Haunting Prison

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Haunting Prison: Exploring the Prison as an Abject and Uncanny Institution

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For mom and dad

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Preface

This study that makes up this book began as my doctoral thesis, which I started working on in 2016 and completed in 2021. When I first started analysing prison stories from different times, places, and points of view, I was surprised by how coherent they were in terms of theme and imagery despite being historically, geographically, or socially distant from one another. While narrators in this genre are often both literally and literarily confined, even when they were free from incarceration they still depicted prison in much the same way as those who were imprisoned by it. The same held true across regions and historical time. Moreover, it did not take long to note how the themes and images these novels conjured were closely tied to the ghost- and horror stories of Gothic literary conventions.

Commercially published prison autobiographies create a grey area between fact and fiction. Their stories are framed as true, but at the same time they are edited for entertainment purposes and mass-market appeal. While their truth claim is clear, the extent of the truth itself in these stories is not. Nor does it really matter how true these stories are. What matters is that they are presented as true, while also presenting a horror-storied picture of prison for readers to experience through imaginative engagement. As a result, these truth claims become part of how prison stories use a Gothic frame of narration.

This discovery was the starting point for seeing how prison stories are not only bound by prison, but they are also bound by a gothicized literary tradition. To explore how this overlap of prison and gothicity speaks to the cultural anxieties that underpin them both, I turned to the uses of psychoanalytical theory found in sociology and the humanities. What quickly became clear was just how much these stories present abject and uncanny encounters that showcase anxieties about selfhood, life, and death. The prevalence of such themes made these prison stories an intriguing case for the study of a social unconscious. The way content with documentary ambitions uses horror tropes gives rise to so many questions, and so many possibilities for interdisciplinary research.

Rewriting my doctoral thesis to suit the book format has been a bit of a challenge, but it is a challenge I am very happy to have been offered. I especially want to thank Yvonne Jewkes for encouraging me to go for it, and the editorial team at Emerald for making the process of reworking this study so enjoyable. My deepest thanks also go out to those who read, listened to, and commented on this research while I was pursuing my degree, including – but by no means limited to – Frida Beckman, Eamonn Carrabine, Michael Fiddler, Kristina Fjelkestam,

Robin Gålnander, Keith Hayward, Magnus Hörnqvist, Ingrid Lander, Anders Nilsson, and Tove Pettersson.

Last but not least, I want to thank my friends and family for always being there, offering snacks and sympathy whenever things got stressful. Like everything else in life, this project would have been way less fun without you.

Tea Fredriksson
September 2022

Chapter 1

Prison Imag(inari)es

Most people have never been imprisoned. Yet, we all have some idea of what prison is like. What do you think about when you think about prison? What do you picture? How does it look, sound, smell, or feel? Now, consider how much of the image you have conjured up is based on your encounters with prison in popular culture. Unlike many other places we are personally unfamiliar with, we still think we know a lot about what prison is like due to its popularity in pop culture and the media (see e.g. Carrabine, 2008, 2012b; Cecil, 2015; Cheliotis, 2012). But what stories are told and heard about prison? And how?

Prison influences, and is influenced by, our cultural, collective imagination – especially through its myriad depictions in art and literature (Carrabine, 2012b; Garland, 2012). The criminological interest in how crime and punishment is represented in popular culture has increased in the past decade (e.g. Carrabine, 2008; Fiddler, 2007; Fredriksson, 2020; Steinmetz, 2018; Young, 2009). Studies have shown that popular culture is an intrinsic part of public perceptions of prison, to an extent where myths, tropes, and horror stories have come to be viewed as truths about prison (e.g. Cecil, 2015; Cheliotis, 2012; Fiddler, 2011b; Fleisher & Krienert, 2009). Prison, especially to those who have never been inside it themselves, has thus become a merger of fact and fiction.

