Ross situates it within journalistic and literary/fictional writing, but is, like many other commentators, decidedly sceptical about its putative value or contribution to the overall understanding of crime and punishment, or indeed literary aesthetics. For him, true crime is more of a symptom of a pathological modernity than a place to seek solutions to modern problems like crime. Tracing the historical emergence of true crime, a distinctive publishing category since the 1980s, from eighteenth-century writers like Daniel Defoe to Truman Capote in the mid-twentieth century, Ross highlights two of the genre’s techniques ‘factual embroidery and the narrative of childhood trauma and discontent’ – before concluding that ‘true crime reveals few useful truths about violence in society; it is evidence, instead, of a society more terminally bored, protected from real threat, and distant from living death’.²⁰

In many true crime texts (literary, journalistic, or otherwise), the auto/biographical narrative converges on the task of finding, accessing, and interviewing the offender(s), family members, close friends, or those who knew the person/people in question. All these agents represent key sources of knowledge for reconstructing an explanatory narrative of the series of events and influences that led to the crime. According to Mike Presdee, it is this extra-rational (i.e., both rational *and* irrational) process of ‘excavation’ which embraces the emotional, socially responsive, and, above all, *lived* experiences of the offender and then re-presents these experiences to collective memory.²¹ In response to the trauma of the ‘transgression’ of crime, it is the humanistic qualities of these life histories that constitutes one of the most compelling advantages of true crime over the more sterile, quantitative, rationalistic explanations of (positivist) criminology. In their personal approach, such life histories have the potential to appeal to the reader’s sympathy and, because of their accessible style, they are ‘enjoyable’ to read, not just because they are emotional in a sympathetic or sentimental sense, but also because they incorporate and virtually celebrate the more ambivalent and even shameful aspects of crime writing.²² While these two factors account in large measure for the popularity of auto/biography, Presdee argues that life writing should be accorded more, not less, weight within criminology:

Our aim in taking a biographical and auto-biographical approach is to take the defiance, the anger, the resentment, the loneliness, the love, the fun, the warmth of an individual life and attempt not to celebrate it but to recognise it as real, as real history, as lived life that will stand as history longer than all the facts created and concocted by all the contemporary alchemists of numerical life who suck the human from life leaving behind the residual numerical skeleton of humanity.²³

As in existentialist criminology, the priority is to recognise the ‘becomingness’ or indeterminacy of the self and embrace its plasticity as criminal as well as subject to reform.²⁴

In true crime, this project is often represented narratively in a generic format that mirrors the criminal investigative process itself and/or is otherwise based on journalistic procedures, practices, and literacies, whether undertaken by the offender him- or herself, or another.²⁵ Expert or academic epistemologies in the form of concepts, theories, or methodologies do not tend to feature in true crime, though there are indications that this situation is changing as more criminologists are striving to engage with the popular media and contribute to public understandings of crime and punishment more directly.²⁶

In contrast to its low profile in criminological research, the presence of prisoner life writing was prominent in the essays students wrote for a course I teach on true crime, a new option module for students studying towards a bachelor’s degree in criminology in the second year of their three-year programme. The following section is a quasi-narrative representation of the collective views taken by these students of prisoner life writing, in part one (re)constructed by myself from their essays and augmented by text written by a small group of the students who volunteered to contribute to this paper. Collectively, these students’ views illustrate why the analysis of prisoner life writing and true crime should be given a more prominent place in criminology.

