

Dr Abigail Rowe is Lecturer in Criminology at the Open University.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the women's prison has held its place in one of the darker corners of the popular imagination. A perennial setting for B-movies and pulp fiction, the women's prison of popular culture provides a backdrop for a cast of stock characters and recurring plot motifs: the ingénue first-timer, the sadistic guard and aggressive prison lesbian. Offering a cultural analysis of representations of sexuality in women's prisons, Ann Ciasullo has described this as 'an enduring cultural erotic fantasy: women imprisoned, trapped with one another in a criminal and sexual underworld'¹. It is also a fantasy with roots in early criminological theory, which connected criminality to sexual inversion. Ciasullo tracks this 'women-in-prison narrative' across genres, including in her analysis psychological and sociological studies of women's imprisonment produced from the 1920s onwards. Here we see the social worlds of women prisoners organised around dyadic sexual relationships and complex pseudo-familial structures. For Ciasullo, it is the figure of the 'prison lesbian'² that most clearly unites these disparate genres of the women-in-prison narrative. Appearing with remarkable consistency, she represents a site at which anxieties about sexuality, criminality, race and class play out³. Ciasullo's inclusion of psychological and sociological research as examples of the women-in-prison narrative invites a critical re-examination of academic as well as literary representations of the women's prison.

Somewhere on the margins of this crowded field sits Pat Arrowsmith's 1970 novel, *Somewhere Like This*. The novel follows a handful of prisoners and staff over a few weeks at HMP Collingwood, a lightly veiled Holloway of the mid 1960s. This is the Victorian fortress that was the old Holloway. Ringing round the stone walls of the prison microcosm are echoes of the world outside, sharpening the sense of this as a novel of its historic moment: the long shadow of the Blitz; the pop culture of swinging mid-'60s London; the mores of its gay subculture against a backdrop of wider social taboo; the lopsided gender-relations that populate the women's prison with prostitutes, abortionists, housewives. The Prison Service Arrowsmith describes is recognisably of its moment too: prisoners uniformed in baggy bottle-green dresses and cardigans; an all-female staff clearly stratified by class; the burgeoning reformist ideals that would shortly usher in the Holloway redevelopment

¹ Ciasullo, A. (2008) Containing 'Deviant' Desire: Lesbianism, Heterosexuality, and the Women-in-Prison Narrative *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, 2, 195-223.

² Freedman, E. (1996) The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965. *Feminist Studies*, 22, 2, 397-423.

³ *ibid.*

project⁴ competing with 'old-school' doctrines of punishment; junior officers living in cramped prison residences subject to a discipline scarcely less rigid than that of the prisoners.

The narrative drive of this lightly-plotted novel derives primarily from the successive love affairs of boyish young burglar Lorry, first with, naïve first-timer Mavis, and then with high-living, well-travelled upper-class, thief, fraudster and seasoned prisoner Jan. Beyond this central triad, the prison universe is evoked through a constellation of other characters: young Officer Hewson, struggling to inhabit her role and manage her new authority; her 'old school' senior colleague, no-nonsense lesbian Mac; Borstal girl Rose, convicted of sending poison-pen letters, desperate for affection but deprived by an emotionally impoverished childhood of the tools to elicit it; abortionist Olive who lost her family in the Blitz and has continually sought to recreate it ever since. In the more distant background are more lightly-drawn others: well-meaning but evasive 'head shrinker' Miss Canister; butch-femme couple Rob and Bett; disturbed Polly, who audibly converses with her absent daughter and compulsively fiddles with her pubic hair in public.

With its strong lesbian theme, *Somewhere Like This* superficially follows many of the conventions of the women-in-prison narrative. The cover imagery and text of successive editions hint at titillating lesbian content, and in its meandering course the novel visits many of the tropes and plotlines Ciasullo identifies as staples of the narrative: the invasive examination on arrival by the reputedly 'bent' female doctor⁵; homosexual encounters in cells and laundry rooms; authoritarian governors and lesbian warders; the seduction of feminine first-timer by butch 'prison lesbian'; an attempted suicide. Little is missing from the rollcall but the riot and group shower scene. By the time Arrowsmith wrote *Somewhere Like This*, however, she was a veteran both of the prison landings and of the London gay scene, and from this singular vantage-point offers a new perspective on this familiar ground. The co-founder of CND and a dedicated peace campaigner, Arrowsmith had served eight prison sentences⁶ for her campaigning activities, and was active in the gay rights movement⁷. As we might then expect, Arrowsmith invites us to an understanding of her characters that is neither salacious, pathologising nor functionalist⁸, consistently evading and subverting the familiar narrative to produce a candid, but deeply humane account of prison life.

