

THE READING REVOLUTION

POETIC JUSTICE

A NARRATIVE OF BELFAST BREAKTHROUGHS

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That's shit'. So says J, a middle-aged woman, of Shakespeare's sonnet 29 at my Get Into Reading group at a Belfast prison. 'What bits are particularly shit?' I ask. 'Well, all of it. Who talks like that, anyway?' Turns out, after a bit of unpacking and a long discussion on the fine line between free will and necessity, it's not 'shit', just *difficult*. 'You always think the grass is greener on the other side, don't you – but it isn't', says L, a woman whom I know to be speaking from experience. Applying the text to real life, another of the group says of the opening line 'When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes', 'I'm expecting to be treated like that, when I leave here'. Such musings could be the modern day equivalent of Shakespeare's Richard III, 'And every tale condemns me for a villain'. Certainly, that's how our friend has been feeling. Another woman whose brash, public face belies a sensitive acknowledgement of her 'outcast state' offers this: 'I spend hours, sometimes, crying in my cell – just like [the speaker]'. Finally, like a light going on in the mind of our friend (she of the excremental analogy), J delightedly exclaims, 'Oh! I get it – it's about jealousy and depression!'

Every week I read with these women – women for whom life has been difficult, unbearable, even, and for whom society has assigned a role that they, like characters straight out of a

Shakespearean tragedy, feel obliged to play. For how long, though, is the discussion that comes from reading the sonnet together. J's assertion that 'I will always be the woman who has been in prison', is met with aggressive sincerity by K to 'change how you think about it, like the man in the poem... you need to find that *thing* to keep you going', she says. It's bloody hard here, but K is right – there are things that keep you going.

It seems such a simple thing, really. Every week, I – or sometimes, the women – read short stories and poems, aloud, together. We talk about the texts in ways that relate fictional life stories to our real ones in numerous and often offbeat ways. I say 'real', but they're not always our real stories. Sometimes, they are the lives and stories we wish we had – or didn't have. I'm often asked what it is that *Get Into Reading* *does* for the women. My initial thought is usually an acknowledgement of the appropriateness of the verb, 'doing' – it is true, however unintentional the material implication may be, that *Get Into Reading* 'does' something. It has very practical applications. Let me try and put into words what that very real, practical *thing* is.

In the first session, P, an imposing woman who is a self-confessed non-reader with limited social skills, became agitated as soon as the staff officer left. P was either unable or unwilling to express what the matter was – perhaps the closing of the door, however well-meaning, was understood as another form of imprisonment. I wondered, then how she would feel about my reading choice that day, a delightful short story ('Faith and Hope Go Shopping' by Joanne Harris) about two elderly ladies conspiring together to escape the constraints of their care home to travel to London in search of their holy grail – a pair of 'inappropriate' shiny, red designer shoes. P, as if sensing my interest, demanded to leave both the room and the project. I tried, without success, to encourage her to stay for a bit before making that decision. She reluctantly agreed to sit the session out, only because there was no-one to escort her back to her cell. To underscore the point, she turned her back on me, and the rest of the group. In the absence of a more practical solution, I simply started reading. Before long, it was clear that there were parallels between the well-meaning staff at the fictional care-home and

the prison, in that our heroines had been ‘banned’ from reading material that would presumably (or presumptuously) incite rebellion, in action or in thought. In the story, *Lolita*, was on the banned list. For their own good, you understand. In a clear case of life mirroring art, I too had been cautioned by some of the staff to avoid stories about ‘sensitive subjects’, such as prison or murder and ‘anything that will upset them’ (all without qualification). I wondered if ‘Faith and Hope’ was to be our *Lolita*. I read for a bit and after stopping at a few points and sharing some discussion with the rest of the group, I cast a surreptitious glance at P, and noted that she had slowly, almost in spite of herself, started to turn around. It was clear that she was trying to participate. Five minutes later, at a point of quiet reflection on the text, she leaned into the group, and in a barely audible voice, whispered, ‘I really like this’. The spontaneous applause that followed from her fellow group members, expressed as much of my own relief and gratitude as it did theirs.

Six weeks in, P was still there. I remember that week vividly. I read ‘The Story of an Hour’, by Kate Chopin, which tells of a woman whose husband is understood to have died in an accident. As the news is reported to the woman she struggles with conflicting feelings of grief and relief, which in the story, are presented collectively as one entity, a tangible ‘thing’ that advances towards her, and which threatens to overwhelm her. P, who is serving a sentence for the manslaughter of a violent partner, was getting very restless. Something, not yet understood, was happening to her as I read the following passage:

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognise this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will – as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned herself

a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: ‘free, free, free!’ The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

Throughout the reading, I was conscious of P’s increasing agitation, and of something visibly present that I would later recall as pain – I could see it. It was etched on her face as she tried desperately to communicate *something*. I stopped to give her the opportunity to speak and what followed was a series of incoherent and disjointed sentences that, when put together said, simply, ‘That’s how I feel’. I have never watched another person who has all of the physiological workings and cognitive apparatus necessary to enable speech, struggle so much to articulate a statement before that moment. But what a statement. With some gentle encouragement, she attempted, many times, to recount through a broken narrative, the circumstances that led her to prison and the emotional struggle she has experienced every day since. Words like ‘pain’, ‘guilty’, ‘love’, ‘loss’, surfaced alongside bits of sentences; ‘miss him’, ‘feel guilt’, ‘can’t grieve’. The only sentence that came with any clarity was ‘that’s how I feel’. To be able to express an emotion or a thought is half the battle when it comes to dealing with the ramifications of that emotion or thought. As Fernando Pessoa puts it, in his wonderful *The Book Of Disquiet*, ‘To express something is to conserve its virtue and take away its terror’.