Generic and Stylistic Qualities of Prisoner Life Writing, True Crime, and Criminology

The generic, market, and stylistic qualities of prisoner life writing as a subgenre of true crime were noted and summed up by students generally in terms of how, why, and when prisoners tend to write; reader reception in terms of credibility; cultural evaluations in the context of other literatures; and market demand and publishing technologies. Students explored how and why prisoners write and why this might be of interest to readers of true crime *and* experts in criminology and cognate disciplines (e.g. penology, law, psychology, and education). Students discussed the benefits of utilising both popular and academic texts, while also recognising the inherent limitations and unique strengths of prisoner life writing in formulating expert and ordinary understandings of crime:

... [S]ome inmates can use writing for therapeutic purposes and to relieve pent-up anger and violent tendencies. Prison writer Rodriguez illustrates how “writing is my way of sledge-hammering these walls,” (cited in Miller, 2005: 246). ... some prisoners may write to rehabilitate themselves and hopefully lead to credible employment prospects after release from prison. Writing can lead to other education classes and maybe even qualifications which will improve job prospects. Chevigny [...] argues that some inmates write to “set the record straight” and to tell their full story and to impede misinterpretations of what actually happened (cited in Miller, 2005: 248). ... some inmates might write to ‘kill’ time and inmates will do anything to pass time. This relates to Irwin’s (1970) adaptive strategies for passing time in prison (cited in Jewkes, 2002: 12). Some inmates may write to come clean, as once an acknowledgement of guilt is made, the self-transformation and rehabilitation can begin (Miller, 2005). Understanding why prisoners write allows us to measure how much we can rely on these accounts for developing worthy criminological theories

... [Andrew]

In his analysis of prisoner life writing, Morgan found that the majority of published prisoner life writings are authored by white, middle-class males. Building on such existing research, students explored why the life writings by or about certain types of prisoners are less common, for instance the dearth of life writings by prisoners convicted of corporate fraud or ‘white-collar’ crimes, many of which are also committed by white, middle-class men.²⁷ The less enthusiastic reader reception and market demand for these life writings was noted and compared to the substantial attention devoted to such ‘crimes of the powerful’ by criminologists:

... [T]here is so much literature available on homicide, the mafia, gang crime, knife crime, prisoner autobiographies, and criminal biographies which profile the criminal and outline their crimes. So why is it there is a lack of academic literature that covers these topics? But for white collar crime it is the other way around? There is a great deal of academic literature and criminological perspectives covering white collar crime, but very little true crime literature that tells us about specific stories and people that have committed such crimes. ... One reason why white collar crime is often left out ... is that it doesn’t contain the dramatic immediacy, and isn’t often capable of being translated into personal or titillating news. While rape, murder, and theft contain these elements of a successful news story, white collar crimes do not ... [Sophie]

This student attributes the ‘arduous’ and unpopular character of these white-collar prisoner life writings to their proximity to academic writing in how they render the facts and epistemological context that form the basis of the explanation:

As a true crime representation of white-collar crime, [*Madoff: The Man Who Stole \$65 Billion* (Arvelund, 2009)] ... reads like factual writing.

There is little ‘padding out’ of events, numerous amounts of figures to back up and substantiate the story. It is quite an arduous book to read, if you are not fully aware of how the stock market works, and how percentage rates affect stocks et cetera, it is difficult to understand how Madoff so seemingly skilfully stole so much money. It reads sometimes like a first- year student would read an academic textbook; wordy, overcomplicated, and confusing; however, the fact that the natural curiosity of how a man could cause such colossal damage to other peoples lives and finance, fuelled by what can only be described as greed, means that readers will find themselves wanting to continue reading, whereas with a textbook, we often find ourselves wanting to put the book down, as it can often become so consuming that it gets to be too much.
[Sophie]

Like many others, this student was constructively critical of how the otherwise dry factual writing on corporate crime can be leavened or invigorated by the dramatic immediacy of true crime and offender life writing, in this case stories about personal greed, which instils a desire to ‘know’ in the reader. In this instance, reference is made to Arvedlund’s (2009) biography to argue for the need to personalise and humanise academic explanations of corporate crime, as well as to make these accounts more palatable and enjoyable for all readers (including students), hence broadening and deepening their influence.²⁸ As my student co-authors put it, this criticism goes to the crux of why they chose to study criminology in the first place and exposes some of their frustrations halfway into their undergraduate studies. Reading prisoner auto/biography provides them with an opportunity to critically reflect on the criminological theory they learned in their first year and also enables them to appreciate how the formal study of prisoner life writings can help them gain a better understanding of crime and punishment, and eventually to take ownership of the discipline:

