

Book Review of *Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett*

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Life on the Outside:
The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett
 By Jennifer Gonnerman

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In the late 1990s, researchers and policymakers started to draw attention to a very noticeable, burgeoning problem resulting from decades of mass incarceration policies – over half a million people were returning home from correctional institutions each year and the vast majority were not prepared for life on the outside (e.g., Petersilia, 1999, 2000; Travis, 2000). Since then, there has been ensuing effort to identify and address the multitude of issues confronting ex-prisoners as they reenter society (e.g., Maruna, 2001; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001).

In *Life on the Outside*, Jennifer Gonnerman offers readers a firsthand account into the life of Elaine Bartlett, a convicted drug offender who was sentenced to twenty years in New York’s Bedford Hills prison. It was her first conviction, but under New York’s Rockefeller drug laws the offense of transporting four ounces of cocaine carried a mandatory minimum sentence of twenty years. This case study traces Bartlett’s life from her troubled childhood through her conviction and reentry experience. In doing so, Gonnerman puts a human face on the term “prisoner reentry” and expands on the scope of the problem, not in terms of aggregate percentages but by focusing on one individual’s experience.

The book is divided into four sections. The first part describes the events leading up to Bartlett’s arrest as well as the consequent legal proceedings. The second focuses on her experiences in prison, and the third and fourth sections cover the period after her release from prison on January 26, 2000. While Bartlett’s experiences constitute the core of this case study, Gonnerman also extends her analysis to include Bartlett’s family. By doing so, Gonnerman demonstrates how the problem of prisoner reentry is much larger than the individual; reentry has serious consequences for the entire family.

Throughout her depiction of Bartlett’s life, Gonnerman inserts factual information related to the criminal justice

system and other larger societal issues, making it an enlightening resource for those who want to learn more about the system. For instance, Gonnerman provides a detailed account of the history and development of New York’s infamous Rockefeller drug laws. Indeed, this narrative is ultimately a testament to the negative long-term impact of these laws on offenders and their loved ones.

Was someone like Elaine Bartlett the anticipated target of these mandatory minimum penalties? Most likely not. More generally, Gonnerman characterizes Bartlett as both the typical and atypical offender. She is typical in that her demographic features mirror those of the majority in prison—black, poor, and incarcerated for a drug offense. Yet she is atypical in that Bartlett is a woman, who earned a significant education in prison and was granted clemency. In addition, she spent an inordinate amount of time in prison, compared with the average offender. These similarities and differences do not limit Bartlett’s story in terms of its relevance, however. Gonnerman does a terrific job capturing Bartlett’s personal successes and plights, all the while alerting readers to the larger issues at hand.

Gonnerman’s account of Bartlett’s prison experience sensitizes us to some core issues faced by people serving time in prison—strained family relationships, loss of control over one’s life, and loneliness. She reminds us that the prison environment does not nurture positive personal growth or changes, partly because inmates must regularly deal with the negative emotions of other prisoners and the conflict these create. Gonnerman particularly focuses on the difficulty of being a parent in prison, which is limited almost solely to phone calls and brief visits at the prison. “For Elaine, it was difficult to maneuver between these two worlds: the visiting room and the rest of prison. In the cell blocks and corridors, she had to watch her back constantly, always ready to raise her fists if anyone tried to pick a fight. But then when she entered the visiting room, she had to play the role of mother. She had to be patient and affectionate, warm and loving.”

Throughout Bartlett’s incarceration and reentry, Gonnerman calls attention to two dominant themes: a sense of loss of control—over Bartlett’s own life, as well as her family’s lives—and an enduring feeling

of loneliness. The author distinguishes the many boundaries—physical and psychological—imposed by prison and parole and describes how living within these margins was often unbearable for Bartlett. “In prison, she had felt like she was always waiting to get home, and now that she was home, she still seemed to spend most of her time waiting—for her parole officer, for her welfare caseworker, for permission to see her husband.” Despite the many people in her life, Bartlett had a difficult time establishing relationships that could provide her with a healthy outlet for her frustrations. Ultimately, we see how this isolated emotional state can translate into a tenuous existence for the returning prisoner.

The current literature supports the notion that reentry should start in prison. Despite the conventional opportunities that Bartlett took full advantage of during her confinement, such as education and work, prison clearly did not prepare her for the challenging transition to a life on the outside. Gonnerman conveys a pessimistic reality in which prison temporarily relieved Bartlett of all responsibility to herself, her family, and to society at large. In prison she learned to steal to obtain basic necessities and smoked marijuana. On the day of her release, she was given \$40 to facilitate her return.

During her initial days of freedom, it was striking to observe Bartlett struggle with the most basic aspects of everyday life. Gonnerman makes it evident that reentry is not just about securing legitimate employment and housing and meeting the requirements of parole supervision. It is also about obtaining a new wardrobe, establishing a daily routine, finding your place in a resentful family, and simply becoming adjusted to conventional contemporary society. The world changes substantially over a period of sixteen years!

