

FEATURE - BOOK REVIEW

Crowley, Michael, *Behind the Lines: Creative Writing with Offenders and People at Risk*, 2012, Waterside Press, UK.

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Drawing on over 15 years experience working in youth justice, author Michael Crowley's *Behind the Lines* is an exploration of how creative writing can be a useful educational and rehabilitative tool in a prison setting.

Initially a youth offender officer, Crowley's own life was transformed somewhat through creative writing, and thus he is convinced of the power of the pen. For the last five years he has been a writer in residence in a UK prison, an institution which he does not name. He is also the author of the play, *The Man They Couldn't Hang*, the story of John 'Babbacombe' Lee, a prisoner who was reprieved by the Home Secretary in 1885, when the gallows trap door failed to open. Crowley's debut collection of poetry 'Close to Home' deals with displaced childhood.

Aimed at educational and care professionals working within a prison setting, *Behind the Lines* outlines ways in which creative writing can be used to encourage offenders to address their own lives and crimes through creative writing.

That Crowley is passionate about his work with offenders and the power of creative writing as a tool of change is unquestionable. His book raises some very interesting issues relating to offenders and the society that has shaped their paths. However, *Behind the Lines* lacks focus to some extent, and the scope of what the author is trying to achieve may be too wide. On one level, it is a handbook '...for everyone concerned about the negative effects of poor levels of literacy amongst those in prison or at risk of imprisonment...', while on another level it reads like a personal reflection/social commentary on working with offenders, all of which is interspersed with samples of writing from young offenders and exercises to work with one's client group.

As a handbook for prison education and care staff, this text would benefit from a better balance between practical creative writing tips and the personal meanderings of the author, whose tone can sometimes stray

onto 'the high moral ground'. He frequently informs the reader of his students' gratitude to 'Mr Crowley,' leaving one with the uneasy sense that he is on a 'crusade' to save young offenders through the medium of creative writing, a task which may be somewhat ambitious (p.226).

As a source of therapy, creative writing is widely acknowledged as a very useful tool, and one that gives the writer a voice that may not be heard in their everyday life. Crowley firmly believes in the value of giving voice to his students through creative writing, and seems to have successfully worked with many young offenders. He suggests that creative writing should be more central to the rehabilitative process, but his approach raises some difficult issues.

To be interested in a prisoner's writing without any regard to how the process might change their thinking and behaviour to me seems pointless. This has meant discussing crimes, grave crimes in detail; writing and rewriting about them; the planning and motivation; the commission of the offence; the aftermath on all concerned; their meaning. It is remarkable how little opportunity or requirement there is upon prisoners to discuss the significance of what they have done, particularly in a YOI (Crowley, p.29).

To suggest that an educational professional working with offenders of any age should request their student to discuss their crime in detail seems both naive and most un-safe, not to mention displaying a lack of professional conduct. Creative writing teachers may be equipped to deal with the process and techniques of writing and self-expression, but they are not trained to deal with the psychological aspects of revisiting a crime with their student, who may be a very vulnerable individual. This could be incredibly traumatic for the student, and puts the education or other 'care' staff in a very difficult position. There are also issues of confidentiality and the matter of where such discussion



should take place, either in a group session or one-to-one? What might be the impact on the student when the class has finished and they return to their cell after they have re-lived some traumatic life-changing event?

As part of a programme in Restorative Justice or addiction counselling, *Behind the Lines* may work well as it encourages offenders to reflect and write about the impact of their crime on their victims, sometimes from their victims' point of view. Writing 'the self' is no doubt cathartic but as a reader and potential user of this text, I felt there was perhaps too much emphasis on the rehabilitative process of creative writing. As an education worker, I would question and feel uneasy with the role of bringing about a type of moral transformation in the students we work with.

Crowley is correct in the sense that creative writing cannot be completely separated from one's own experiences, and participants in a creative writing class should be encouraged to write about their own lives, but not purely about their criminal/dysfunctional life events. It is surely important to believe that nobody has a single story to their life.

In terms of usability, *Behind the Lines* offers some excellent suggestions for writing tasks that would indeed encourage creative expression, such as the Emotion into Memoir exercise (p.66), which challenges the participant to write about the seven different emotions. Other exercises that encourage the participant to write to themselves at a point in their past and in their future would work really well with learners of different levels, as would the tips on creating characters.

With regard to learners with literacy issues, Crowley admits 'that difficulties with literacy and a weak reading culture are substantial barriers to the work....' (p.31). He adds that this type of creative writ-

ing needs to be 'fuelled by reading, as well as reflection upon what has been read.' Given that literacy is an issue for the majority of men and women in a prison community, many of the exercises would be more suitable for use with more advanced students. Asking students to write about an event in their life in a fairytale genre, or requesting them to consider the commission of a crime and write the internal dialogue as they work through what they are about to do, requires a relatively high level of understanding and command of language.

Crowley raises some interesting points about how the introduction of TVs with multi channels in individual cells has dramatically reduced use of the prison library, and how this further compounds the problems of cultural impoverishment. However this is a problem within the non-criminal general population also.

Crowley is clearly passionate about creative writing as a journey to a better self, and he makes a very important point in claiming that 'To lack the means to express yourself is to be imprisoned wherever you are.' He is sensitive to the needs of the young offenders he is working with and is keenly aware of the social inequalities that have shaped the lives of the people with whom he works.

Having been asked to review *Behind the Lines* from the perspective of a prison English teacher, and one who is far less experienced than Mr Crowley, I feel it is a useful resource to 'dip into', and could be used as a basis for encouraging creative writing with learners. I would have some reservations about some of the exercises that delve into the student's criminal life, mainly as I would feel unqualified for such a task. As a text I feel that a good editor could bring a sharper focus to *Behind the Lines*.

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