Prisoner writings and biographies can lend an insight into the cognitive process of the criminal. This is fascinating on an inter-disciplinary level; by this we mean that a range of disciplines can use true crime texts in order to further their understanding; for example a criminologist may wish to attempt to apply criminological and sociological theory to the true crime texts. This would allow them to see the relevance of the theory on a practical, individual, and micro level and not just the macro level of criminological theory. [student collective]

Students are interested in and cognisant of how and why prisoners write, and this awareness in turn helped them to take a more reflexive and constructively critical view of how and why academics write about these prisoners, how this impacts on teaching about crime and punishment, and how these processes can be improved by a better appreciation of prisoner life writing.

Methodological, Theoretical, and Pedagogical Issues

Students were aware of a range of critical, theoretical, and methodological issues pertaining to prisoner life writing, such as the nature of the stories and identities represented in prisoner life writings published in the true crime genre and the sorts of crimes and criminals that tend to feature and, just as importantly, not feature in these texts. The undergraduates considered the limitations of the generic tendency in offender life writing to concentrate on the life of a single individual (notwithstanding the commonplace use of diegesis, or the telling of the life stories of others, within these life writings).²⁹ Even so, students were more often than not quite amenable to, if not openly positive about, prisoner life writing in its potential to inform or enhance criminology and to provide a critical perspective on the discipline. Demonstrating self-reflexivity and a critical practitioner perspective, students recognised current criminological trends ‘from qualitative research towards quantitative research’ as an ‘effort to legitimise criminology as a science’ [student collective].

In their essays, students focused on how the limitations of the micro or qualitative perspective of the individual case studies presented by prisoner life writing are ameliorated by the typicality of the represented life and explicated by the academic as expert *and* amanuensis. The relationship between individual case studies and ‘typicality’ was well understood by The Chicago School in the first half of the twentieth century, and it is worth returning to this earlier perspective on offender auto/biography to balance what can be myopic views on prisoner life writing in contemporary criminology. One student, John, explored Chicago criminologist Clifford R. Shaw’s method of combining life writing and quantitative analysis in *The Jack Roller: A Delinquent Boy’s Own Story* (1930), which concluded that the boy in question ‘is, and is not, typical of juvenile delinquency in Chicago’.³⁰ Shaw recognised that while ‘[n]o single case could be representative of all the many variations of personality’, statistics on crime rates among boys from similar backgrounds supported the notion that this specific life story was typical.

By contrast, in the context of the contemporary cult of the celebrity prisoner, more recent examples of prisoner life writing published in the true crime genre can have the opposite effect by exaggerating the atypicality of the life story being told. Such prison writings can, in some instances, undermine their own usefulness for the purposes of criminological research and popular understandings of crime and punishment, as well as divert attention away from other important forms of crime, such as state crime:

There are countless writings on infamous individuals from the criminal world such as *The Guv’nor* by Lenny McLean, *Stop the Ride I Want to Get Off* by Dave Courtney, or *Bronson* by Charles Bronson. The problem that can be found in these writings is that, however intriguing or entertaining we find them, they are very rarely accounts that can be considered normal. Most prisoners will not be able to relate to people such as the Krays and ‘Mad’ Frank Fraser or

Roy Shaw. The problem with these exceptional accounts is that any analysis of them and any resulting theories would only offer theories that applied at the micro social level. This is just not the correct kind of true crime writing that is required to develop theories that can be applied to the majority of society. The prisoner writings that will serve the best purpose are those of ordinary prisoners, and they are readily available ... [Thomas]³¹

