

Book Review: Erin George, *A Woman Doing Life: Notes from a Prison for Women*, 2nd Edition. Edited by Robert Johnson and Alison B. Martin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780199935888 (Paperback). 272 Pages. \$34.95.

Reviewed by Robert M. Worley¹

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In the book, *A Woman Doing Life: Notes from a Prison for Women*, Erin George, an inmate serving a 603-year sentence at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, candidly reflects upon her incarceration experiences. While the vast majority of the book is written by George in her own words, it has the benefit of being edited by Robert Johnson and Alison B. Martin, both of whom are well-regarded criminologists. Professor Johnson, in particular, is known within the criminal justice discipline as one of the leading critics of mass incarceration. In addition to having published numerous books and scholarly articles which pertain to institutional corrections, Johnson received the coveted Outstanding Book Award in 1992 from the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences for *Death Work*, a scathing indictment of capital punishment and a modern day classic. Given all of the expertise and experience of both editors, and particularly Johnson, it is no surprise that Erin George's book proves to be a fascinating exploration of imprisonment through the lens of a female

¹ **Robert M. Worley**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas. He is also the editor of *ACJS Today* and a member of the Institute for Legal Studies in Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. He has published academic articles in journals, such as, *Deviant Behavior*, *Criminal Justice Review*, *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, and *Criminal Law Bulletin*, among others. His research interests include inmate-guard inappropriate relationships, police and prison officers' liabilities for the use of Tasers and stun guns, computer crime and cyber-bullying, and issues related to publication productivity and rankings in criminology and criminal justice. Address correspondence to: Robert M. Worley, Lamar University, Beaumont, Texas; e-mail: rworley@lamar.edu.

inmate. It has the benefit of being written in a manner that is often gritty and raw yet sufficiently rigorous and theoretical.

The author begins her story by briefly delving into the circumstances that led to her arrest, adjudication, and ultimately life imprisonment. Prior to her incarceration, George was a middle-class suburb mom who was arrested and charged with the murder of her husband. While she maintains her innocence to this day, the author writes that she consciously made the decision to avoid focusing too much on the details of her case in her book. George reasons that doing so would distract readers from the broader issues associated with female correctional facilities. As Robert Johnson, serving as the lead editor, insightfully explains in the opening paragraph of the book, it is irrelevant whether or not George is innocent or guilty. Johnson maintains that he himself believes in George's innocence, however, it is evident that neither the author nor the editors wish to use *A Woman Doing Life* as a vehicle to garner public sympathy for George's case. Rather, it is clear from the very beginning of the book that its primary objective is to give the reader a glimpse into the world of female prisons. In this sense, the book accomplishes its goal and makes for very interesting reading.

In the first chapter of the book, George reflects upon her experiences in jail as a pretrial detainee after she was arrested. The author writes that, upon her arrival to the Rappahannock Regional Jail (RRJ), she was promptly strip-searched and put in a delousing shower. The courts have ruled that even pretrial detainees are subject to these types of intake procedures to ensure the safety and cleanliness of correctional facilities.

Because the author did not have a criminal history, she was eventually bonded out of the jail; however, the bond was rescinded about a month prior to her trial. George writes that many of her fellow inmates told prosecutors that she had admitted to killing her husband. This practice is well-documented in the academic literature; inmates who engage in this malicious behavior are referred to as "jailhouse snitches," and attempt to befriend other prisoners to gain information that can be used to concoct fabricated confessions, which are often traded with prosecutors in exchange for leniency (Bloom, 2002; Cicchini, 2012).

Not surprisingly, the author reports that she learned fairly quickly to be leery and suspicious of other inmates in her facility. In fact, she and her attorney made arrangements for her to be moved to protective custody before and during her trial. However, shortly after she was found guilty, George moved to the general population, since other inmates no longer had an incentive to inform on her. During her time in the general population of the RRJ, George writes that it was fairly easy for inmates

to gain access to illicit drugs as well as other varieties of contraband. The author suggests that some officers also supplied inmates with tobacco in exchange for sexual favors. For example she writes, “Cigarettes were in demand, either smuggled in or bummed from an officer in exchange for a quick grope in the housekeeping closet” (11). George also admits that, over time, she began to embrace jail culture and took pleasure in bullying other inmates and bragging about her murder conviction. This aspect of the book proved to be quite fascinating, as it illustrates how correctional facilities, or what Goffman (1963) refers to as “total institutions,” show the capacity to transform the personalities of the actors who reside in them.