This book explores this grey area of factual fantasies about prison through a close-reading of commercially published prison autobiographies, by analysing how prison is narrativized. To be narrativized, rather than narrated, relates to how space is created and 'comes alive' on the page. As such, it is more than a mere description of the space, although descriptions are, of course, part of how narrativization takes place. To pursue the question of how prison is narrativized, this study uses a psychoanalytical approach drawing on the Kristevan abject – processes of boundary maintenance and transgression that aim to keep undesirable otherness away, and the Freudian uncanny – an unsettling or outright frightening unfamiliarization of said boundaries, and of other things we thought we were familiar with. Prison, as this book will demonstrate, is bound up in a perpetual exchange between ejections of abject social matter and uncanny, unsettling returns of things and perspectives that were long forgotten or repressed.

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It is worth noting already at the outset that this book focusses on prison depictions written and published in a Global Western context. This means that perspectives outside of these regions are not present here, which is, of course, a limitation. However, this is largely a study of how prison functions as a prism of fears, anxieties, and unease to white heteropatriarchy, collecting and diffracting these fears in different ways. In a sense, this book studies how prison haunts (and is haunted) in Western societies that tend to view it as a tool for criminal policy and control of classed, racialized, and gendered undesirables. This book thus largely explores what happens when prison bites the hand that feeds it, when white-supremacist, heteropatriarchal senses of self, and of prison, as good or useful become dislodged, or when punishers find themselves uncomfortably akin to punishees. It studies how such events or processes come alive on the literary page, and how, in turn, social and political powers associated with patriarchal, heteronormative whiteness is bound up in (and unsettled by) prison imagery.

Prison and Popular Culture

When it comes to prison's presence in Western culture, it has a particular history of relying on deliberate, and frightening, misinformation. A clear example of this can be found in its early architecture. The *architecture terrible* of Western nineteenth century prisons was designed to mirror the castles and dungeons of the then-popular gothic novels and penny dreadfuls (Fiddler, 2011b; Garland, 2012). These buildings were artistically designed with the aim of conveying a fearful image of incarceration – to tell a specific, frightening story about what it meant to be imprisoned. To do this, the designs implemented horror-iconographic details such as chains, sharp spikes, and statues of tortured convicts (Garland, 2012, p. 259). The explicit aim of this design was to add fuel to the fires of public superstition, thereby inspiring new horror stories and making prison frightening to the public (Fiddler, 2011b; C. Smith, 2009). In this way, the prison façade became a communicative, pop-cultural display modelled after a gothic aesthetic: dark, gloomy, and threatening. By means of familiar horror iconography, people would know (or, rather, think they knew) what to expect from imprisonment. This form of projection has been explored as a form of phantasmagoria (Fiddler, 2011a), where underlying collective fears and anxieties were projected onto an external surface. Over time, through prison's increasing presence as an imagined reality in art and culture, this 'message of gothic prison-ness' no longer needs 'to be projected onto a façade. It exists as a place myth, stripped of an apparatus' (Fiddler, 2007, p. 204). Today, this is evident in how contemporary culture is filled with dark and dreary prison imagery (e.g. the true crime wave of the twenty-first century). Prison thus has a communicative function that is intricately bound up with pop culture and the collectively agreed upon horror iconography of our social imaginary. This broad, societal communication is a form of storytelling – be it through façades or narrative fiction. This book focusses on the latter.

As narrative criminologists have pointed out, '[t]he sharing of stories is an important part of the human condition' (Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016). It is a way to express and communicate social anxieties, through things like familiar tropes

or narrative themes. Moreover, scholars have asserted that through narratives in film and literature, 'dramatic depictions of the prison' have stepped in to 'convey the same messages as the gothic façade [of the 19th century]' used to do (Fiddler, 2007, p. 193). In this study, I adopt a cultural- and narrative-oriented criminological approach, to explore the stories prison tells: stories about belonging and otherness; deviance and normalcy; horror and haunting. The study explores how these stories unveil a prison that is best understood as an abject (i.e. concerned with boundaries, their maintenance, and transgression) and uncanny (i.e. uncertain, destabilizing, and ambiguous) socio-cultural institution.

