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Erwin James

Editor-in-Chief, Inside Time

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Erwin James, Guardian columnist and editor-in-chief of Inside Time, the UK's national newspaper for prisoners and detainees. His turbulent childhood led him to a life of crime. After being sentenced to life in prison for two murders, he fled to the French Foreign Legion for two years and then handed himself in. He dedicated his 20 years behind bars to furthering his education and discovered a love of writing. His anonymous Guardian column, A Life Inside, was the first of its kind in the history of British journalism. Since his release in 2004, he's been a vocal prison reform advocate. He is patron of several ex-offenders and arts charities, and is an honorary master of the Open University.

Erwin, thank you for joining me.

Hey Paul, my pleasure.

You were inside for 20 years. When you were languishing in a cell, you must have never imagined that one day you'd be a national newspaper journalist and the editor of a paper.

Paul, I never languished. When they took me away initially, I was finished, I was broken. The Old Bailey sentenced me to life imprisonment and I was glad; I was relieved my old life was over. It was a painful life, painful for me and for other people because of me. And I was glad when it was finished. So I guess I did sort of languish in the beginning. I was locked up in Wandsworth Prison with a bucket for a toilet, a bed, a chair, a table, three sets of bars on the back cell wall. Gloom struggled to get in that cell, but I was finished. I never imagined another life. For me it was all over.

Tell us briefly how you got to that moment, because I don't want to dwell on the past, but our listeners will be interested. I do want to focus on what you did from that moment, but just briefly could you tell our listeners how you got to that point?

To my conviction for murder? God, it's a long old story, but I got my first criminal conviction when I was just under 11 years old. My first crime was at 10, and I was in the magistrates' court at 11. I got convicted of burglary, so I became a criminal when I was 11. And it was a long downhill slope from there. I was in a children's home for a while. I did go to school. In fairness, the first time I went to school regularly was when I was 11 years old in the home. And it was a good school, I was good at English. I was always the first to get my hand up in spelling lessons and composition and that sort of stuff.

I can tell you were good at English, you're a great writer. That's beyond dispute.

No, cut that bit out because absolutely...

Absolutely not! I've been a huge fan of your writing for years.

Paul, I'm not very good at sort of...

Receiving compliments.

No I'm not. I don't want compliments. What I'm... I'm sharing this journey with you... I got out of the home at 15 and basically for the next few years I... when I was in the children's home, you know, this is a funny thing. We were lost kids, scooped up from the system, I guess. Kids like me, there're orphans. Kids who've broken into shops, shop lifted like me. Broke into sweet shops. Nicked cars and stuff. We're a mish-mash of...

'TWOC-ing', they call it now, don't they?

TWOC-ing, they did. They did. Well done, Paul.

For my sins, I actually studied law, that was my degree.

Fair play to you, sir.

I always remember that theft is a two-stage thing, it's taking without owner's consent, and permanent intention to deprive thereof. And lazy prosecutors just charge you with the TWOC-ing bit.

I never had that second bit, I only got the TWOC thing. I was a TWOC-er

So, the Theft Act 1968, I don't know why we're talking about this, but it actually, in order to steal something you have to have the intention to permanently deprive that person of it.

Oh, I see.

Whereas if you're just a joy rider, a teenager just taking the car, you don't intend to keep the car, let's be honest.

You know I always wondered why I was never convicted of theft or tried with theft of the cars.

Because you only have one element to prove with TWOC, whereas with theft it's two. So lazy prosecutors, it's basically the same sentence.

Well, I did lots of TWOCs. It was no big deal for me, my dad was a drunk, a very violent drunk. And I became a bit like him. And it was no big for me when I got out of the home... you know, in the children's home, we all thought of ourselves as potential criminals, we didn't aspire to be astronauts or train drivers or psychologists or teachers. We wanted to be criminals, because there was something reinforcing it... we didn't think positive things about ourselves. We sort of thought of each other as who's the toughest guy, who's the hardest, who's the most criminal, you know, so we wanted to be gangsters and killers and robbers, you know? Anyway I left there when I was 15. The home. Left school, because in those days you could leave school at 15. And I drifted for years and I was sort of... I worked on building sites and factories and tarmacking roads. Washing up in restaurants. I had no real intellectual skills. I had no confidence or abilities that I knew of, other than I was strong, but I became a drunk early on, like my dad. And it was no big deal for me to get drunk, have a fight, smash a window, steal a car. And that was the pattern of my life for years. I spent time in drunk tanks. And young offender prisons. Six months in one, it was like a gladiator school. I know I came out worse than I was when I went in. I just know I did, because I was stronger. It was all weight lifting and bloody gymnasium hard stuff. And most of the kids, and most of the young people that I was with, we aspired to be who's the toughest, who's the strongest, who's the hardest, who's the most violent. Who's the most dangerous? I mean, it was all ridiculous when you think about it now. The state took me in, hopefully to try and make me better than I was, or rectify my issues, but they didn't, they made it worse. The second one was 13 months, that was pretty much the same sort of stuff. Then I just sank after that, and I ended up sort of drifting. Committing more crimes, more frustration, more violence. More drinking problems. I met my co-accused in a squat in London, actually. And we became two criminals together, we... smash and grab, off licences. Stole cars. Burgled premises and basically started mugging people. I don't want to talk about the details of exactly what happened because it is contentious still, having said that I was there, I was involved. Over a three-month period, me and my co-accused, we left two people dead. I was a coward. All my life I've been a coward. And I fled the country, joined the French Foreign Legion.