According to the author, the RRJ has a significant overcrowding problem, which is unfortunately all too common in prisons and jails all throughout the country. George writes that, while she was waiting to be shipped to Fluvanna, it was not uncommon for her to be crammed into a unit with 100 other inmates even though it was designed to accommodate fifty people. Also, in some cases up to three inmates were housed in cells that were designed for only one person. George claims that she lived in one of these cells and was not even able to use the toilet without having to place her foot on someone else’s mattress. She maintains that, under these barbaric conditions, it was not unusual for fights to break out several times a day. In the book, the author observes that female inmates do not fight like men. Rather than using fists, they often prefer to slap, spit on, bite, and kick one another. George comments that some officers at RRJ found this be amusing and even encouraged these fights to an extent. Aside from having to live in intolerable conditions, she also describes that the medical treatment (or lack thereof) was quite substandard in the RRJ. In the book, George asserts that, during her time in jail, she had to pay a \$10.00 co-pay when she needed one Band-Aid for a foot infection. Given all of the above, the author makes it clear to the reader that she was actually looking forward to being transferred to Fluvanna in spite of the fact that it would be a one-way ticket to serve a life sentence.

In *A Woman Doing Life*, it is clear that George’s initial impressions of the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women (FCCW) were fairly positive. She recalls being somewhat surprised by the cordial interactions between the guards and inmates and describes how an officer even helped her circumvent institutional rules so she could keep her gold wedding band. Nevertheless, the author is at times quite critical of FCCW though often her criticisms are directed at the incarceration experience in general. For example, she writes that prison life is

characterized by a chronic lack of sleep and observes that at FCCW breakfast begins promptly at 3:30 a.m. Throughout the book, George also discusses some of the various cellmates she has had to endure over the past several years. She writes, "The housing gods are capricious, at best. Their official story is that placement is random, but certain people seem to have extraordinary bad luck when it comes to cellmates" (38). While George admits that she has had been fortunate to have cellmates who are fairly normal, it would be fair to say that she has still been housed with some rather rude and obnoxious, perhaps even dangerous, offenders. For example, according to the book, one of her first cellmates, Gloria, was a perpetual masturbator who would pleasure herself several times a day, even when the author was in the cell reading or sleeping (at least pretending to do so) on the top bunk.

George devotes a short chapter to the prison romances, which inevitably occur between inmates within female correctional facilities. Despite the fact that it is only fifteen pages, this chapter is quite informative and may alone be worth the price of the book. George describes how some of the inmates are labelled by others as *studs* due to their ability to proudly accentuate their masculine characteristics. According to George, inmates who are studs are often lesbians outside of prison and tend to wear baggy clothing and may even have facial hair. Other inmates, those to whom George refers to as *boos* (short for the term "booty call"), tend to gravitate toward the studs. Surprisingly, the author is quite critical of these women and writes, "Boos bounce from stud to stud in their search for true love. They're usually not really gay—they just equate self-worth with being attached to someone, anyone, and the more jealous and controlling the better" (53).

Throughout her book, the author contends that it is quite common for inmates to "hook up" with one another or engage in sexual relationships. She also implies that some officers, even those who are supervisors, are fairly tolerant of these relationships which are against prison rules. For example, according to George, if an inmate develops a strong rapport with a sergeant or a lieutenant, she can often persuade this individual to assign her girlfriend as her cellmate. George also writes, "A few officers are pretty cool about girlfriends. They're the ones who will make an excessive amount of noise at the desk before their rounds when they suspect two favored inmates are having sex. Shoot, sometimes the officers even like to watch. Girls can get away with a lot if they have an officer covering up for them. If the price is a third-party voyeur, well, so be it" (54). While George characterizes the vast majority of sexual relationships that occur between inmates as being short-term, casual

alternatives to masturbation, she does describe an impromptu wedding that occurred between two inmates, Dusty and Babygirl, who had been a couple for one-year (which the author contends is the equivalent of roughly ten years outside of the prison walls). In this portion of the chapter, George describes how the two inmates sent out homemade invitations, exchanged rings and nuptials, and even convinced other offenders to throw them a party which included confetti made from newspaper and a chocolate cake made out of Swiss rolls.

