REHABILITATION, REMORSE AND REDEMPTION  
WITH ONE TIME LIFER ERWIN JAMES

Few of us will ever know as much about prison life as writer Erwin James, who has spoken about his experiences at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. James was handed a sentence of 99 years in 1985, for his part in two murders – the culmination of an unhappy childhood and a young life of increasingly violent crime. James was, he said, “a failed human being” – one so disconnected from life and community that he greeted his sentence with relief. And yet, by the time he had served twenty years of it, he had with the help of a sympathetic prison psychologist educated himself sufficiently to become a regular contributor to the Guardian. He was judged no longer a danger to society, and released. His new memoir is titled Redeemable: A Memoir of Darkness and Hope.

Though James speaks confidently, he remains conspicuously remorseful. “I’m so sorry and ashamed,” he began. For the sake of his victims’ families, he never talks about the detail of his crimes. He does, however, argue strongly for a society that treats criminals more like human beings and invests in their futures. “For an individual or a society to think they should help someone who’s done them harm – that’s a huge challenge,” he said. “I totally understand that.” He seeks no sympathy: “I deserved everything that was coming to me.” But improving prospects for those inside is, he argues, to the benefit of all. “We deserve prisons that let people like me out better than we were when we went in. If we’re not caring about prisoners, we’re not caring about their potential future victims.” Underfunding, overcrowding, poor living standards and low staff morale in the prison system currently co-exist with high rates of reoffending and – in James’s opinion – too many being incarcerated. “They should reduce the prison population. 80% of females in prison are in for non-violent crimes. 70% of male prisoners have two or more diagnosable mental illnesses.”

James also pondered whether radicalisation – so often blamed on the influence of religious or wider social attitudes – might not be triggered by the same stimuli as any criminality. “We do see that the people who commit these acts of terrorism have often been in and out of prison; they’ve lost their way; they’re not necessarily intellectuals,” he said. “I’ve seen people in prison...
embrace religion in a way that’s irrational – it’s indoctrination. If there’s a void elsewhere in your life, those values can be distorted. There’s a place for you; you can be a martyr.”

Martyrdom is not the path that he has chosen for himself. James is conscious of the discomfort his history causes. “I know my slate will never be clean. I know that.” Some, he said, argue that the twenty years he served was not enough for what he did. But with regard to his right to be a public figure and to publish and express his thoughts freely, he quoted a prison governor with whom he once clashed over his right to work as a journalist. “We believe in rehabilitation for prisoners – but we’re not sure how rehabilitated we want them to be.” Whether or not his own demons are ever wholly defeated, Erwin James stands as a continual challenge to our collective desire to sweep the causes and consequences of crime under the carpet.