I don't know anyone who's joined the French Foreign Legion. I always thought that was kind of an apocryphal thing.

I promised you I joined, but I wasn't joining for adventure or fun. I was desperate, I was out to kill myself. Where do I go from here, you know?

But you handed yourself in after a couple of years, didn't you?

Well, two years later, but then I'd honestly had an experience of possibilities. I was given a structured, disciplined life. I was given reward for hard work. It was amazing, that experience. I was based in Corsica. I did the most amazing basic training course in Castelnaudary in the south of France, then I ended up being the REP, 2e Régiment étranger de parachutistes, it's like the elite regiment in France. Went to Africa, I was in Chad. And two years later, my co-accused was arrested for something in England, and then was traced to the murders we'd committed, and because he named me to the police... and I was glad he did. I don't blame him at all. Because in the Foreign Legion, I was always growing. There's a cloud growing too, because the more...

Weight on your mind.

It was unbelievable. I can't tell you how that felt. I didn't get away with it. Those two years, I did not get away with anything. But anyway, I was actually relieved when I was captured. I did hand myself in to the British consulate in Nice, that's how I got extradited from France back to London and faced trial at the Old Bailey. And got life. I lied through my teeth at my trial, I'm ashamed to say. Anybody listening, I'm so ashamed, you know.

You've paid your price to society.

No, no, no, I'm not sure I ever will pay that price, that's the thing, you see. I can't make amends; my slate will never be clean.

You have made amends. You've served 20 years in prison, I think you've earned the right to a fresh start.

Some parts of society... oh, Paul, thank you for that. But...

I mean, you've also put that time in prison to incredible use, which is one of the things we're going to talk about in a minute.

Well, here's the thing. I went to jail for life, never expecting to live again. Didn't languish, even in my Wandsworth prison cell, did exercises, I was a disciplined... if I'd gone into prison from the drunken slob I'd been, I'm not sure I would have managed prison as well as I did – but I went in as a controlled, disciplined soldier. And I didn't want to harm anybody ever again. So in my cell, I did my exercises, I read books. Thankfully I could read. Most people in prison, 60% of our prisoner population in this country today, can't read or write.

And it's one of the reasons why we have such a high recidivism rate.

It really is, Paul, it really is. But I was lucky...

This is the duality that the Daily Mail's agenda has, being tough on burglars and criminals is actually counterproductive to the cohesiveness of society, because we either lock people up for the rest of their lives and warehouse

them, or, if we're going to put you or anyone in prison for 10, 20, 30 years, you're going to get let out and therefore we need to have a productive, rehabilitative regime.

Paul if you don't die in those places...

You're going to get out.

... you're going to be released. If you're not one of the 52, I think, never to be released, the majority will get out. My agenda is, why I'm still writing and talking about this issue, is I want people to be safe, safer, from people like I was when I went in, because I was a dangerous guy. I mean, Christ, I had 54 convictions when I went to prison for life.

You went into what I would have called, Borstal as a kid...

As a kid, yes, I did.

And came out as you just said. Came out worse.

Well, then I did. After the 20 years I came out with some hope, they released me, not because I became a Guardian columnist in prison...

We're going to talk about that in a second, I'm fascinated how the whole genesis of that came about.

Listen, Paul, they didn't let me out because I was a Guardian columnist.

That was reason enough to keep you in!

Correct! I hope you don't mind me smiling and laughing, I mean, it's been a hell of a journey, this bloody prison thing. But the main thing is, I managed to become, I think, who I think I should have been if my early years hadn't been as dysfunctional and chaotic as they'd been. I'm not saying that's any excuse for crime, there's no excuse for crime. But how we become who we become is a complicated process.

It's nature and nurture. Of course it is.

It really is.

And trying to blame one or apportion...

There's no blame.

... the causation on one side or the other is a ridiculous question. So might I ask then, you're sent down for life. There can't be many laughs in that, I imagine you weren't chuffed. How long does it take you to kind of get over the shock of that before you then decide, "Well, I'm going to do something

useful"? What was the first chink of light as you were serving that time when you thought, "I'm going to educate myself, I'm going to learn, I'm going to do something constructive and productive." Tell us about how all that came about.

Gosh, Paul, I mean, that was a long process...

I bet it was.

That didn't happen overnight, or...

No, I can imagine.

... in a week or so. You're in there...

You just must have been shell-shocked.