George identifies FCCW as a correctional facility that has one of the highest substantiated allegations of sexual misconduct in the United States. In fact, the author asserts that that problem was at one point so pervasive that its former warden, Wendy Hobbs, was called to testify before the federal Justice Department's Review Panel on Prison Rape. In spite of this, George maintains that she has no actual knowledge of any cases of inmate-on-inmate sexual assault that have occurred at her facility. She writes, "I've never heard of anyone being raped or forced into a sexual act. If anything happens here, it is most definitely consensual" (64). And yet, it does not appear that George is fearful of being sexually assaulted by other inmates. Moreover, it is comforting to learn that the author does not perceive inmate-on-inmate rape to be very prevalent, and this observation will undoubtedly be of significant interest to prison sex researchers, particularly in light of a controversial study which boldly asserts that prison rape is rare (Fleisher & Krienert, 2009).

Even though George has very little, if anything, to write about prisoner-on-prisoner rape, she more than makes up for this by candidly discussing actual cases at her facility in which former prison employees were terminated or forced to resign for having sexual relationships with the inmates they were paid to supervise. For example, George alleges that during her incarceration at FCCW, a major correctional officer [the top-ranking guard in charge of security] impregnated a female inmate and was sentenced to multiple years in prison for having sex with numerous inmates. Additionally, the author discusses how a love triangle involving two female officers and an inmate led to the termination of one of these employees. George also contends that some staff members sexually harass inmates. To illustrate this point, she refers to C.O. Valezquez [this is a pseudonym], a male officer who had a habit of peeking over the bathroom stalls while female inmates were using the toilet. In an interesting twist, George contends that after his actions became known to the upper administration, this officer was transferred to another position; he became a counselor, which ironically provided him with unlimited private interactions with female inmates.

While the layperson might be shocked (though perhaps less so given the popular appeal of such recent programming as, for example, “Orange Is the New Black”), those who study prisons know that there is merit to the author’s insightful observations. In fact, there is a growing body of literature that indicates that some correctional officers sexually harass or have “inappropriate relationships” with inmates, a phenomenon which unfortunately occurs with surprising regularity (Beck, Rantala, & Rexroat, 2014; Cullen, 2012; Worley, Marquart, & Mullings, 2003; Worley & Worley, 2013). Those who read this book will also be deeply disturbed by the author’s discussion of the poor quality of medical services that are provided to inmates at FCCW. George maintains that prior to her incarceration she was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). Nevertheless, she had to spend over a year convincing medical staff of this, even though this disease could have been confirmed with a simple blood test. George insinuates that some FCCW inmates have even died due to the lack of proper medical care. For example, she writes, “Victims of medical are legion. Women still stagger around the yard clutching swollen cheeks from botched and infected dental procedures. You may have to wait weeks to see a doctor. Infection had killed at least one woman in the prison infirmary after she had an otherwise successful brain surgery” (178).

According to George, the dental care at FCCW is virtually nonexistent. She claims in her book to have only had her teeth cleaned once during the several years she has been incarcerated. The author contends that she continuously brushes her teeth so that she will not have to rely on state-issued dentures. She writes in her book, “I am absolutely terrified of the inevitable time that I will have to get dentures...It’s not the idea of dentures that bothers me so much, though. It’s the year or more that I will have to walk around the prison toothless that upsets me most. It’s a humiliating prospect, an excellent way to dehumanize us” (173). George explains that it often takes a year or longer for inmates to get their dentures due to the fact that they are made by male prisoners at another facility (also resulting in an inferior product). The author contends that, as a result of the long wait, the inmate’s mouth caves in, and the dentures do not fit when they finally do arrive. Of all the cruelties of prison life that George describes in her book, this practice to me seemed to be among the most capricious. One can only hope that prison administrators at FCCW have read a copy of *A Woman Doing Life* and are aware of the this problem (if they were not already) and are taking measures to correct it.

While much of my review focuses on the grim and darker aspects of the author's incarceration experiences, it should be noted that she at times attempts to be good natured and even light-hearted about prison life. For example, George provides readers with many humorous personal anecdotes and also praises many correctional staff members throughout the book. Still, it seems as though the author has become fairly adept at navigating her way around the cumbersome prison bureaucracy and is dealing with her confinement as best as she possibly can.

In all, *A Woman Doing Life* is an evocative and eye-opening book and a must-read for anyone who is seriously interested in learning about correctional facilities. It would also be of interest to those who are either working in a correctional facility or residing in one. Either way, it is a book that I would highly recommend.

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