As suggested above, the 'prison lesbian' is a lynchpin of the women-in-prison narrative. Arrowsmith's rendering of this central figure is illustrative of her treatment of the narrative more broadly. Ciasullo suggests that the prison lesbian is primarily realised through the binary of the 'real'

⁴ See, *inter alia*, Rock, P. (1996) *Reconstructing a Women's Prison: The Holloway Redevelopment Project, 1968-88*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Arrowsmith (1970) P.28.

⁶ She would go on to serve three more. Her convictions were for activities protesting against nuclear weapons, the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland, and the Vietnam war and Amnesty twice adopted her as a prisoner of conscience. Arrowsmith, P. (1970/1990) *Somewhere Like This* (Third Edition) London: Gay Men's Press.

⁷ Blindel, J. (2008) No Time for Battle Fatigue. *The Guardian*, 30th April. Available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/apr/30/6> . (Accessed 30th September, 2011).

⁸ For a critique of the functionalist treatment of lesbianism in women's prisons, see Howe, A. (1994) *Punish and Critique: Towards a Feminist Penalty*. London: Routledge, p.152.

and 'pseudo' lesbian, posited by Havelock Ellis in 1897⁹. The 'true' invert is masculine, sexually aggressive and homosexual by preference; the 'pseudo' invert in women-in-prison narratives is the new, naïve prisoner – 'jailbent' or 'penitentiary turnout' – seduced or coerced into sexual involvement but resuming her normal and preferred heterosexuality before, or at, release. The prison-lesbian-as-true-invert reflects biologicistic Lombrosian explanations of women's offending, which continue to reverberate among criminologists. Women's offending is a deviation from normative femininity, associated with 'related' deviations such as masculine physiology and sexual deviance (homosexuality or hyper-sexuality). Both 'real' and 'pseudo' lesbians in women-in-prison narratives, then, speak to normative constructions of women as docile and compliant, giving these representations of women prisoners a more general feminist significance.

For Ciasullo, the women-in-prison narrative offers 'a safe but titillating exploration of female homosexuality' and 'reinscribe[s] the (purported) stability of heterosexuality'¹⁰. Although this argument is primarily supported by illustrations from popular culture, it equally chimes with functionalist sociological research. Here, lesbianism functions to mitigate the loss of roles and relationships outside¹¹; women barter participation in homosexual dyads and 'pseudo-families' for material or physical security.¹² Early US psychological studies presented lesbianism around a racialised binary, arguing that in romances between black and white prisoners, racial difference was a place-holder for gender, the binary later transposed to make class the central signifier of difference¹³. Readings of lesbianism in prison thus remain essentially heteronormative.

As Somewhere Like This opens on the first morning of Lorry's sentence, she seems the classic prison lesbian, passing as a man outside and masculinising her prison uniform as far as she can. Arrest is an occupational hazard and she is comfortable and confident in prison. The place of pseudo-lesbian is filled by 'fluffy, feminine and confused' Mavis, whom Lorry seduces: a first-offender, mother and housewife, wholly ignorant of lesbian sexuality. Their characterisation, however, undermines the lines of power and deviance for which the real/pseudo binary stands: Lorry's youth and boyish charm; Mavis's conviction for violence. Far from the coercion and instrumentalism that characterise other versions of this story, their coming together is tender and tentative. Together they share a first experience of love, and Mavis discovers a newly satisfying sexuality. Working together in the gardens, emotional and physical intimacy grows in secluded shrubberies and unused sheds, under the indifferent eye of the supervising officer.

Their relationship ends with Mavis's abrupt withdrawal from Lorry. An unexpected first visit from her husband brings the worlds inside and outside into collision and the bubble of her romance with

⁹ Ellis, H. (1897) *Sexual Inversion*, in Ciasullo (2008), p.200.