An advantage noted by students is that prisoner life writing highlights faults and exposes absences, weaknesses, and fissures in what are dominant theories of crime and criminality, even in positivistic theories such as biological and rational choice theory. Ironically, the missed opportunity represented by the failure of criminology to engage more fully and confidently with prisoner life writing as a medium linking theory with real offenders can actually impede the construction and further development of such 'hard' scientific theories as rational choice theory. As one student argued, criminology thus misses out on a fuller understanding of models of rationality or narrative rationales represented within offender life writing. This failure, emanating from the derogation of micro-qualitative methodologies such as auto/biography theory applied to prisoner life writing, negatively affects criminology's capacity to recognise or account for all dimensions of individual motivation as fully as it could. After all, as rational choice theories purport, individual motivation constitutes a major contributing factor to causal explanations of crime, rehabilitation, and the ongoing narrative construction of criminal identities in policy discourses, as well as in the public mind and in the lives of real offenders. What is more, these life writings can expose the significant cultural influences that contribute to and dialogically shape criminality and criminal identities, such as represented in the popular media.

Despite its limitations, prisoner life writing offers some distinct if not unique methodological advantages, not least as a 'dataset' that privileges the agency of prison(er) research participants; one that is (in the case of published works) usually quick, easy, and cheap to access. Ethically relatively uncomplicated due to the lack of researcher control over the data collection phase in particular, prisoner autobiography does away with the increasingly demanding and complex task of negotiating gatekeepers, a not inconsequential factor when it comes to researching prisoners and prison life. In short, as students recognised (but criminologists are slow to accept), prisoner life writing constitutes a prolific and under-utilized source of 'secondary research'.³² Drawing on Alan Bryman, one student, Steve, noted the advantages of life writing as a form of secondary research, including less time spent on the collection of data, which could facilitate a more thorough and effective analysis of the material.³³

As a mainstay of true crime and a lacuna in criminology, prisoner life writing exposes many facets of competing ontologies and epistemologies about what precisely constitutes the 'facts', 'realities', and 'knowledges' (ordinary, expert,

and complex and shifting combinations of the three) about crime and punishment. Whatever else its faults with regard to facticity, prisoner life writing tends to be richly descriptive and evocative, a textual form of writing that is particularly amenable to a visual culture. The visual is a key semiotic for communicating narratives in modern cultures, a burgeoning area of interdisciplinary research, and a key pedagogical tool for enhancing teaching and learning. As the following student states, this also contrasts to the often dry and rigidly conceptual abstraction of criminological semiotics:

When reading real crime stories one finds the reading enthralling because the reader manages to visualise what they are reading and become closer to understanding the criminal's character, the motive, and form an idea on the criminal's state of mind. [Kim]

Conclusion

The crux of the matter may simply be that true crime texts, prisoner life writing, and criminology are doing different things, performing different functions via their own distinctive discourses, epistemologies, and etymologies. This would be consistent with the conventional situation in which various genres have their more or less discrete place and more or less keep to it, for example, in policymaking, academic, and popular forums on crime and punishment. However, perhaps true crime, prisoner life writing, and criminology are doing the same thing (providing explanations of crime and criminality) in different, yet more or less accessible ways, in line with the cultural values and moral landscapes they inhabit. Where prisoner auto/biographies provide key sites for individual expression in the realms of aesthetics, therapy, education and/or personal/spiritual reform, criminology provides an 'objective', rigorously scientific, historical overview. True crime bridges the affective divide between the prisoners' desire to escape the secrecy of confinement and the public's compulsion to indulge, condemn, and to 'feel' as a cathartic way of knowing the criminal 'other' and re-establishing a sense of moral solidarity and social consensus.³⁴ The problem with these generic conventions and their epistemological and ontological habitus is that in the postmodern digital media age, their boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred and unstable at the same time as these texts are becoming more available, plentiful, and (in some cases) frenetic, polarised, and extreme. Criminology in particular is in danger of further marginalisation if it does not engage more directly and openly with these other explanatory and popular texts.