Like most returning prisoners, upon her release Bartlett moved in with her family at their apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Her return home was far less satisfying than she had anticipated. “All those years she had been away, she had never even considered the possibility that she might be living in better conditions in prison than her children were in the free world.” Years of family problems in addition to Bartlett’s absence had erased all sense of what she remembered as a functional home. It was as though her family had given up. “I left one prison to come home to another.” Gonnerman shows how Bartlett’s family life was further diminished by the pain, anger, and resentment of her family members.

The author also demonstrates how complicated it can be for former prisoners to assume conventional roles such as employee. She describes how prison can even diminish a person’s desire to work. “...prison living can

be the worst sort of training for future employment... many inmates grow so used to being in an institution—of being told what to eat, when to sleep, when to go to the toilet—that they lose all ambition and initiative, precisely the qualities they will need to get a job once they are set free.” Despite her apparent resolve and the education she received while incarcerated, Bartlett’s prison sentence still hindered her search for meaningful, legitimate employment.

Although Bartlett avoids parole revocation, this book suggests how easy it can be for ex-offenders to be swept back into prison. Parole conditions and relationships with parole officers can be challenging for ex-prisoners. As we see, state supervision is even difficult for family members—particularly the precariousness of a parolee’s freedom. One of Bartlett’s daughters expressed her fear that her parole officer would put her mother back in prison. “If my mom gets locked up, I don’t know what I’ll do.” Later she concedes that this fear is part of the reason she does not want to get close to her mother—“she did not want to get used to the idea of having her mother around, just in case she did not stay long.” Through this example and many others, Gonnerman exposes the unintended consequences of state involvement in the lives of offenders.

Gonnerman emphasizes the fact that ex-prisoners are ordinary people whom we encounter in our everyday lives. They have similar responsibilities and problems with family, finances, household management, and other conventional facets of life. But they must also cope with their status as ex-prisoners, and with this label comes a range of additional responsibilities and commitments, as well as a multitude of barriers and limitations that do not necessarily facilitate their transition back into a normal, productive adult life.

All-in-all, Gonnerman presents a realistic, yet discouraging picture of Bartlett’s life. “No matter how hard Elaine tried, the reality of her post-prison life had not come close to matching her expectations... She was free, but she was not free. Her family members felt like strangers. Her children’s home did not feel like a home... on the outside, there seemed to be no place for her.” The book does not end optimistically—Bartlett loses her job, continues to have family problems, and maintains her dream for something more. Gonnerman stays true to her reality and perhaps the reality of many returning prisoners.

Ironically, researchers and policy-makers for prisoner reentry would likely consider Bartlett’s outcome a success. She secured housing upon release, was not re-arrested, had meaningful employment for a considerable

period of time, and did not fail any drug tests. However, Gonnerman does not leave readers with a sense that Bartlett had prevailed. In the end, her parole status was terminated, but she was really just getting by in other aspects of her life.

One of the most important contributions of this book is its human element. Gonnerman successfully captures the emotional experience of a returning prisoner—from hope and happiness to frustration, sadness, and despair. We experience the progression of Bartlett's life. Bartlett, too, deserves credit for opening her life up to Gonnerman and, ultimately, the world. This perspective is often lost in the research and policy-based literature.

Yet, some may criticize Gonnerman for presenting a slanted view of Bartlett's life. Gonnerman's writing style subtly conveys her sympathy for Bartlett's experience, because the criminal justice system wronged this woman. However, she arguably portrays Bartlett in an objective light. Bartlett had used drugs, skipped out on work, did not always abide by her parole conditions, and often had a grandiose view of herself. But she ultimately had a very common, conventional side, which makes her easy to identify with and also makes it easy for readers to share in the outrage over her prison sentence.

Readers may also dispute that Bartlett's experience does not generalize to those of other ex-prisoners – especially males. Incidentally, Bartlett's son, Jamel, was also convicted and sent to prison for a short term during this narrative. Gonnerman uses this occurrence to describe his own prison and reentry experience. While she may not delve as deeply into Jamel's thoughts and emotions, it provides a more balanced point of view for readers.

Again, the larger story undoubtedly sheds light on important considerations for reentry researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners. Gonnerman covers returning prisoners' most basic and most complex challenges. Indeed, as evidenced by Bartlett's story, ex-prisoners need considerable guidance and support, as do their family members. Prisoner reentry's effect on the family may be one of the most important lessons of this case study.

This book is suitable for a variety of audiences. No matter their perspective—academic, social work and practice, policymaking, or simply as an ordinary

citizen—readers should find this book enlightening and moving. Gonnerman's account provides an in-depth examination of someone's life in her own element and, therefore, is an invaluable resource for researchers who are conceptualizing the process of reentry. Practitioners will likely draw many parallels with their own clients' experiences. Furthermore, this book can guide political leaders and legislatures through the human experience of prisoner reentry, as to facilitate decisions on the application and severity of criminal laws. On the whole, it is a must-read for anyone studying reentry, as well as those who study sentencing and corrections.

Gonnerman has successfully demonstrated the important role that journalists can play in terms of educating and guiding future research in important subject matters such as prisoner reentry. Her clear and direct writing style paints a picture of the realities of prisoner reentry that is not lost in theoretical and academic generalizations. It is a valuable contribution to the growing literature base in prisoner reentry.

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