Cultural criminology merges with narrative criminology through a shared, established interest in the stories we tell and how their socially constructed meanings underpin issues of crime and control, as well as the spaces they occur in (e.g. Ferrell, 2013; Garland, 2012; Hayward, 2012). Because of their interest in storytelling and meaning-making, cultural-criminological enquiries often merge criminological, sociological, and humanistic research methods. As Sothkott (2016) states, cultural criminologists are 'primarily concerned, not with novelty for its own sake, but with re-shifting the focus of criminological enquiry in a more overtly humanistic direction', in order to better explain 'how popular vindictiveness and disgust for criminal transgression can sometimes encourage responses (both formal and informal) that are themselves unlawful' (p. 443; see also Valier, 2008). In other words, it takes an interest in how the idea of *fighting* monsters is what *creates* monsters.

The nascent and related field of ghost criminology has devoted its attention to how questions of (dis)appearance, (in)visibility, and haunting figure into these questions of deviance and punishment (Fiddler et al., 2022), and how this is expressed in myriad cultural forms (e.g. Carrabine, 2014; Fiddler, 2011a,b; Fredriksson & Gålnander, 2020; Steinmetz, 2018). Here, scholars have highlighted the importance of looking at how anxieties relating to belonging and otherness underpin (narrative) sense-making, and how these anxieties are distilled and dissolved through cultural discourses and imaginings (e.g. Fiddler, 2007, 2011; Higgins & Swartz, 2018; Sothkott, 2016; Steinmetz, 2018). However, literature is still an understudied kind of material within the ghost-criminological field, which is something this book seeks to add to this area of research. Explored within the ghost-criminological field, prison's abjection and uncanniness pertain to more than prison itself. They are also tied to questions about what, and how, societies that use prison fear, as well as to prison's role as monster or saviour in the stories about deviance and normativity that society tells itself, about itself (cf. Garland, 2012). Through studying its abject and uncanny properties, we can see how prison is part of collective, societal subject formations. The question of collective or societal subject formation centres on how society becomes what it is through processes of exclusion, hierarchy, and haunting, and, for the purposes of this study, what role prison plays in this becoming (see Valier, 2002, 2008). The abject prison isolates and devours, whereas the uncanny prison destabilizes what we thought we knew about boundaries and belonging.

Manifestations of the same, gothicized prison story that was expressed by nineteenth century buildings are present in modern true crime stories, prison

novels, and prison films (Cecil, 2015; Duncan, 1996; Fiddler, 2007; Garland, 2012). Instead of inscribing the story of imprisonment on prison façades, today's socio-cultural understanding of prison relies on written and filmic storytelling to paint the picture of what, why, and how prison *is* (Carrabine, 2012b; Cecil, 2015; Fiddler, 2011b; Garland, 2012). Effectively, the nineteenth century prison exteriors made prison look like something abject and monstrous to proper, civilized society. Prison was thus visibly ejected from society as abject, while *simultaneously* being displayed for public view. It functioned as an embodiment of the meaning of imprisonment, aimed at eliciting – and designed based on familiarity with – gothic imaginaries and horrors (Garland, 2012). Because of their play on the public's familiarity with horror, these prisons' façades also made for uncanny doubles, or doppelgängers. Doppelgängers are bodies, or in this case, places, that 'have to be regarded as identical because they look alike' (Freud, 2003, p. 141). These nineteenth century prison façades thus deliberately doubled the dungeons and castles of horror stories in order to conjure up similar thoughts about what went on inside prison walls.[1] As such, this communicative display embodied a specific, gothicized meaning of punishment to the public eye: stay out, beyond these walls are the threats and monsters you know from horror stories.