P’s story is not unusual. Neither is the utility of the text in this way. Yesterday, for example, I read with a group, ex-prisoners, men, who have spent a lifetime in jail. One of the men, S, said afterwards, ‘You know, Patricia, I can see why you read like this in prison. We are not *reading* the text here – we’re *investigating* it’. To use his words, ‘we’re looking at all the angles’. We read Morley Callaghan’s ‘The Snob’, a story about a young student overcome by shame and humiliation at encountering - and ignoring - his scruffy father in a bookshop, to prevent his girl from suffering the indignity of having to meet him. Yet it is he

who passes judgement on his own family. 'That girl wasn't given a chance to form her own opinion', said our man. 'He formed it for her'. Having spent time discussing why that might be, the guys concluded that society, epitomised in our protagonist, has a lot to answer for.

Another week, and H, who has spent 26 years in prison, 15 of them 'in solitary', read Charlotte Mew's poem, 'The Call', to the group after we had read it once over and talked about what or who had made 'the call':

Was it a bright or a dark angel? Who can know?

It left no mark upon the snow,

But suddenly it snapped the chain

Unbarred, flung wide the door

Which will not shut again;

And so we cannot sit here any more.

We must arise and go:

The world is cold without

And dark and hedged about

With mystery and enmity and doubt,

But we must go

Though yet we do not know

Who called, or what marks we shall leave upon the snow.

'That could be anything', said H. It could be the end of something or someone and you have no choice but to get on with it without them'. 'Aye', responds S, 'But it could be a good thing – a new start – cutting the dead wood and moving on'. H asked if he could keep the poem, 'I want to read it again later', he says. At the end of that particular session we were interrupted by a big wall of a man who came in to the group because he was fed up waiting outside on S (we had overrun). Taking a copy of the poem as I was about to read it, he reads along with me. 'Wow, that could mean a thousand things!' he says of Mew's poem. He goes on to give a very articulate and profound interpretation of 'The Call' before apologising when he suddenly becomes aware of the sound of his own voice. 'Sorry love, for sticking my nose in'. We encourage him to continue and afterwards, the

guys and I invite him to next week's session. His response was reminiscent of a Monty Python sketch; 'Jesus, no' he exclaims, 'I don't read poetry or books!'

Our guys don't read books so much as they read people. 'If you don't, you get stroked', says H, 'pretty soon you're a dead man'. This kind of 'reading of humans' has helped H to extrapolate from the intricacies of the literary readings. He will seize on words that others often overlook and attribute to them a contextual significance that shapes and enriches our readings of the characters. While discussing a short story about a confrontation between a thuggish dad and a middle class university professor in a park, H hesitates over the word 'incredible' in the sentence describing the latter's wife's reaction:

'Would there be violence, fighting? How dreadful, how incredible...She must do something, stop them call for help'

H claims the word 'incredible' 'doesn't fit with the wife's disgust at the violence'. Actually, it doesn't – its juxtaposition with 'dreadful' is incongruent. 'She's scared that they'll fight, but at the same time she's excited by it', asserts H; 'she wants him to get stuck in 'cos she's fed up with her boring life with him'. Nods of agreement from the rest of the group follow as does a scramble for 'evidence' of H's synopsis from the text itself. At the end of the story H tells us that 'this story has actually changed my thinking... I would never normally walk away from a challenge, but you can see, here, how fighting this guy will achieve nothing – in fact, walking away is harder, but it actually is the right thing, even if it doesn't please everyone'. Seeing 'all the angles' is key to H's revelation and change of attitude. He tells me so at the end. The totality of the story offers just that – beginning, middle, end. A chance to think things through. The reading allows us time for reflection on an event before it happens in reality, or, conversely, to reconsider a similar past event and make a more objective assessment of our handling of it.

Back at the prison, and P has gone on from barely speaking to mentoring others in basic literacy. Recently she took me aside

and said, 'Patricia, whatever happened at the end of that story you read with us, you know, the one with the woman who has to go underground because of a bomb or something?' She was referring to H. C. Neal's 'Who Shall Dwell', which I read with her almost 2 years ago, when she was barely able to deal with even basic social contact. I told her the name of the story and she squealed 'that's it! I missed the end of that for some reason and I often think about it – I've always wanted to know what happened to that family.' The family to which she refers, lives under threat of a nuclear attack and build a bomb shelter as a safe haven for their small family. When safely inside with four minutes to impact, the mother succumbs to the desperate calls from outside, momentarily opens the door and surrenders her place to a child who would have otherwise died. Unable or unwilling to take steps to reverse the situation, the father, too, opens the door, throws another two children inside the shelter instructing his son not to open the door 'for at least a week', before inevitably, perishing with his wife. Looking back over my records I noted that P had attended the full session, but for whatever reason, had no recollection of the story's conclusion. For her, the story raised concerns about the people 'left behind' and the impossible situation in which the mother finds herself. Our discussions raised questions about whether this couple are playing God (the title invokes Psalm 15, 'who shall dwell in thy holy hill'), or merely taking charge of their own destiny. These questions have a particular significance for our group. P, for her part, has had to learn to take control of things, to make decisions that will, in the first instance, help herself. It hasn't been easy. As she left, she hugged me and whispered very quietly, 'thank you – it's been tough, but I've come a long way, Patricia'.

Bloody right, she has.