¹⁰ Ciasullo (2008) P.196.

¹¹ Ward, D. AND G Kassebaum (1965) *Women's Prison: Sex and Social Structure*.

¹² Note that few of these studies adequately account for when the 'demand' comes from in a market in which sexual intimacy is the currency. For a fuller review of sociological research in women's prisons, see Rowe, A. (2009) *Negotiating Disempowerment: Coping and Social Support in Women's Prisons*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, The Open University, UK.

¹³ Freedman (1996).

Lorry is ruptured. As in other women-in-prison narratives, the dissonance between Mavis's two realities becomes intolerable, but there is an ambivalence here that pulls this back from the classic contours of the women-in-prison narrative. By the end of the novel, Mavis's husband has 'taken up' with a neighbour, leaving their children to be taken into care and Mavis to grieve for them without the comfort of her relationship with Lorry, which had offered an 'unstable shelter'¹⁴ from prison life and her wider unhappiness. Mavis struggles suddenly to account for her rejection of Lorry, and this loss contributes to the despair that leads to her failed suicide attempt towards the end of the novel. Although attempted suicide is common in the career of the imprisoned pseudo-lesbian, distress at the loss of the female lover is well outside its usual compass.

Lorry's second affair confirms the dissolution of the real/pseudo binary. Rejected by Mavis, she allows herself to be seduced by Jan, who has quietly pursued Lorry since her arrival at Collingwood. As a 'basically fem',¹⁵ sexually versatile lesbian-by-orientation, Jan makes the real/pseudo dichotomy untenable. Her relationship with Lorry demands a radical redrawing of the women-in-prison narrative: it is stone-butched Lorry who is now seduced, and confused by being made love to by a woman. Having tied her lesbian sexuality to a masculine persona, the experience destabilises her self-image. To the shocked bewilderment of the wing governor who has attempted to reach out to her, Lorry is troubled not by her homosexuality, but by falling short of her own masculine ideal. Through Jan, and the encounter between disparate lesbian sexualities her relationship with Lorry represents, Arrowsmith questions the conflation of gender and sexuality. The ordinariness of sexual fluidity in and to the narrative and presence of incidentally gay figures, such as prison officer Mac, supports this. The more-or-less open homosexuality of a number of officers completes the novel's challenge to the association of homosexuality and masculinity with criminality.

Arrowsmith's homonormative re-versioning of the women-in-prison narrative represents a challenge to the assumptions and stereotypes on which the narrative relies. Its disruption of the real/pseudo-lesbian binary through which the 'prison lesbian' is realised undermines the nineteenth-century conflation of criminality and sexual/gender inversion that began to be replaced by increasingly medicalised views of women offenders in the mid-twentieth century, but which still colours both popular and academic representations of female criminality and life in women's prisons¹⁶. Disentangling this cluster of associations around female deviance and stripping away the perverse glamour of the 'cultural erotic fantasy' of the women's prison, Arrowsmith frees her characters as convicted and/or lesbian women from their titillating construction as 'deviant'. By presenting her subjects as certainly troubled, but neither passive nor pathological, Arrowsmith redirects our attention to the broader context. What she leaves us with is an insight into the relationship between the prison and the social margins. The women in Collingwood are

¹⁴ Arrowsmith (1970/1990) p.126.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.150.

¹⁶ For example, a recent article by Diana Fishbein looks for a relationship between aggressiveness, 'masculine' physical traits and homosexuality among women prisoners. Fishbein, D. (2000) Sexual Preference, Crime and Punishment, 11, 2, 67-84.

disproportionately poor, fragile, broken or unconforming. Their punishment is perverse, and this perversity is mirrored by Arrowsmith's observation that the prison, ironically, offers some of these socially marginal women a degree of respite from social pressures and normative values that stigmatise and undervalue them. For Lorry, Collingwood is the only social space in which, as a gay woman, 'she felt normal'¹⁷; for Mavis, the only space in which she feels fully loved. This issues a broad, and fundamentally feminist critique of both the criminal justice system and the wider society it serves. Although that society has changed dramatically since *Somewhere Like This* was published, the criminal justice system Arrowsmith depicts remains readily recognisable, and the challenge made by the novel continues to resonate today.

¹⁷ Arrowsmith (1970/1990) p.60.