

Reflections on the inside

AMY REISWIG

Stephen Reid offers insights into addiction and remorse, as well as the justice system and prison life.

Understanding the human condition is sometimes scary a business. Those willing to undertake the journey will be well-served by the controversial *A Crowbar in the Buddhist Garden* by writer and current William Head inmate Stephen Reid (ThistleDown, October 2012).

Winner of the recently awarded 2013 Butler Prize, Reid's powerful book has elicited polarized responses from the Victoria community, as many see Reid for what he did and was: a former Stopwatch Gang member and addict bank robber now serving time for a 1999 heist that led police on a bullet-ridden high-speed chase through Beacon Hill Park and James Bay, putting innocent lives at risk. In this collection of essays, his second book, Reid takes us straight into the heart of those events and the person behind them, including the man he is today, in all his tortured, thoughtful and thought-provoking humanity.

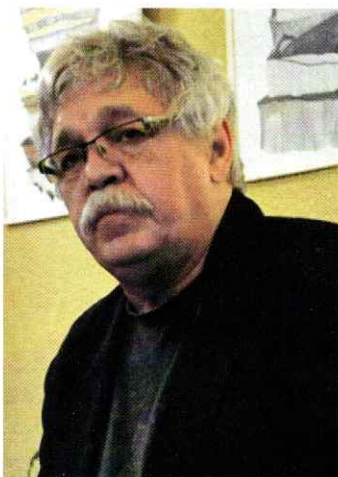
At the centre of Reid's book and his experiences is the desperate demon of addiction. It's a condition where the effects are so visible yet the causes or origins so often remain unknown, undiscussed, because they are painful, confused and confusing—especially if you are, as Reid was, an 11-year-old kid.

Reid writes honestly about things no one (I suspect even him) wants to know: like how a pedophile doctor injected him with morphine before sexually assaulting him. This went on for three years, throwing Reid down a well into which he would continue to fall for much of his life. "Paul unzipped my childhood," Reid writes, photographically recalling the day: the blood running down his arm, being pressed into the red leather of the doctor's Thunderbird hidden down an Ontario tractor-trailer road while "yellow waxy leaves make their death rattle in the late afternoon breeze. I am in profound awe of the ordinary...I am high. I am eleven years old..." By age 14, when most of us were worrying about our grade 9 homework, Reid was living on the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Reid acknowledges that the psychological trauma of sexual assault is not an excuse for criminal behaviour, but writing about it provides an entrance to understanding—for him and for us. "My small-town values, my human values, had been forever altered," he reflects, also accepting responsibility for his role. "It is not what Paul took from me, it is what I kept: the lie that the key to the gates of paradise was a filled syringe. In all the thousands of syringes I've emptied into my arm since then, the only gates that ever opened led to the penitentiary."

This so-young addiction, immersion in things no child should know, separated Reid from those around him, leaving a sense of disconnection that he fought alongside his addiction and during his sober years. "I had been released from prison, but still I had not escaped. I felt the same aloneness in the midst of my warrant-burning party in our garden as I had in my grade nine class," he writes.

And so, one day in 1999, despite years of sobriety, a loving marriage with author Susan Musgrave, and two daughters he describes as "incredible pieces of magic," Reid again turned to the only solace he ever knew.



Stephen Reid

"My wife smelled the tobacco on my breath and saw the long-distance holes in my eyes. She retreated to our bedroom, closed the door, and wept." With a wrenching combination of directness and discretion, he fully owns the loss he has inflicted on his family, and himself, as he again ended up behind the razor wire.

Therefore, one theme running throughout the essays is connection. In the prologue and epilogue, both called "The Beachcomber," Reid writes about tidal detritus at the seaside prison's edge and the way it links him to the world: "This is my news...my mail, posted anonymously and arriving by accident, connecting me to the lives of strangers on the free-side shores." And contrary to what many of us might think, that desire for connection is something he witnesses in various facets of the prison system, for Reid's is a rare look inside not just his own mind

and heart but inside the corrections system itself and the ways it has changed over the many years he's spent in and out of its reach.