While old prison buildings are not the focus of this study, these building do offer a clear example of how the abject and uncanny have long been present in prison's storytelling, and how this storytelling merges the real with the imagined. This study focusses on a similar merger of fact and fiction: autobiographical novels. These too, as this study will show, retain prison's connections to a gothic mode of storytelling. This gothic mode is a collection of conventions, tropes, and iconographies that together form a gothic aesthetic in the articulation of prisonness (cf. Fiddler, 2007). This gothic mode remains a foundational aspect of how Western societies continue to picture and understand 'real' prisons today – but through books, rather than buildings. The dramatization that goes into prison documentaries and autobiographical prison novels thus performs much of the same work as the nineteenth century prison façade: projecting collective anxieties in communicative, (mis)informative ways, using familiar horror tropes to make the image of prison 'realities' come alive in the public imagination (Fiddler, 2011a). As such, the underlying narrative that structures prison as an imagined reality remains built on a gothic foundation. These factual fantasies lie at the heart of this study.

Furthering prison's ties to gothicity and its many tropes and conventions, studies have also shown how prison has been depicted as a living tomb where imprisoned people persevere as ghosts, zombies, or monsters, existing in a liminal state of living death far away from normal life. These tendencies have been observed across many forms of text (C. Smith, 2009), and show how prison is envisioned

[1]Importantly, these notions were inspired by deliberately erroneous aesthetics. These designs were supposed to elicit a fearful response for deterrence purposes. In other words, the imprisonment practices behind these walls were not modelled on the same gothic sensibilities as the look of the buildings.

both a space of safety, keeping the monsters at bay, and as a site of horrors; a dark tomb for live burials. This idea of prison as a site of tombs and live burials where social undesirables exist in liminal states of living death renders prison uncanny; making it the 'buried, repressed, repository of social fears' (Fiddler, 2007, p. 198). Across the previous studies relevant to this one, some central questions lurk between the lines. Does prison make monsters, or contain them? Or was prison the monster, all along? What *is* a monster, anyway? And to whom?

Much like the aforementioned nineteenth century prison façades, autobiographical prison novels tend to present prison as a simultaneously monstrous, abject, and haunting, uncanny space. This perpetual motion between abjection and uncanniness is the central tension that this study explores. In short, I use the present study to investigate how prison's storytelling function expresses generic as well as subject-formative societal anxieties about belonging and otherness, normalcy, and deviance, as both abject and uncanny.

Aim and Execution

Since this study takes an interest in factual fantasies or imagined realities where prison in concerned, the analysis consists of a narrative study where I have repeatedly close-read 10 Western, commercially published prison autobiographies. These are *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (1912), *The Enormous Room* (1922), *Papillon* (1969), *The Great Escape* (1950), *Inside Alcatraz* (1991), *In the Belly of the Beast* (1981), *Dead Man Walking* (1993), *Newjack* (2000), *A Prison Diary: Volume 1 Hell* (2002), and *Orange is the New Black* (2010).

While these titles span different times and places, this is not a historical study. The narratives this book explores are not primarily studied as relics of their socio-historical contexts. While such aspects can come into play, the primary focus here is on how these novels remain as parts of a bigger whole: prison's ongoing storytelling. They are part of how prison is a (horror) storied institution – it lingers, shifts, and perpetuates itself both within and across Western societies. As such, rather than being viewed as socio-historical artefacts, this study considers prison novels as part of the same overarching discourse as nineteenth century prison façades as well as today's true crime phenomenon. Stories written in the past are still read today. We might respond to stories differently in different times, but they nonetheless remain part of an overarching prison story that spans different times, places, and pop-cultural prison depictions. In other words, what is important for this study is that texts, while written in different times or places, can still linger as part of prison's ongoing, storytelling function. Viewed in this light, the prison-themed films, TV series, podcasts, and novels consumed in the North-Western infotainment sphere all speak to a meta-image of prison in different ways. While this book focusses on horror iconography in fictionalized, commercially published prison autobiographies, the image of prison this study unveils could thus be observed and nuanced through other forms of prison media as well.