Of course I was, like most people who go to prison, you're sort of... life comes to an end. Life as you knew it. Even though mine was so chaotic, and even in the Foreign Legion it was disciplined, but it was still a bit of a fake act because I knew, eventually, I'm going to have to face this. So once I'm in jail I had to face up to the truth of my failings. And it was a long... I could read, I read books. I read a great book by David Levering Lewis called Prisoners of Honour, about The Dreyfus Affair. That brought an understanding of the importance of truth and integrity, which I'd never really had. You know, all my life I'd been a liar, a cheater, and a thief, all my life. And then, through this book, I met Dreyfus and I thought, "Christ, what a great guy." A man of integrity, honour, courage. I thought, "I'd love to be like him." However naive that sounds. I was a survivor; that Foreign Legion experience gave me a robustness that I've never had before, you know? I kept myself clean. About 18 months in, I met a psychologist who persuaded... her job was to assess my dangerousness and my risk to the public, but the way she did her job was so considerate to me as a human being, I was responded well to her. And over 18 months she said, "You've got to get an education." Her name was Joan Branton. I said to her, "Joan, I'm too thick for education. I'm 31 years old." "No, none of us are thick, we're all born lovable. We're all born with the potential to be achieve what we're meant to be in life." I said, "Even me?" She said, "Even you!" And I thought, "Christ." So I tentatively joined the English class in prison, because when I was in the home I was good at English. And sure enough, it was still there. Top of the class in prison, the highest grade in prison. It's not hard to be top of the class in jail, I've got to tell you. In any subject. But I was good at English. And there you go, I sort of... you know.

What came next? How did you end up writing a column in the Guardian? I've been a fan of that column for years.

That was 15 years later, I mean, Christ...

Oh, wow. Okay. So we've got some ground to cover!

There's a bit of ground there. I'm not going to lie to you, it was challenging. I found... the psychologist I met said to me I owed it to my victims to achieve as much as I could with the life I'd got left. That was the key for me. That made me feel able to live. And so, English class, I joined other classes. I couldn't wait to get to Joan's office on the wing. On this wing, this was a maximal security dispersal prison. There was 85 men convicted of murder. There were terrorists, serial killers, child abductors. We were the worst of the worst, but I couldn't...

What's called Category A.

We were Cat A's. I was a Cat A for five years. And I couldn't get back to her office quick enough to show her my certificate if I passed something. I was like a little boy, so weird.

Well, there's no harm in having pride in your achievements.

Well, I wanted to show her. When people believe in us, whoever you are... we all need champions, Paul.

Of course.

I'd never had a champion before, and so I... she used to say, "Look, I told you. We're all born lovable. We all have the potential to be the best we can." And then it went from there. I passed exams, took a history degree, that took me six years. It wasn't all exams and education, I was in a major riot in Long Lartin Prison, then one of the most dangerous prisons in the country. 1990. The barricades went up, the sparks were flying. The flames were burning. My next door neighbour, who was in for killing five people, he's got a mask on, he's got a spear. He says, "Come on, let's kill the nonces." So I've got... my friends in prison were my books. So I've my six books. Sophocles, I've got Thucydides, I've got my Thesaurus, I've got Bertrand Russell, I've got the strangest...

You've also got a man with spear at your door saying, "Let's go and kill the nonces."

Yes. So I said, "I've got my books." I stuck them in a pillow case. And I got a table leg to guard my cell. "Lead us!" I said, "Lead us? Where the flipping 'eck are we going to go?" He said, "We can kill..." I said, "Let's not kill anybody tonight. Have we not done enough?" He went, "Yes, but, yes, but..." Eventually the IRA, there were IRA prisoners in our prison at the time, and the highest ranking IRA officer, Brian Keenan, was on my landing. And, fair play to him, kept it all cool. Because the IRA...

They have their own issues, but they weren't there to kill the nonces.

They didn't have that criminal sort of agenda, you know? Anyway, six months later, my next door neighbour killed himself in Full Sutton Prison. He was doing 35 years. He was never going to do it, you know? But those challenges are part of long-term prison life. I'm just thankful I was robust enough to weather those sort of things. I became known as the guy who can write a good letter. So I used to... there was

always somebody at my door who asked me to write a letter home, write a parole application, write a complaint to the governor. I got a lot of vicarious pleasure writing complaints to the governor! But I just became... I got writing groups in prison... prison writing.

How did the journalism start? Because I read your column in the Guardian for many, many years. But I mean, clearly the column itself was groundbreaking, the fact that you were a serving prisoner. But the writing was incredible. I always used to look forward to reading it, because it really gave you, to state the obvious, a sense of what it was like to be in prison. Because most people just have prison movies and TV, and no one really knows what it's like to be in prison, in terms of the emotional toll it would take. And, you know, you really captured the colour and the nuance of what it was actually like. And quite rightly, were railing against the frustration of what a hugely missed opportunity for rehabilitation our prison system is.

Well, that's true. But Paul, you look too young to have been somebody who read my column so regularly!

I did, for my sins.

Well, you know, the years passed. I started writing to newspapers to say, "Look, for Christ's sake, most of us deserve to be here, we understand why we're here. But please newspaper editor, tell the truth about prison." You know, Christmas, they roll out these stories about the pensioners are starving while the prisoners are having great slap-up lunches, slap-up Christmas dinners. You tell the public that we will live in holiday camps. You tell the public so much misinformation. So I said, "Look, tell the truth about prison. We deserve to be here, most of us."

But you go to prison as punishment, not for punishment.

But even though, whoever it is, you asked me about how did I get into journalism. I'm writing the newspapers and telling them, "Look, tell the truth, for Christ's sake." And eventually, a lovely lady called Ruth Picardie, Ruth, she has since died of cancer, but she used to write for the Independent. And Ruth wrote back said, "Okay, tell us what prison is like." So I wrote an article about prison life and they published it in the Independent. It's amazing to see my byline, a headline I never gave them, I didn't realise that they do headlines.

