



BOOK REVIEW: Kerman, P. (2010). *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*. New York: Spiegel & Grau

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As prisons throughout the world are mainly populated by men, female prisoners have long been in the shadow of their male counterparts. Yet, the rise of the number of women in prison in several countries (Aebi & Delgrande, 2014; Frost, Greene & Pranis, 2006; Walmsley, 2015) has resulted in a growing body of criminological research and a mounting number of publications on female imprisonment. This has also raised the awareness of international policymakers. For example, the United Nations has recognized the importance of reducing unnecessary imprisonment of women, and the need for improvements in female prisoners' detention conditions. This need was formalized in the United Nations' "Bangkok Rules", which focus on the specific characteristics and needs of female prisoners.¹⁴ This growing awareness is also tangible beyond criminology and policy, for example in popular media. One of the most obvious examples here may be the immense success of the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*. While the series is categorised as comedy/drama (*dramedy*), it is originally based on the autobiographical book of Piper Kerman (Piper Chapman in the series). In her book, Kerman vividly describes her stay in a US women's prison after being sentenced to 15 months for a decade-old crime of transporting money to her drug-dealing girlfriend. Although the book was first published in 2010, it mainly came to the attention of a larger audience after the Netflix series was launched in 2013.

Over the past decade the body of scholarship on popular representations of punishment in the age of mass incarceration in the United States has increased substantially. In line with this trend, the series *Orange is the New Black* is discussed in several publications by scholars with different backgrounds (e.g. criminology, literature, communications), and apparently conferences are being organized using the title of the series (Artt & Schwan, 2016).¹⁵ Far fewer publications have focused on the book on which the series is based. With the release of Season 5 last summer, we believed this to be a good time to review Kerman's original work. As we are both scholars who mainly conduct research from a constructionist stance, we are interested in the experiences and perceptions of those people embroiled in the criminal justice system. In that sense (auto)biographies may be highly informative about criminological topics. While there are plenty of (prison) biographies, they are not often picked up by criminological researchers (see, however, Smoyer 2013, 2014, for example, on the role of food in women's prisons). Drawing on Kerman (2010), we discuss the value of (auto)biographies for criminology. We illustrate how these publications may provide meaningful insights for researchers and may extend or deepen our knowledge and understanding of prisoners' experiences.

Kerman does a great job in describing in depth how she experienced her time in prison. One of the main strengths of her work is how her descriptions of prisoners as people of flesh and blood challenge images of offenders as heartless people. For example, the description of the moment her grandmother passes away may

¹⁴ United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Resolution A/RES/65/229), 21 December 2010.

¹⁵ See, for example, the conference *Orange Is the New Black and New Perspectives on the Women in Prison Genre* held at Edinburgh Napier University in June 2015.

invoke the reader's compassion and empathy with prisoners, while the harsh and cold prison system preventing her from attending the funeral may provoke irritation and disagreement with the authorities. Kerman reminds us that prisoners are human beings with a lot more in common with the average citizen than expected, and that not all prisoners are necessarily dangerous and violent offenders. In reality, a considerable number of women serving time with Kerman ended up there as a result of the *War on Drugs*, which also targets minor and non-violent drug offenders. In that sense the book may be important for contesting stereotypes citizens may have about prisoners and putting a hold on the *othering* of prisoners.

Kerman also describes several pleasant moments and hilarious events. In addition, she recounts several warm and friendly encounters with fellow inmates, like the time she helped one of her fellow inmates, Pennsatucky:

When Pennsatucky came to me to ask for help writing a letter to her judge, I was relieved. She had a relatively short sentence of a couple of years but was trying to get an earlier release... (...) Pennsatucky and I met in the converted closet that served as a Camp law library, where there was an old beat-up typewriter. 'Tell me again what you think this letter needs to say, Pennsatucky?' I asked. She explained the facts of her cooperation, and then said, 'And throw some other stuff in there, about how I've learned my lesson and shit. You know what to say, Piper!' (p. 244)

At times she leaves the reader with the impression that her time in prison was not all that bad. This impression may also be fuelled by her humoristic writing style full of self-mockery. However, it appears from the literature that joking in prison may be part of a "survival strategy" (see, for example, Terry, 1997). While the same style is picked up in the series, it goes a step further by sometimes portraying events differently from how they are described in the book. For the sake of entertainment, typical characteristics of protagonists and humorous events are more emphasized or exaggerated, and some events (e.g. the relationship between a correctional officer (CO) and an inmate) are romanticized (see also Cecil, 2015). Notwithstanding the popularisation of prison life, the overemphasis on sex behind bars, and the fact that some critical details of prison life are left out, the series does a better job than most other documentaries, series, or films in representing prison reality (Cecil, 2015).

