

## **CBT Library Highlights - Two Prison Tales 11/09**

Unlocked: A Journey from Prison to Proust

(Unlocked: The Life and Crimes of a Mafia Insider in paperback)

By Louse Ferrante

2008 Harper Collins

(Rated R + for language and violence)

Escape from India: A True Story, the Story of Ronen D.

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Translated by Shoshie Nissenbaum

2009 Myzlik Publishing, Beit Shemesh, Israel

There's something about sitting in prison which lends itself to deep reflection, I guess, if you are inclined toward reflection. Boredom and despair take over most prisoners but lead others to explore the hard existential questions of life and to come out with some kind of answer.

Although very different in tone and location, these two books are remarkably similar in many ways. After years of criminal behavior, both authors find themselves behind bars. Prison life is dangerous and monotonous and has its own internal rules, self-preservation being the primary one. Most of the prisoners stave off loneliness, fear, and deprivation with drugs and other animal comforts, join gangs for protection, and dream of the outside world which is passing them by. Ferrante and Ronen D., however, embark on surprising journeys of self-discovery which lead them to some unlikely places.

Let's start with Ferrante.

"I was seventeen years old. I liked girls. I liked fist fighting. I liked to drive fast cars. I liked hamburgers and French fries. I liked playing stickball in the school yard. And I'd just realized that I liked to hijack trucks."

So begins the story of Louis Ferrante, born into a working class Italian household in Queens, NY. Truck hijackings are his specialty but he also dabbles in credit card fraud, stick-ups, and most any 'opportunities' which come his way. He is smart and fearless and has a record of evading the police. Eventually, his reputation brings him to the attention of John Gotti and he becomes part of Gotti's team, giving up a cut of his profits to the Mafia and living by their 'rules of honor.' Despite his seeming invulnerability, at age 24 Ferrante is arrested on charges stemming from a clumsy burglary attempt in San Francisco several years earlier. Several of his associates 'sing' in exchange for a plea bargain and Ferrante finally accepts an offer to plead guilty on some of his charges and is sentenced to 13 years in prison.

Proud, at first, to 'do time,' thinking it a badge of honor for not squealing, the reality of prison life sinks in swiftly. The prisoners are polarized into racial and ethnic gangs in order to protect themselves from burglary, rape and mutilation. Corrupt wardens manipulate the inmates for their own benefit. Conditions are crowded, filthy, and dangerous, especially in the maximum security federal prison in Lewisburg, PA.

At some point in his ordeal, Ferrante feels an uncharacteristic drive to do something his young life has not prepared him for.

'[I] had the urge to read. I don't know why I wanted to read, maybe books had the answers to all those questions I'd begun asking myself...[or] maybe I had plenty of time to kill and that seemed like the best way to kill it.'

A friend sends him his first batch of books (describing Ferrante to the bookstore clerk as being 'short and bossy,' he comes away from the store with a biography of Napoleon, a history of Caesar's Gallic wars, and Mein Kampf!) He labors over dictionaries and vocabulary lists, reading his way through Shakespeare and Proust. Reading leads to writing, then to teaching other prisoners, starting a film club, obtaining taped lectures, and even getting personal English tutoring from a university-trained

inmate. He teaches himself classical music from the radio. He writes letters, Cyrano-style, for illiterate convicts. He studies law in order to appeal his case (and shaves off a few years from his prison term.) After serving 8 ½ years in prison, a remarkably different Louis Ferrate is released on parole.

Part of Ferrante's self-education is his effort to come to terms with philosophical dilemmas such as justice, morality, and the existence of G-d. He embarks on a crash course in religion, reading the Gospels, the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, and Buddhist works. But something about Judaism and the Torah speaks to him. He approaches the prison rabbi in an effort to deepen his Jewish learning. He begins to wear a kippah and pray with a tallit, and asks friends to send kosher food. Later, after his release, he formally converts to Judaism.

The short epilogue section of the book recounts Ferrante's slow adjustment to life 'on the outside.' Lucky to have a sister to take him in, unlike many newly released prisoners who have nowhere to go and no one to turn to, he struggles to overcome the obstacles of adjusting to everyday life such as getting a new driver's license, scheduling his own time, adhering to parole. He tries to gain some perspective on who he was and who he is now, recalling incidents in his young life when he instinctively and spontaneously came to the aide of others, musing that 'good people usually come around, and everyone deserves a chance.' Perhaps he had the 'spark of Sinai' in him all along. It seems as Jewish a moment as any, this contemplation of his Italian '*pintele yid*,' which eventually put him back on the right track.