Subs write the headlines.

They do, they do. And it's a great headline, Rough Justice and the Jailbirds Pecking Order. Google it, it's still there now online.

Wow. Rough Justice, that made me conjure up imagery of David Jessel, back in the day. Do you remember that TV show?

That was great, that was a great programme.

I loved Rough Justice.

But I know a colleague of his who is associated with my newspaper now, Louise Shorter. You know, she was producing on that programme. She now works, she's got a thing called Inside Justice, it's charity. And they pursue exactly, you know, cases of miscarriages of justice.

I've had the pleasure of working with Richard Ferguson, QC. Jim Nichol, who worked for the Bridgewater Four.

I knew two of the Bridgewater Four in prison.

Wow. Jim Nichol was their solicitor.

I didn't know that.

I've known Jim ever since I was about 12 years old.

Gosh, my goodness. Well, I'll tell you what, you talk about me having a tough time, or anybody in prison, but they had a tough time. And Michael Hickey.

Oh, yes.

My God. What he went through in jail was unbelievable. I mean, he was on the roof in Gartree for about 60-odd days in the worst winter we had for years. And his experience is actually noted by psychologists and people who are interested in, you know, how people endure difficult circumstances. He's a case study in how do you endure that. I was in Long Lartin with him, and Christ, he was so damaged. And I hope, if he's listening, or if anybody knows him, I hope he's managing well now, because he was such a young victim. He'd been a bit of a crook beforehand, but that was not their crime, you know? But anyway, I was going to say, I wrote to these papers and got a reply from Ruth Picardie. Wrote a piece, got it published. I thought maybe I could do this. I thought I could write a good letter, now I've got an article in the paper.

A column and a byline in a national newspaper.

Not in the Independent. I'm firing off then, articles left, right and centre and getting rejection after rejection after rejection. And eventually, the Guardian published a piece in 1998, four years later. I'd been in jail 14 years then. And I thought, "This can't be a fluke, maybe I can do this." And then two years after that, I got a new probation officer who comes to visit me and says, "What do you do here?" I said, "I'm a bit of a writer. I'm the guy that can write a letter. I've got articles published. Look at this." He went, "My next door neighbour is a writer." "Who is that?" "Ronan Bennett." Now, Ronan's a pretty top class, you know, even then. He's top class now, but he was top class then. A novelist and a writer. I said, "I've read his books." So Richard said, "Why don't you drop him a note?" And, you know, say I don't know, say, "Well done." Anyway, I had never written a fan letter, but I wrote to Ronan. A card saying,

“Look, I met Richard, your next door neighbour. I’ve read your books.” Fantastic. Six months later, he wrote back and said, “I’m writing a film about prison. Can I come and see you?” So I became acquainted with Ronan Bennett. Didn’t know then he was married to, or the partner of, Georgina Henry who was the deputy editor of the Guardian. Anyway, we had this fantastic friendship. I helped him with his film. We had a great correspondence. And then I got a call to the prison, by then it’d been 15 years, and I got a call saying, “Call Ronan Bennett urgently.” So I phoned up, “Ronan, what’s up?” And he had a conversation with an editor at the Guardian, Ian Katz. They wanted a serving prisoner to write about prison life for the Guardian. He said. “You want to be a Guardian columnist?”

Yes.

Well, I did say yes! But then I thought, “Be careful what you wish for.” How do you become a columnist for a national paper?

You’ve got the same problem every columnist has at that point, which is how do you write something new and original, fresh, week in, week out.

The prison governor said, “Never going to happen.” I said, “But governor, I’m a writer.” He said, “Get another hobby. No prisoner is allowed to go to the media.” I said, “Oh, ugh.” And I thought, “He’s right, who am I trying to kid?” But Alan Rusbridger and Ian Katz, they petitioned the Home Office. And eventually, I was given permission to write this thing by the prisoners’ minister, Paul Boateng. Because then I thought, I looked out my cell window that night, three sets of bars on the windows still. Rain falling, prison unduly quiet. And I thought “What the flipping heck am I ever going to write about, nothing ever happens here. It’s the same day over and over. Who am I to write about prison life?” But of course it’s not. Because prison life, all human interaction, happens in a prison landing. And I had to just slow my thoughts and figure out how to do this. And I wrote these three columns, 800 words each. And you know, I wrote every column with a pencil in longhand, and they were exactly 800 words, because I thought that’s what I thought the editor wanted. I didn’t realise you could trim a few. If I made a mistake, I scribbled it all out and write it again until I got exactly 800 words.

Good discipline. You were your own sub.

In fairness, it was!

You’d do well now because there’s no sub-editors in any newspaper.

Some of the subs at the Guardian still interfered. My challenge was to get interesting words into my column eventually. One of my favourite words is preternatural. It took me about six years to get that into a Guardian piece. But anyway, I started writing this column.

I don’t blame them because I’m nodding as if I know what it means. The truth is, I think I ought to know, but I don’t.

In the right context, it's the right word. You know, the best writers, the right word in the right context. As an editor, I would never let anybody say that, unless they knew exactly what it meant and why it should be there.

I'm nodding again. I still don't know what it means.

I'm not going to tell you.

I'll Google it after this.