Another reason for potentially considering her prison experience as "not that bad after all" is carefully explained by Kerman herself. Throughout the book she explains that, in contrast to many other women serving time with her, she thinks of herself as "the lucky one".

First, she was only sentenced to a short-term prison sentence. *Second*, she did not spend her time in a maximum security facility. *Third*, she does not have children. As meticulously illustrated in the book, one of the most difficult *pains of imprisonment* (Sykes, 1958, see also below) to bear for women is related to motherhood (see, for example, Crewe, Hulley & Wright, 2017). *Fourth*, as she is highly educated and White, she is an atypical prisoner. It appears from her story that Whites may be excluded by other prisoners, who are mainly Blacks or Hispanics. However, as prison staff tend to consider Whites as higher in the informal prison hierarchy, being White may result in a more helpful attitude from prison staff. Research has indeed shown that white, middle-class females without a drug addiction receive more help from prison staff as they are perceived as "different" (Rowe, 2011).

One afternoon alone in a pickup truck, another officer turned to me intensely and said, 'I just don't understand it, Piper. What is a woman like you doing here? This is crazy. (p. 269)

Fifth, unlike many other women, she has a solid social network that continues to support her throughout her imprisonment.

While the story of Kerman is probably not representative of how the majority of female inmates experience imprisonment in the US, the book definitely adds to criminology as it brings a lot of well-known penitentiary phenomena and criminological concepts to life.

First, the book corroborates the importance of prison hierarchies as revealed in criminological research (see, for example, Crewe, 2009). It appears from the book that in prison, people need to reckon with formal (prisoners vs. prison guards) and informal (subgroups amongst prisoners) hierarchies when navigating through prison life. When describing the first days of her incarceration, she focuses on the chow hall. She explains how her *bunkie* (prison slang for roommate) warned her not to engage with the "wrong" prisoners, an engagement that could easily start in the chow hall while searching for an empty seat. Hence, overcrowding during lunch and dinner causes stress for new inmates (Is this seat still free? Am I allowed to sit here? Which people should be ignored or avoided?). This illustrates more generally the difficulties prisoners face when searching for their place in the inmate social system. The lack of protection from COs when making the wrong friends makes these kinds of choices for newcomers a hard and extremely important task. Kerman explains how lucky she was that her *bunkie* supported and advised her on this matter. Nevertheless, at times she still made mistakes, for example

when she complained about the meals in the presence of Pop, the prison chef. Being in charge of cooking, Pop received privileges from prisoners as well as officers: “ ‘Piper, Pop gets whatever Bunkie she wants.’ I was stunned by this revelation that a prisoner could get what she wanted. Of course, if that inmate is the prime reason that your institutional kitchen runs in an orderly fashion...” (p. 117). Offending a prisoner who had such a high position in the prison hierarchy was one of the biggest mistakes Kerman could make.

The book also contains plenty of anecdotes illustrating the *pains of imprisonment*, as described for the first time in Sykes' seminal work *The Society of Captives* (1958). One of these pains shaping prison experiences is the deprivation of autonomy. Kerman illustrates that while imprisonment itself is the punishment, in practice prisons do add additional layers of suffering. Prisoners' deprivation of autonomy and the hostility it generates is a key topic in prison research. Kerman provides us with meaningful and vivid examples of how she experienced this. The example used here refers back to her grandmother, who becomes ill and dies while Kerman is imprisoned:

In the last ten months I had found ways to carve out some sense of control of my world, seize some personal power within a setting in which I was supposed to have none. But my grandmother's illness sent that sense spinning away, showed me how much my choices eleven years earlier [committing the offence] and their consequences had put me in the power of a system that would be relentless in its efforts to take things away (p. 265).