The most important selection criteria apart from being commercially published were (i) that the novels were autobiographies, and (ii) that they were both *about* and mainly *set in* prison. From there, titles were chosen based on seemingly

being widespread or popularized. For example, stories that have been adapted for film or TV have arguably made an impact on their readers, making the image of prison in these stories appropriate for an analysis of how prisonness is represented in Western culture. Other ways of assessing novels' status included paying attention to when a book might be mentioned within other ones. When one prison novel makes explicit mention of another, that makes these books intertextually linked. It also speaks to the status of the book that is being referenced, since someone deemed it important enough to include in their own story. In these cases, books in the study's sample pointed me to one another. Another way of looking for relevant titles had to do with their notoriety. For example, stories might be met with widespread discussions or critique in the media or online forums, either upon their release or in the form of a lingering interest. The latter relates to novels possibly having the status of a classic within their genre. Public interest was also assessed by noticing how certain books were popular on book review sites such as Goodreads or in lists of top recommendations made by fans of the genre.

Of course, this means that the selection process has been somewhat fluid and guided by recommendations from both the books themselves and readers of the genre. Notably, while some books have been excluded throughout the process of reading suggested titles (e.g. for not being set in prison to a large enough extent, or for not being commercially published), no prison autobiography was ever excluded due to not exhibiting the horror-iconographic traits this study is interested in.

In addition to the aforementioned criteria, different narrators' perspectives in relation to prison space were also of interest in the selection process. In an attempt to broaden the picture of prison available for analysis, I wanted the study to include stories narrated by different kinds of voices: visitors, imprisoned people, and prison staff. I have also sought to include both men's and women's voices. However, most likely given the popularity criteria and the study's restriction to commercially published samples, most of the included titles have been authored by white, straight men, and often by people occupying fairly educated, middle-class positions (cf. Nellis, 2012). This, in and of itself, says something about whose view of prison is given credit and attention in Western cultural imaginaries. It was noticing this that led me to focus on how white supremacy sees itself (and avoids seeing itself) in the prison system it is responsible for having constructed. While the study did not set out with this aim in mind, the selection process prompted a critical view of whiteness and how it operates in the narrativization of prison. This realization has also led the study to adopt a critical perspective in relation to its take on gothicity, which will be discussed throughout the book. While gothicity itself is not a theoretical perspective, this book does explore how prison novels make use of gothic narrative modes, and how these in turn express normative perspectives. gothic themes thus articulate abject and uncanny social processes and their relation to social hierarchies (cf. Gordon, 2008; Valier, 2002).

A related point that was important for an analysis of prison novels is the question of who speaks about what place. As such, one consideration has been whether or not to limit the included titles to those authored by people imprisoned in their own home countries. This could avoid cases of othering that centre on

questions of (non)belonging to the country itself and its culture, rather than on prison as such. However, this kind of national othering was only notable in cases where narrators were imprisoned in significantly different socio-political climates to their own (e.g. Swedes imprisoned in Kaliti in *438 Days*). Narrators imprisoned in countries other to their own, but within Western culture, generally did not narrate prison using the same overt, nationalistic othering. As such, the selection was limited to stories about imprisonment in a Western setting, narrated by Western voices.

Differentiating Authors from Narrators

A central distinction in this study is that between authors and narrators. While circumstances surrounding the books and their authors have been important for assessing the status of a literary work and its suitability for the study, these considerations have not been part of the subsequent analysis. While the autobiographical genre entails that the narrator is always framed as being the same as the author to some extent, the present study makes a clear distinction between the two. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the present study is interested in the image of prison available for public consumption. In short, its interest is in the narratives themselves as parts of how prison is collectively imagined. The author is irrelevant to this interest, since (s)he does not exist within the text. Secondly, this study has neither an interest in nor the access to the authorial intent behind these narratives. Given the editing process between writing a first draft and a story's eventual commercial publication, there is no way the present study could make claims about authorial intent since the authors – unlike the narrators – exist outside of the text, and thus outside of the material under study. Similarly, this study does not delve into reader response theory, since readers also exist outside of the text.