Google it later. It's quite a straightforward word. I got it from a fellow prisoner. You talk about me being the first columnist in a national newspaper. The first columnist we had in prison in a magazine was Peter Wayne in Prospect Magazine. He had a column called The Prisoner. And he was a terrific writer. Still is! So I got it from him. I thought, "I'd like to be bright like him." So I try to use those words. It's funny, because once the minister gave me permission to write that column, the governor brought the local deputy mayor of the local town into the prison, brought him to my cell. "This is Erwin James. He writes for the Guardian." I thought, "You hypocrite."

Retrospective credit for something he was blocking.

But like most people who work in our prisons, he was a decent man, really was a decent man. But he was confounded and confined by, "What is my role with this prison? Do I give these people rehabilitation? Or do I keep them in so that they're punished?" And he thought someone like me, convicted of murder, doing 99 years, that was my sentence. You know, writing for a national newspaper, "How can I justify that to the public? How can I?" So that was his dilemma. But once the prison minister says, "Yes, okay..."

But there's a managerial element to being a governor as well. Because again, people just want you to serve your life in prison as cheaply as possible to the taxpayer.

It's true.

You know, rehabilitation costs money.

It was pretty cheap.

Nothing's cheap if you pay too much in the long run as a society.

That's true. I found in jail that it doesn't need money. What it needs is attitudes, hope. They don't cost money. What costs money is, even decent food doesn't cost a lot of money. You know, when I was in jail, I think it was most of the years I was in, it was about 75p for my daily food intake.

So just for the record then, not a holiday camp as the Daily Mail says.

Let me tell you, no. You know what disappointment about four years ago when they put in their new justice secretary, called Chris Grayling. And he took on the role.

Awful, awful man.

The first thing he said was, “No more holiday camps in prison.”

No more books. In fact, it was a mistake wasn’t it? And he tried to cover it up. He denied books because he wanted... kind of misspoke. He then had to uphold this.

For a politician to say, you know, holiday camps. And I’m thinking, “Christ.”

Is he on another planet? That’s what I would have thought.

Well, it’s a total misdirection and misinformation for the public. We deserve, as a society, whatever you think about me and my crimes, you might think I should be in prison still. I mean, maybe you think I should have been hanged. Maybe I should have been. But we give people a second chance in this country. We let people out. Now if you’re going to let us out, let us out with a chance. With some hope. With skills and abilities to function well. So that we don’t, people like I was, don’t cause more victims, from people like I was. You know, that’s the crux of it. And to just brandish prisons as holiday camps, then especially, four years ago, they’re hellish places. But however hard you make our prisons, and I say this to the politicians, some of us will make it, regardless of how difficult you make it. I’m not proud of much in my life, but I’m proud I made it through all that with the help of... there’s an army of people that work in our prisons. You know, good, decent teachers and psychologists. There are some good prison officers, some good governors. Without them, I’d never have made it. Even that good governor who said “No, get another hobby.” He’s a good guy.

He meant well.

He meant well, but he wasn’t sure how to deal with this. Look, Paul, I could have crawled away in a hole and rotted like so many long-term prisoners do. And so many people outside wouldn’t have given a toss if I did. They would’ve been glad for another one, you know, going down the hole. But I thought, “No. I want to make something of myself.” My psychologist said I owed it to my victims to do the best I could. And the best I could was, you know, to achieve whatever I could in life, bearing in mind it was a completely failed life before prison. My big, empty head was lit up with a light bulb with information and knowledge and skills and abilities. You know, I became somebody I never imagined that would be.

Isn’t there a duality, though, to the way that we think about people who commit crimes? Because if I think of burglars, I think yes, of course, there’s quite a few wrong ‘uns around. But there’s also people that are addicted to, you know, heroin and all these kind of things. And we need to tackle those causes because substance abuse leads directly to acquisitive crime. But then again,

if, when my friend gets burgled or someone steals something from my car, even though I can think about burglar in the abstract and how we need to, you know, improve recidivism and all these kinds of things. That particular burglar of me or my friend, he wants horse whipping, hanging, punching in the face, I want to kill him with my bare hands.

Yes.

So when other people are the victims of acquisitive crime, I'm prepared to think about things in the abstract, but not when it's me or my friends or my family. I want vengeance.

Yes.

That's what the Daily Mail and that kind of journalism taps into, doesn't it?

Anybody wants to say, "Look, is that how we live? That we, the people who do these things, burglary, rape, murder, kidnapping. Do we hang them and flog them and destroy them? Or do we use the prison system that we have to try and rectify the issues that have driven them to be the harm causers that they've been?"

What I object to is the 'othering' of people who've been convicted of a crime. That you're just a murdering so-and-so.

Yes.

And I hope you rot in prison. I mean, that actually demeans me to think that. Not that I do think that, of course. And I don't think as a society we've really truly addressed that yet.

No, but you know why? Because we've had no leadership from politicians to guide our thinking about this. In Norway, they don't like murderers, rapists, paedophiles, burglars, drug dealers, they don't like people who cause harm and distress, but they tolerate a system that gives those people who commit those sort of offences a facility and environment where they can rectify those issues, and be guided towards not living in a harm-causing way. And they put the lowest re-offending rate in Europe. Whereas we've got the highest, we've got amongst the highest, in fact, I think it is the highest. We don't really focus on rehabilitation. We want to punish people. And I'm with victims on this, you know, for a victim, someone like I was, you want me to suffer.