This example reflects how imprisonment engenders the loss of agency and feelings of powerlessness. In the same vein, the humiliating “pat downs” after visits are an example of these feelings. Kerman recounts that some male guards inappropriately touched women during these searches: “*The CO asked me loudly and repeatedly: ‘Where are the weapons of mass destruction?’ while he fondled my ass and I gritted my teeth*” (p. 269). Despite feelings of disgust and astonishment she lets this happen and does not react.

The loss of her grandmother brings us to another deprivation, the loss of, or difficulty of maintaining, family contacts. Kerman states that “prison is so much about the people who are missing from your life and who fill your imagination” (p. 122). Her description concerning the struggles she went through to meet family and friends in the visiting room illustrates the difficulties of maintaining social contacts. There was the stress that her counsellor might not have added her friends and relatives to the visitors' list, meaning they could not visit and had to drive all the way back home. Criminological research has recurrently shown that contacts with family members during, but also after, imprisonment are crucial for a successful reintegration process (see, for example, Cobbina, Huebner & Berg 2012). Kerman's description provides us with an inside view on how penitentiary institutions should (not) handle family visits in order to stimulate the reintegration process. Reintegration and life after release is a prominent subject of discussion between the protagonists in Kerman's book. The deficiencies with regard to the reintegration process, such as the lack of useful help in preparing for life after prison, are laid bare:

I had been pretty curious about what the reentry classes would convey to us. The first one I was required to attend was on health (...). A CO who worked in food services was there to lead it. (...). He told us that it is important to eat right, exercise, and treat your body as a temple. But he didn't tell us how to get health care services that people with no money could afford. He didn't tell us how we could quickly obtain birth control and other reproductive health services. He didn't recommend any solutions for behavioral or psychiatric care, and for sure some of those broads needed it (...). Next we heard about housing. He talked about what he knew – which was insulation, and aluminum siding, and the best kind of roof to put on your house (...). One woman raised her hand. “Um, Mr. Green, that's cool and all, but I need an apartment to rent. Can you talk a bit about how to get an apartment, and if there are any programs we could qualify for” (...). “Yeah, well, I don't know too much about that...” (pp. 283–285).

In this extract, Kerman sharply illustrates the kind of help prison authorities do and do not provide in the process of reintegrating prisoners.

The central role of food in a prison environment is another topic that is well described in Kerman's book. The importance of food, the poor quality of institutional meals and the consequences for inmates' weight, the joy of contraband food, the position of those in charge of cooking in the prison hierarchy... all these topics provide a detailed insight into how daily prison life is led and negotiated. Interestingly, these mundane events, which are all too often neglected in research, explain to the reader that life in penitentiary institutions is not only about mediatized events such as violent outbursts and collapses of order. For example, prisoners may engage in prison cookery. Kerman explains that contraband food was irresistible but that she rarely cooked herself. She learned how to make certain popular prison dishes, such as cheesecake, often prepared for parties. These kinds of parties, held for birthdays, holidays, or when a fellow inmate was about to be released, illustrate how the women try to create an enjoyable atmosphere on days when imprisonment is particularly hard to bear. Self-made dishes

also appear to be very important for prisoners with different cultural cooking habits, partly because they remind these women of home. According to Kerman, some women (mainly “homesick Spanish and Indian women”) in prison cook on a daily basis.

The book reveals that women with similar food habits stick together in prison. Kerman explains that there are several female “tribes” – “Whites”, “Blacks”, “Latinos”, and “others” – each with different food habits. These female tribes strongly shape prison life and the prisoner community. Her descriptions concerning these tribes provide us with detailed information about the crucial role of ethnicity in a prison environment. As criminological research has shown that a lack of knowledge about the ethnic component has prevented scholars from fully grasping prisoners’ experiences in the past (see, for example, Philips, 2012), this aspect of prison life is of particular importance.

As illustrated in this review, Kerman’s biographical work has great merit for criminological research. The detailed description of her experiences in a women’s prison can be connected with several criminological frameworks and concepts, some of which are illustrated here. From a constructionist viewpoint, prison biographies may also be useful for increasing prison authorities’ and policymakers’ understanding of how people experience their sentence and how to improve prison regimes and reintegration practices. In that sense, these kinds of books should be required reading, not only for prison researchers, but also for prison staff and criminal justice policymakers.

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