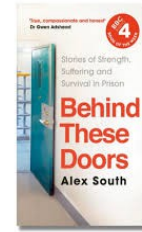


**BOOK REVIEW “*Behind These Doors*” by Alex South  
Hodder & Stoughton £10.99 in paperback published 2023**

This is a brave, honest, important, disturbing and moving memoir by Alex South of her ten years as a prison officer, which I think OPVs will find illuminating, especially those visiting Whitemore, Wormwood Scrubs and Belmarsh prisons; from rookie officer at 22 to Senior Officer at 32. The tag line on the book’s cover says that it tells ‘Stories of Strength, Suffering and Survival in Prison’ which it certainly does. Her memoir is divided into three parts about her different prison experiences. Well written in the first person and present tense enables an urgency and engagement of the reader.



Though I was aware of the pressures prison officers are under, intensified by cuts, loss of experienced officers and staff shortage, her book made me more aware of how terrible it is. It is amazing that anything positive is achieved. She shows the awful state of English prisons for prisoners and their officers with the negative impact on their respective families.

Her initial idealism is eventually shattered by dealing with the relentless violence and self-harm partly caused by the ‘spice’ epidemic, suicides, and the frustrations of poor health care, squalid conditions for prisoners and staff and inadequate rehabilitation activities for prisoners. Capped by staff not being given adequate training and support for the tough situations they deal with daily.

Her commitment to prisoners and colleagues shines through. Her praise of some of the good aspects of prison life inevitably is at odds with the daily grind yet she achieves constructive relationships with some prisoners enabling them to progress.



Her progression as a prisoner officer over ten years is mapped with interesting descriptions of the intricacies of the role, which to many outside the prison system will be unknown. She describes how she learns from other officers and prisoners and becomes a confident, skilled practitioner of ‘jailcraft’, gradually going up the ladder to become a senior officer with many achievements and qualifications along the way but at an eventual great cost to her physical and mental health which leads to her resignation.

I don’t need to tell OPVs of the appalling state of prisons and its negative effect on prisoners, and the community they are released into, when proper rehabilitation has not occurred. This book tells that story but also how insufficient training and absence of proper support to prison officers compounds the many failures in the prison system, meaning officers feel they are fire-fighting much of their working lives with little chance to do more constructive work.

The book concludes with a description of her Churchill Fellowship visiting prisons in the USA, Canada and Australia. On return, after much effort she eventually gains an interview with the then Prisons Minister for England (unnamed) in which she tries to share the lessons from her travels and studies, especially the need for proper training and support to prison officers. She quotes the Minister’s appalling reply – “Well, to be honest, Alex, that all sounds like fluffy things to make prison officers happy”. This is made worse by other pig-headed comments which paralysed her then and was the last straw; her memoir is her considered reply.

In a final appendix she lists excellent organisations dedicated to supporting people in prison and officers and includes the NAOPV. In the last three prison memoirs recently read this is the first time NAOPV is mentioned, which is progress!

**Adrian Briggs  
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