But the home secretary is not going to win votes by being "soft" on murderers, but by being tough.

But they don't tell the truth. If they said, "Look, this guy is going to prison for such a long time, we're going to make sure... we're going to let him out one day. We want him to be a good neighbour. We let everyone out of our prisons, so we're going to do this so that he won't do that again. She won't do that again. We're going to help them." It's a challenge to help people who hurt us. Whether you're a kid, somebody

has nicked your phone or punched you in the jaw. Whether you're a, you know, a young adult or a person... somebody hurt you, caused you stress, caused you pain, how can you justify helping them? That is the challenge for an individual, a community, a society. How can we justify helping that person? But if we don't help that person to resolve the issues that drove the pain-causing behaviour, you know, they'll come out of prison and they'll do it again. I mean, look at me, 53 convictions before I went to jail for murder. For Christ's sake, I should've been helped when I was nine years old, when I was 10. You should resolve those things. And I'm not blaming society, or blaming anybody. But objectively, I think, "Please help these young people who are going down that path." Because I met so many people in prison who started like me, relatively minor crimes and then dysfunctional behaviour and then violence and then...

There's no check on that behaviour. I mean, I'm an activist and a supporter, and have been for many years, of the Howard League for Penal Reform.

Great organisation.

Of course. And their strapline is 'fewer prisoners, less crime, safer communities'.

That's true.

All three feed into each other.

This is not leftist, you know,

It's practical.

It's totally, utterly practical. It's not about compassion or sympathy for prisoners and wrongdoers, it's about how we use the resources we have.

Tell us about Inside Time, the prisoners' magazine in which you're editor-in-chief.

Well, it's a prisoner's newspaper, Paul, if I may rectify your comment. It's the only newspaper of its kind in the world.

It's incredible.

In the world. You know, I never expected to become a newspaper editor; I was a columnist for the Guardian. I got out of prison, did freelance for years. You know, making a decent living, writing and commenting about prisons. And then Inside Time, I was an avid reader of Inside Time as a prisoner. And then, when I got out, I was still, you know, a subscriber. Like yourself Paul. It's a good paper.

Thirty-five quid a year, insidetime.co.uk.

You get an amazing bundle of information for that £35. But anyway, I became the editor and my mission... Eric McGraw was the guy who started the paper, after the Strangeways riot, he thought, “Prisoners don’t have a voice.” So what he did, he asked the Prison Service, “Could we put a newspaper together?” And Eric basically put four or five, six pages together, cutting and pasting articles and, you know, interesting things for prisoners. The government printed it and sent it to prisons. Gradually it grew. Eric retired three years ago, I’ve been here three years. That’s 25 years. Now, we’re basically a mainstream national publication aimed at giving prisoners information, hope, and entertainment. Also, anybody could read our paper. Anybody. It is prison-centric, but it’s not completely prison-centric. Our paper goes to MPs, justice select committee, MOJ, everyone reads our paper. I want people to read our newspaper and understand more about prison that’s outside prison. All people in prison read it and think...

They’ve not been forgotten about.

Yes. I was trying to find those words. They’ve not been forgotten. They count. I don’t care why you’re in prison. You count. That’s what we try to do with our paper; 60,000 copies every month into all our prisons in the UK. We get about 500 letters a week from prisoners. We have a real lively letters page called The Mail Bag. We’ve got somebody who is a best author, Noel Smith, who is our commissioning editor. He was in prison. We’ve got a researcher, Paul Sullivan, who was in prison, and who does our reports and things. Our publisher, John Roberts, is somebody who has run businesses for years, and he’s always employed former prisoners. We’ve got a great admin team. We’ve got a fantastic little organisation here. We work as a team to deliver the best we can for people in prison. They deserve to be connected, to feel connected.

They’re human beings for goodness sake, whether they’re in prison or not.

That’s the key.

Of course, there are many people that deserve to be in prison and should be there for a long time.

Most people do. Not for a long time, actually, but most people who go to prison deserve to be there.

Of course, but that doesn’t mean that we forget that they’re human beings. Again, that brutalising them, that ‘othering’, is the thing that means that our recidivism rates are so horrendous.

I interviewed the governor of Bastøy Prison Island in Norway. It’s an island just a couple of miles off the coast of southern Norway. I went there for the Guardian, and for the BBC, and for an Australian documentary team. I went over there not knowing what to expect. And I interviewed the governor, his name is Arne Nilsson. What a fantastic guy! Psychotherapist, he’s in charge of the prison. And he said, “What we do here, we respect the dignity of our prisoners as human beings.” And I thought, “Christ. Why can’t we do that?” Don’t worry about what they’ve done, how they’ve

hurt people. If we don't respect them, their dignity as human beings, why would they feel obliged or inclined to get out of prison and be good neighbours? Be people who want to do good in life? If we crush them, debilitate them, corrode them, they come out of prison crushed, debilitated, corroded. They're not people that you want to have as your neighbour. They become angry, bitter.

Even more angry, you could say.