Most students are well versed in representations of crime in popular culture and digital media, which is, ironically, the reason why many come to study criminology. While my students recognised the limitations of prisoner life writing in all its generic forms and the quality and scope of the explanations of crime and criminality contained in these texts, they did so with a similarly

critical view of the existing limitations of criminological theory, many of which are exposed by – and could be improved by better use of – true crime and/or prisoner writings. For most students, the very popularity, ubiquity, and indeed entertainment value of all types of true crime texts, including offender life writings, with which the wider public are familiar, comfortable, and in which they are widely conversant, was in stark contrast to the public reception and ‘impact’ of academic criminology. For me as a teacher, prisoner life writing provided a fertile landscape onto which students could project and map their new criminological knowledge of crime and punishment, using true crime texts to ‘mash up’ and hence critically assess criminological theories, while building on their own prior knowledge of crime in popular culture. These alone are compelling reasons for criminologists to start taking prison life writing much more seriously, both as an admittedly complex and challenging dataset and also as a site for engaging in wider public debate. Perhaps it is time for us as criminologists to acknowledge our debt to these popular texts as a prime resource for inspiring people to want to study criminology in the first place, as well as a factor in explaining why some students regard the content and delivery of their degree programmes at times as a bit of a disappointment, or at best something that they did not expect. In the final analysis, these students’ writings constitute a constructively critical expression of confidence in our discipline, and the opening up of it to student, prisoner, and/or ‘ordinary’ knowledges and explanations of crime. This bodes well for the future of criminology and for better, more sophisticated and engaged public understandings of crime.

Notes

1. For an overview of recent statistics and trends in international incarceration see Roy Walmsley, 'Global Incarceration and Prison Trends', *Forum on Crime and Society* 3.1/2 (2003): 65–78. Regarding the philosophical, cultural, political, moral, and aesthetic elements of confinement see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977) and W.B. Carnochan, 'The Literature of Confinement', in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 381–406.
2. Anita Wilson, 'Reading a Library - Writing a Book: Prisoners' Day to Day Engagement with Literacy/ies', paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Exeter, England, 12–14 September 2002. Available online at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00002546.htm>. Accessed 26 October 2011.
3. On this resistance to life history, see Mike Nellis, 'Prose and Cons: Offender Auto/ biographies, Penal Reform and Probation Training', *The Howard Journal* 41.5 (2002): 434– 68 (434).
4. The names of students cited have been changed to maintain anonymity.
5. Shadd Maruna and Matt Matravers, 'N = 1: Criminology and the Person', *Theoretical Criminology* 11.4 (2007): 427–42. This issue was a special issue devoted entirely to *The Jack Roller* on the occasion of what would have been 'Stanley's' 100th birthday. This refers to Clifford R. Shaw's classic autobiography *The Jack Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, [1930] 1966).
6. For an example of a therapeutic perspective see Maily Clark, 'What Has Creative Writing Done for Me? A Prisoner Perspective' (undated). Available at <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/clarkcxpaper.pdf>. Accessed 26 October 2011. For educational views, see David Wilson and Anne Reuss, eds., *Prison(er) Education: Tales of Change and Transformation* (Winchester: Waterside Press, 2000). On training, see Mike Nellis, 'Prose and Cons'. For policy and 'what works' see John P. McKendy, "'I'm very careful about that": Narrative and Agency of Men in Prison', *Discourse & Society* 17.4 (2006): 473–500.
7. See Pat Carlen, *Criminal Women: Autobiographical Accounts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985); Shadd Maruna, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* (Washington D.C.: American

Psychological Association, c2001); Elaine Crawley, *Doing Prison Work: The Public and Private Lives of Prison Officers* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2004). For an overview of biographical research in criminology, see Jo Goodey, 'Biographical Lessons for Criminology', *Theoretical Criminology* 4 (2000): 473–98.