The language and violence in the first two thirds of the book are pretty rough. Descriptions of prison life are stark and disturbing. Later in the book, the chapters become shorter, more reflective, and expressive of Ferrante's self-transformation (and elevated English.) He also has a dry, self-deprecating style at times which helps to lighten the darkness. He is a talented storyteller, too, and he captures the reader's interest by using dialogue rather than description in the first part of the book. An

especially amusing episode is his account of his fellow Mafia inmates' plot to smuggle authentic Italian food into their medium security ward.

For a taste of Ferrante's personality and style, and a more complete discussion of his conversion process, follow the link below to an interview with Leonard Lopate on WNYC which was aired shortly after publication of his book

[www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/episodes/2008/03/26/segments/95678](http://www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/episodes/2008/03/26/segments/95678)

Here is a link to a very nicely written interview published by ou.org

[http://www.ou.org/shabbat\\_shalom/article/57577](http://www.ou.org/shabbat_shalom/article/57577)

The story of Ronen D., as I mentioned, draws from the same well as Louis Ferrante's book in many respects, although Ronen was born Jewish and lives in Israel. The tone and pace of the book, however, are quite different. For one thing, this is a real page turner. I really couldn't put it down. It is another story of poor choices, prison, and personal redemption through *teshuva*, but experienced in such unusual circumstances that the story seem surreal at times. Also, the author adopts a religious tone of voice right from the beginning, seeing all the events of his saga in hindsight as part of Hashem's *hashgacha pratis*.

Ronen D. was raised in a traditional sefardic home in Holon, Israel, one of 9 siblings. He travelled to India after his army service, as so many thousands of Israelis do, enjoying the beaches and parties and apparent freedom. He grew his hair into dreadlocks, earning him the nickname "Ronen Rasta." Upon his return to Israel, he found he had a talent for organizing parties and went into business with a friend, making lots of money and leading a generally dissolute life. He also started smuggling drugs from India into Switzerland on his many return trips to the East. Some of his friends are caught and sent to prison. Some of his friends, however, find themselves attracted to a more traditional lifestyle, even 'converting' and moving out of the Tel Aviv party scene to Tzfat and

Jerusalem. They start to settle down and have families, leaving Ronen to wonder when he will 'grow up.' His friend, Dudu, starts taking him to the mikvah and exposing him to mysticism and finally he and his business partner, Ari, leave the party life and moved to Tzfat to become more observant. He starts laying tefillin, takes a trip to Uman for Rosh HaShana, and begins to study Torah but he also experiences several lapses. Ronen just doesn't have the depth of background and *hashkafa* to stick to his choice of lifestyle. Finally, he does choose the religious life, gets married, has a child, and opens an Indian import business. After finding his business in deep debt, however, Ronen decides to take 'one last trip' to India to smuggle drugs and relieve his financial problems. He is caught at the airport and thrown into jail.

Prison conditions are abominable and the justice system is completely corrupt. He survives his first months by allying himself with a powerful English-speaking Nigerian prisoner who befriends and helps him understand how to navigate the system. Strange as it may sound, he is encouraged to find a way to get into the maximum security section of the prison where, perversely, conditions are better. There is another Israeli in maximum security who becomes his friend and helps him overcome his loneliness and depression. Unlike Louis Ferrante, who seems to have no one but himself to rely on, Ronen seems to have the whole Jewish world rooting for him. The Chabad *shluchim* in Mumbai, Rabbi and Rebbetzin Holtzberg *iyd*, to whom this book is dedicated, offer assistance and encouragement in countless ways. People all over the world try to help him bribe his way through the legal system and plan possible escape scenarios. Meanwhile, Ronen devotes his time to Torah study, to praying with tefillin, and doing *teshuva*. I won't spoil your fun by describing his escape and the series of miracles which fill the final part of the book. Suffice it to say that he is reunited with his family in Israel in 2005 and writes the book two years after his return.

Both of these authors urge us, the readers, to take stock of our lives and do *teshuva* the easy way rather than be forced to take the hard route to self-actualization. They also prove, as Natan Sharansky did in

his monumental book Fear No Evil, that prison walls can't confine or define who is truly free in thought and spirit.

-Laura Paley