More angry. Or I did as a kid, I came out much, much worse. One thing I would say, the majority of the people I met in prison over those 20 years – and I met every type of offender – had the desire not to be criminal. I mean, genuinely. I don't want to see them again if I can help it. One or two I made friends with, but mostly I don't want to see them again. But I owe them this: the majority of people I was in jail with, and it's going to be the same now, had the desire to be changed. I didn't meet people jumping up and down with happiness and joy, rejoicing at being criminals. Murderers, rapists, paedophiles, burglars, drug dealers. But for some people, the problems they have are so deep rooted, they can't quite make that change that they need to make. And of course, resources in prison are so limited that the hard to help get left behind. Someone like me who was fairly easy to help, I got help. I blossomed in jail. Against the odds, I did. I wasn't a goodie-goodie but I wasn't a baddie-baddie. I was just somebody trying to find a better way to live. And I managed to.

How hopeful are you, as a society, that we're going to start to be more constructive about these things? Because in one sense, you can't blame Theresa May because 95% of her brain time now and her thoughts must be completely dominated by Brexit.

Of course.

She almost hasn't even got any time to think about... and even if she did have time to think about non-Brexit things, it's going to be the NHS, front line policing and all these kind of things. You can almost sense the fact that prisoner rehabilitation is going to be 87th on her list.

But it's not about prisoner rehabilitation. About using our prisoners constructively. It's not about prisoner rehabilitation or prisoner punishment. It's about using our prisons effectively.

How do we do that? There's a big open question for you.

Well, yes. What we do is we fund... we put enough prison officers in the prison to run a decent regime. We make sure there's education facilities that people can access, because at the moment we have some of our prisoners, we have an education department, we have teachers there waiting to teach but there's not enough prison officers to get the prisoners from their cells to the education department.

That just seems utterly ridiculous.

It is ridiculous. But I mean it's not all like that. I mean, one of my pages in inside time is Good Prison News. Hull Prison, a bit notorious, they've made award-winning gardens. Vegetable beds. Another prison, Parc Prison in Wales, it's a private jail, they've done amazing murals. The young people have done murals on the walls. There is good prison news. But as a society, politicians have got to stop using prisoners as whipping boys for all the ills of society. We have to just let prison governors, let prison managers, let the Prison Service get on with it. Stop interfering, politicians. That's what needs to stop. I interviewed the director general of the Swedish prison service, again, about three or four years ago. Amazing guy. Nils Öberg. He gets a sort of instruction from the government and he's allowed to get on with it. There's no home secretary or justice secretary poking his nose around.

Who wants headlines.

There's nobody doing that. No.

To say, "We're going to take books off prisoners, how dare they read books?"

There's none of that stuff.

You have the most unbelievably unique perspective on this, don't you? In terms of you've interviewed all of the top people in the penal systems across the world.

I have.

You've done 20 years in prison yourself. I mean, what an incredibly unique set of circumstances and a platform upon which for you to campaign on.

Well, I'm not a campaigner, Paul. But one of the reasons I'm pleased to come and speak to you about this, about these issues, to promote Inside Time, because we are a great newspaper.

Insidetime.co.uk, £35 a year.

It is such an odd situation to be in, for myself. I'm not going to lie to you. It's challenging. Who wants to be a well-known somebody who's been imprisoned for murder? You know, I don't want to be that person. I don't want to be the public face of the rehabilitated convict. I'm just a writer. I found my thing to do in jail as a writer; it's taken me here. But I've got about 10, 15 years left. I'm just going to try and do the best I can. Whatever the challenges are. To just try and keep sort of saying to society – my society, if you don't mind, it is my society – try and use prisons more effectively so that we're safer from people like I was. That's why I do this. Not because I want to be famous or a well-known ex-convict. That's the last thing I want to be. I want to be a good writer. As you know, that takes a bit of work. And I want to promote my newspaper Inside Time, which is the most amazing newspaper you've ever read.

Tell us about when you got out. You got into some hot water, didn't you? Over an untruth.

Well, when I got out, it's funny because I got out of jail... I went to prison a complete failed human being. I walked out of jail after 20 years. I used to think, if I could just live long enough to experience one sunny day outside. But I didn't just do that. I got out on the sunniest August day imaginable. And I wasn't just an ex-convict, I was a Guardian columnist. I had contacts, I had people who liked Erwin James. Bear in mind, Erwin James Monahan was my full name, but I'd been writing as Erwin James to try and put a little bit distance between Monahan the criminal...

The old guy.

I was trying to put... I didn't want to hurt anybody by me suddenly appearing as some media figure. That's the last thing I wanted, but I didn't want to hide completely. So I used Erwin James. Sounded good as an author name. And I started to enjoy being somebody who was welcomed into conferences. A keynote speaker. You know, I chaired a conference in Westminster about two years after I got out, and I had two MPs as my sort of... I was a chair, they were speakers. And somebody from Germany on a video link. Like an important person from Germany. And I was conducting this whole conference, about 200 people in there in Westminster. And I liked it. I didn't want to be Erwin James Monahan the murderer, convicted criminal. And so gradually this little bubble built up, because I was getting invited to do this, I wrote for Radio Times, I wrote for all sorts of the national press. And then there was a blogger, started to research me. Who is Erwin James? Who did Erwin James kill? And I started to hide even more. I was so upfront in jail, but once I was out in the public eye, I struggled with that. So, eventually there was a story in the Guardian writing about the British, the foreign legion didn't want to take any more Brits because they're too flabby, so one of the editors said, "Look, you write a piece about this, you were in the foreign legion." So, I thought, "Christ. If I do that, the bloggers are going to... you know, I'm going to be exposed." I was in the foreign legion, "It's him, it's him." So I did. I wrote a piece about the foreign legion and I lied about when I joined. So, I joined in '82. In my piece I said I joined in '81. I put it all back a year.

