

JACK HENRY ABOT

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IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

LETTERS
FROM PRISON

"Awesome, brilliant...the most intense, the most
fiercely visionary book of its kind in the American
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New York Times Book Review

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY NORMAN MAIL

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BELLY OF
THE
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LETTERS FROM PRISON

**JACK
HENRY
ABBOTT**

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**To Carl Panzram, William (“Whitey”) Hurst,
“Gypsy” Adams, La Count Bly, Sam Melville,
George Jackson, “Curly” McFee,
George (“Sugar Bear”) Lovell, Gary Gilmore
—that they may rest in peace**

**IN THE
BELLY OF
THE
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**With an
Introduction by
Norman Mailer**



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INTRODUCTION

SOMETIME in the middle of working on *The Executioner's Song*, a note came from Morton Janklow, the literary agent. He was sending on a letter that had been addressed to him for forwarding to me. He assumed it was because our names had appeared together in a story in *People* magazine. In any event, the communication was by a convict named Jack H. Abbott, and Janklow felt there was something unusual in the fellow's letter. After I read it, I knew why he thought so.

An author will receive as many as several hundred letters a year from strangers. Usually they want something: will you read their work, or listen to a life-story and write it? This letter, on the contrary, offered instruction. Abbott had seen a newspaper account that stated I was doing a book on Gary Gilmore and violence in America. He wanted to warn me, Abbott said, that very few people knew much about violence in prisons. No author he had

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ever read on the subject seemed to have a clue. It was his belief that men who had been in prison as much as five years still knew next to nothing on the subject. It probably took a decade behind bars for any real perception on the matter to permeate your psychology and your flesh. If I were interested, he felt he could clarify some aspects of Gilmore's life as a convict.

There are unhappy paradoxes to being successful as a writer. For one thing, you don't have much opportunity to read good books (it's too demoralizing when you're at sea on your own work) and you also come to dread letter-writing. Perhaps ten times a year, a couple of days are lost catching up on mail, and there's little pleasure in it. You are spending time that could have been given to more dedicated writing, and there are so many letters to answer! Few writers encourage correspondents. My reply to a good, thoughtful, even generous communication from someone I do not know is often short and apologetic.

Abbott's letter, however, was intense, direct, unadorned, and detached—an unusual combination. So I took him up. When you got down to it, I did not know much about violence in prisons, and I told him so and offered to read carefully what he had to say.

A long letter came back. It was remarkable. I answered it, and another came. It was just as remarkable. I don't think two weeks went by before I was in the middle of a thoroughgoing correspondence. I felt all the awe one knows before a phenomenon. Abbott had his own voice. I had heard no other like it. At his best, when he knew exactly what he was writing about, he had an eye for the continuation of his thought that was like the line a racing-car driver takes around a turn. He wrote like a devil, which is

to say (since none of us might recognize the truth if an angel told us) that he had a way of making you exclaim to yourself as you read, "Yes, he's right. My God, yes, it's true." Needless to say, what was true was also bottomless to contemplate. Reading Abbott's letters did not encourage sweet dreams. Hell was now clear to behold. It was Maximum Security in a large penitentiary.

Now, I was not the most innocent of tourists on trips into these quarters. I had, as I say, been working on *The Executioner's Song*, which apart from collateral reading in prison literature and trips to interview convicts and wardens had also provided me with Gilmore's letters to Nicole in the six months between his incarceration and his death. Those letters had their own penetration into the depths and horrors of prison life. Gilmore had his literary talents, and they were far from nonexistent. Still, he could not supply me with what Abbott offered. Gilmore, seen as a writer, rather than as a murderer, was a romantic and a mystic—ultimately, he saw incarceration as a species of karma. No matter how he might hate it, he also viewed it as the given. Life had its lights and shadows. Prison was the foul smell of the dark places, and maybe he had earned his sojourn there. That was the grim equation. Gilmore believed he would now find no happiness this side of death.