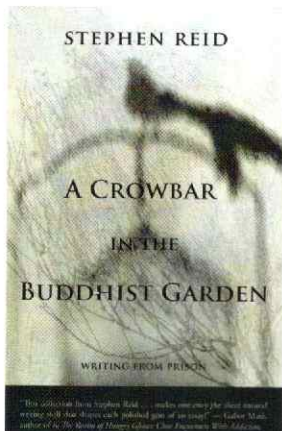
For example, in "The Last Jesus I Know Of" Reid writes of his experience in the Intensive Therapy Violent Offender Program, along with 15 other dangerous offenders. We read of brutally violent men opening up about their crimes—"men who grew so tired of being wounded they went out and wounded something else." And in "The Clockwork Grey of the CSC"—an essay looking at the shifting paradigm of the Correctional Service of Canada—Reid offers a kind of insider's evaluation of prison programs, noting that "Designing programs and implementing them are the two solitudes of CSC. To order someone into therapy is often to subvert the purpose. Willingness is the key to change...But in fairness, the percentage of inmates who genuinely wish to change, and the calibre of instructors willing to help them is much higher than the skeptics would have us believe."

While Reid doesn't shy away from the awfulness of being in solitary, for instance, or the seemingly sadistic prisoner transfer process in the US, where inmates are "wrapped up in waist chains and leg manacles, tossed aboard a bus or a plane and shipped around the country doing one night stands in prison isolation wings from California to Georgia and from Minnesota to Texas...the nightmare world of Diesel Therapy," he seems to focus on some prison positives we might not consider. In "The Carving Shed," for instance, he describes how the CSC recognizes people's different needs by allowing aboriginal inmates access to sweat lodges, healing circles and a carving shed, the latter being a place where inmates work and connect with each other and their culture. And on the question of prisoners' right to vote, Reid writes, "for anyone observing the actual process inside our prisons, the reason for giving criminals the vote becomes obvious" and then explains, offering observations from the federal election of 2004: "Prisoners begin talking in the compound or sitting together in common areas talking of wasted votes, social programs and foreign policies, negative campaigning, party platforms, hidden agendas and not so hidden agendas...A fly on the wall might begin to suspect that these men are feeling a part of something, possibly

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a stake in their country, maybe even in their own futures. If their vote counts perhaps one day they too will count."

A sense of connection, purpose, worth can make all the difference, and the book itself can be seen as Reid's attempt in that regard, for it reaches out to the community—including Victoria, which Reid knows he has wounded—offering accountability, self-knowledge and insight.



Reid has worked in restorative justice, reconciliation and healing circles, and the book functions much like his description of that work: "the victim and the offender are brought together in an informal and neutral setting...wherein anger, shame, and hurt could be transformed...It was sometimes a way through the anger and the hate. It was often the beginning of hope."

Perhaps *Crowbar* offers some hope of healing for Victorians still struggling with Reid's past. These essays are intellectual, emotional, and philosophical, combining the art of observation and reflection, where he finally admits "I

am determined to go wherever I have to go, to take it as deep as it is deep, to do whatever it is I have to do to become whole, to never commit another offence, to never again get addicted."

Some have said they don't believe Reid's book should be published, much less win a city award. But the book, aside from being a striking piece of literature, implicitly raises a larger issue.

Our penal system is based at least partly on a belief in rehabilitation. Prisons punish, yes, but also, ideally, bring people to a place of remorse, accountability, desire and dedication to change. If a prisoner does all that we ask and we then reject that rehabilitation—reject Reid's book without looking beyond the name on the cover—we on the outside have also lost something.

I'm not saying that our social contract requires people to read this book. As Reid notes in his essay on the decline in prison writing, "No one wants these problems in their living room or in their literature." But if humanity truly is our business, then perhaps we should, through these pages in our living rooms, sit with Reid in his prison garden and listen: "So it is—on these days when war breaks out in my heart and my only memories are those of a boy being shoved into the shadows of an old tractor shed, or trembling in the passenger seat of a car coming to a slow stop on a dark country road—that I can come down here to sit on this uneven patch of earth and cultivate a vacuum, a place of stillness and safety where nothing moves and no one gets hurt."



Writer and editor Amy Reiswig has taught college courses on prison writing and is glad, for the sake of those on both sides of the gates, that literature can jump over prison walls.

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