As other scholars have put it, an 'author may embody in a work ideas, beliefs, emotions other than or even quite opposed to those he has in real life', as well as express different ideas, points of view, beliefs, or standpoints across different works in their writing career (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p. 88). People change, whereas a published text does not. This point emphasizes the ethical problems that a study of authors based on their novels would entail. To paraphrase Rimmon-Kenan, literary works present ideas without representing the author as a person. As such, it is worth emphasizing that I do not make any claims about the individual experiences or intentions of the authors who wrote the novels explored here. Finding something in a text is not to be confused with that same something being regarded as a characteristic of the person who wrote it.

This distinction also means that no biographical information about an author that is not offered within the story itself as information about the narrator is included in the analysis. Because of this distinction between the authors as people and the narrators as textural constructs, this study is not to be considered part of convict criminology's aims of penetrating 'the reality of [prisons as] distant social worlds' (Richards, 2013, p. 380). Instead, the present study focusses on how prison is presented in by narrators; the storytellers that exist solely within the

fictionalized account they recount. Essentially, this study focusses on how these stories narrativize prisonness – making the authors (as well as readers) of these texts fall outside of the study's scope. This focus on the fictionalized means that the actual, physical prisons depicted in these stories fall outside of the study's scope as well. An observant reader might have noticed by now that I use terms like story, novel, and autobiography interchangeably when it comes to the prison depictions under study here. This is deliberate, and relates to this point of separation between narrators and authors. For all intents and purposes that are relevant here, the stories under study are expressions of a culturally recognizable image of prisonness. To what extent these stories are actually true is not relevant – the truth claim inherent in the genre is, because of how it frames these images of prison as real (in much the same way as the aforementioned prison façades did).

As an extension of the analytical distinction between the authors-as-people and the narrators-as-text, this book uses first names when discussing narrators in its analysis, as opposed to last names when citing the works of authors.

Disposition and Definitions

This study considers the selected autobiographies as fictionalized, since any retelling of a story for entertaining or suspenseful purposes always entails an unknown measure of fictionalization in order for the story to work *as a story* (Cecil, 2015). I am also studying these novels with a presupposition that these fictionalizations are gothicized, that is, reliant on gothic tropes, themes, or stereotypes, given the established affinities between prison depictions and gothic modes of storytelling (Fiddler, 2007; Garland, 2012).

Using these definitions of the autobiographical prison novel as a genre, this study explores how prison is narrativized as a frightening, threatening, or unsettling space within the selected stories. While my research rests on previous studies' assertions that prison and the gothic are bedfellows in many ways, I aim to explore the nuances of this in more detail. To do this, I focus on *how* the fears and anxieties that prison conjures, distils, and directs are presented in the particular context of autobiographical novels. How do prison autobiographies create a sense of prisonness? What is prison's atmosphere like, such as it can be accessed through its presentations in literature? What can prison novels tell us about what we think prison is like on a societal level? To analyse this, I have chosen to use psychoanalytical theory to unveil how prison comes across as an abject and uncanny institution in these forms of storytelling.

While abjection deals with expelling that which the (collective or individual) self needs to exist in opposition to in order to maintain its sense of identity, the uncanny deals with the unsettling return of the repressed, haunting destabilizations between things we thought were stable, or an unfamiliarization of the familiar (Freud, 2003; Kristeva, 1982). In this study, I take an interest in how prison is caught up in a perpetual exchange between these two movements. This perpetual exchange can be observed between how prison (and those it represents) is depicted as an abject, social death in relation to which the rest of society can retain a sense of propriety. Meanwhile, this sense of propriety is constantly called into question