8. David Wilson and Steven McCabe, 'How HMP Grendon "Works" in the Words of Those Undergoing Therapy', *The Howard Journal* 41.3 (2002): 279–91 (282).

9. Steve Morgan, 'Prison Lives: Critical Issues in Reading Prisoner Autobiography', *The Howard Journal* 38.3 (1999): 328–40 (330).

10. See Victoria Lavis and Malcolm Cockburn, 'Using the "Wall of Wonder" with prisoners to develop diversity research in a maximum-security prison: some initial observations', paper presented to the British Society of Criminology Yorkshire and Humberside Group Inaugural Meeting, School of Law, University of Leeds, 11 May 2011.

11. Ibid.

12. Stephen Farrall's analysis of the life writings of those wrongfully convicted of serious crimes, using the case study of Angela Cannings, represents a notable and outstanding example. "'We just live day-to-day": A Case Study of Life After Release Following Wrongful Conviction', in *Existentialist Criminology*, ed. Ronnie Lippens and Don Crewe (London: Routledge-Cavendish, 2009), 169–98. See also Mike Presdee, 'The Story of Crime: Biography and the Excavation of Transgression', in *Cultural Criminology Unleashed*, ed. Jeff Ferrell, Keith Hayward, Wayne Morrison and Mike Presdee (London: Glasshouse Press, 2004).

13. Morgan, 'Prison Lives', 329.

14. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002); Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Biography* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1989).

15. Paul Gready, 'Autobiography and "The Power of Writing": Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19.3 (1993): 489–523; Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1992).

16. Morgan, 'Prison Lives', 329.

17. Presdee, 'The Story of Crime'.

18. Jean Murley, *The Rise of True Crime: Twentieth Century Murder and American Popular Culture* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2008).
19. *Ibid.*, 6–10.
20. Alex Ross, ‘The Shock of the True’, *New Yorker Magazine*, 19 August 1996, 70.
21. Presdee, ‘The Story of Crime’.
22. Mark Fishman and Gray Cavender, *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Aldine Transaction, 1998); Todd Herzog, *Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghan Books, 2009).
23. Presdee, ‘The Story of Crime’, 44.
24. Lippens and Crewe, *Existentialist Criminology*.
25. Murley, *The Rise of True Crime*; Mark Selzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2009); Anita Biressi, *Crime, Fear and the Law in True Crime Stories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
26. For examples see Gregg Barak, ed., *Media, Process and the Social Construction of Crime: Studies in Newsmaking Criminology* (New York and London: Taylor and Francis, 1995); Gregg Barak, ‘Doing Newsmaking Criminology From Within the Academy’, *Theoretical Criminology* 11.2 (2007): 181–207. For more theoretical perspectives see Jonathan Simon and Malcolm Feeley, ‘True Crime: The New Penology and Public Discourse on Crime’, in *Punishment and Social Control: Essays in Honour of Sheldon L. Messinger*, ed. Thomas G. Blomberg and Stanley Cohen (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995); Elliott Currie, ‘Against Marginality: Arguments for a Public Criminology’, *Theoretical Criminology* 11.2 (2007): 175–90. For a recent example of a true crime/popular criminology book written from both a journalistic and criminological perspective see Paul Harrison and David Wilson, *Hunting Evil: Inside the Ipswich Serial Murders* (London: Sphere, 2008).
27. Morgan, ‘Prison Lives’.
28. Erin Arvedlund, *Madoff: The Man Who Stole \$65 Billion* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
29. Melissa Dearey, *Radicalization: The Life Writings of Political Prisoners* (London: Routledge-Cavendish, 2010).

30. Clifford R. Shaw, *The Jack Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 184.
31. Minor adjustments to the formatting of book titles have been made in this excerpt, to enhance clarity for readers.
32. Morgan, 'Prison Lives'.
33. Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
34. Selzer, *True Crime*; Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller, ed. George E.G. Catlin (New York: Free Press, [1938] 1964).