Was it a deliberate lie?

Deliberate, yes. Only two small paragraphs.

So, the essence was truthful.

But it undermined the whole... well, no, it's all true. All the joining, everything. I was actually in charge. I was in Africa, I could have written something to make myself look good, you know, if I'm honest.

Why did you backdate it?

Well, I was trying to put people off who would... my crimes were committed, I committed my crimes in 1982. So, I thought if I said I was in legion in 1981, that can't have been me, whoever committed those crimes. Totally distorted thinking. Utterly,

totally naïve. And there was nobody to talk to, to ask somebody. The Guardian just thought of me as a valued columnist and journalist, they didn't realise I was actually going through flipping heck with all this thoughts about me in the public eye. And I said I was in Beirut. My unit, when I joined the REP, the second foreign parachute regiment in Corsica, my unit had just come back. So, I knew all about the operation. So, I wrote about it with some detail. Not hugely, but anyway. It's so embarrassing.

What happened?

Well, then somebody in Australia, some blogger, went into the Times archive and paid money to find out who... a legionnaire who's extradited from France for double murder. Of course I turned up. And he exposed me on the internet, and so I went straight to the Guardian. I was so embarrassed. All the editors. I had four of them, I said, "I'm so sorry." I said, "I don't know how to deal with this." Most of them forgave me.

If it's a genuine mea culpa, you've learnt your lesson.

No, I did. One thing I learned in journalism, and I knew it before. If I'm honest I knew it before then. The only way I was getting away with accepting being a journalist, because I had integrity. And I taught them to mind without any trying to hide. But the funny thing is, once it was exposed I thought, "Oh, I'm finished now. Finished as a writer. Finished as a journalist." But no, I wasn't. I was still accepted. Like you just said. People thought, "Well, Christ." I don't know. There were some letters to the Guardian afterwards who were pretty vindictive. You know, one wrote, he said, "He should be still in prison another 10 years." Because they could've kept me for another ten years, and then what? What do you think, get out and have nothing to offer? You could've executed me. I interviewed somebody for the Guardian about eight years ago who was on death row in Ohio. He'd been on row death row for 22 years.

Jesus.

And then they executed him two hours after I'd interviewed him. And I thought, "Is that what you wanted?" What do you want from our prison system? Do you want people to come out of there functioning to make a contribution? And to try and make amends? I mean, of course I can never made amends but...

Being on death row itself is a cruel and unusual punishment.

This kid...

Fancy having that hanging over you for 22 years.

Listen, this kid had grown. He'd developed. I recognised resonances when I interviewed him. He'd gone in ill-educated, inarticulate, just like me. Read books...

And then they gave him a lethal injection.

Became a helpful person. And 22 years later, they killed him. In fact, when I interviewed him, the first thing he said to me in the interview said, “Hey sir, how’s your spirit?” And I said, “My spirit’s not too good because I’m thinking about you.” “Oh, don’t worry about me. Listen, I’m...” He was so upbeat. And then they killed him. I thought, “How could they do that?” Anyway, that’s the way it was. And it could’ve happened to me. It didn’t. Lots of people think it should. I’m sorry but I got sentenced to life. I did something to live and did the best I could.

What’s a typical week for you? What does the editor of Inside Time do?

People who are not writers don’t realise that you’re not always... just because you’re not sitting at a screen, you’re still writing in here, in your head. You know. I’m writing, editing in my head, all the time. My week is basically, I get up in the morning, sometimes 4am, sometimes 5am, sometimes 8am. And I get in front of my screen and I check the emails, I look at contributors, I look at pieces that got to be... you know, because we’re so small we don’t have a load of subs. So, we all sub together, you know? So, I check what the subbing’s been.

A mutual subbing cooperative.

It sort of is, it sort of is. I do all the headlines, all the straplines. My designer, our designer, Colin Matthews, fantastic guy, me and him work together quite closely. Our publisher, John Roberts, we still collaborate, you know? Even though I’m editor-in-chief I don’t make the decisions that probably a lot of editors in national presses make. We have an editorial team, we work together. And it works really well. We talk, we have an editorial meeting once a month, we sit around, we look at what we’ve done, what we’re going to do, we plan ahead. All the time we’re thinking, “Our newspaper is the voice of the prisoner.” But it can’t be just prison voices. It has to encapsulate the wider world. We’ve got to try and figure out how we put that balance together so that when a prisoner in a prison receives our newspaper from the library, he opens that up and he goes, “Oh, wow. So pleased I got this paper. God, I felt like shit but now I’m feeling good. because I got the Inside Time.” I mean, that’s really what it’s about, Paul. We want prisoners to experience hope from my newspaper. My mission when I took this job on three years ago was to send in hope to those places.

Erwin, it’s been a hugely interesting and enjoyable conversation. You’ve got an absolutely fascinating life story, and what you do is incredible – thank you for your time.

Hey, listen, Paul – my pleasure, honestly.