Out of Abbott's letters, however, came an intellectual, a radical, a potential leader, a man obsessed with a vision of more elevated human relations in a better world that revolution could forge. His mind, at its happiest, wanted to speak from his philosophical height across to yours. He was not interested in the particular to the abstract. Prison, whatever its nightmares, was not a dream whose roots would lead you

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to eternity, but an infernal machine of destruction, a design for the Dispose-All anus of a prodigiously diseased society.

The two men could not be more different. Gilmore, while always on the lookout to escape, still saw death as a species of romantic solution—he and Nicole could be together on the other side; Abbott, in contrast, might be ready by his convict's code to face death in any passing encounter, but he loathed death. It was the ultimate injustice, the final obscenity that society could visit on him.

Nonetheless, and it is one of those ironies that bemuses Abbott, he is the first to point out: “. . . if you went into any prison that held Gilmore and me and asked for all of the prisoners with certain backgrounds, both in and out of prison, backgrounds that include observed and suspected behavior, you will get a set of files, a list of names, and my file and name will always be handed you along with Gilmore's . . .”

Yes. Superficially, the morphology is close. Both were juvenile delinquents, both were incarcerated for most of their adolescence in state-supported institutions—as Abbott explained in his early letters, the kids you knew in the juvenile home were equal to relatives when you met them again in the pen—and both men knew very little of liberty. At thirty-six, Gilmore had spent eighteen of the last twenty-two years of his life in jail; and Abbott, while younger, had, proportionately, spent more. First imprisoned at twelve, he was out once for nine months, then imprisoned again at the age of eighteen for cashing a check with insufficient funds. He was given a maximum of five years. As he tells us in this work, he then killed a fellow convict and was given an in-

determinate sentence up to nineteen years. He has been in jail ever since but for a six-week period when he escaped from Maximum Security in Utah State Prison and was on the lam in America and Canada. He has the high convict honors of being the only man to escape from Max in that penitentiary.

There are a few other similarities between Gilmore and Abbott. Foremost, they are both convicts. They are by their logic the elite of a prison population, part of the convict establishment as seen by the convicts, not by the authority—that is to say, they are hard-core. They see themselves as men who set the code for this city-state, this prison, that is occupied by a warden and his security officers. Beneath that overarching authority, convicts build their own establishment. They deal between themselves as contending forces, they hold trials, they instruct the young, they pass on the code.

There is a paradox at the core of penology, and from it derives the thousand ills and afflictions of the prison system. It is that not only the worst of the young are sent to prison, but the best—that is, the proudest, the bravest, the most daring, the most enterprising, and the most undefeated of the poor. There starts the horror. The fundamental premise of incarceration which Abbott demonstrates to us, over and over, is that prison is equipped to grind down criminals who are cowards into social submission, but can only break the spirit of brave men who are criminals, or anneal them until they are harder than the steel that encloses them. If you can conceive of a society (it is very difficult these days) that is more concerned with the creative potential of violent young men than with the threat they pose to the suburbs, then a few

solutions for future prisons may be there. Somewhere between the French Foreign Legion and some prodigious extension of *Outward Bound* may lie the answer, at least for all those juvenile delinquents who are drawn to crime as a positive experience—because it is more exciting, more meaningful, more mysterious, more transcendental, more religious than any other experience they have known. For them, there is a conceivable dialogue. The authority can say: “Are you tough? Then show us you have the balls to climb that rock wall.” Or travel down the rapids in a kayak, hang-glide—dare your death in any way that doesn’t drag other people into death. Whereas for all those petty criminals who are not fundamentally attached to such existential tests of courage and violence, for whom crime is the wrong business, prison is not a problem. They can move with small friction from minimum security to prisons-without-walls to halfway houses. For them, a two-year sentence can even be a high-school education. But the social practice of mixing these two kinds of criminals together is a disaster, an explosion. The timid become punks and snitches, the brave turn cruel. For when bold and timid people are obliged to live together, courage turns to brutality and timidity to treachery. A marriage between a brave man and a fearful woman may be exceeded in matrimonial misery only by a union of a brave woman and a fearful man. Prison systems perpetuate such relations.

Abbott doesn’t let us forget why. I cannot think, offhand, of any American writer who has detailed for us in equal ongoing analysis how prison is designed to gut and corrupt the timid, and break or brutalize the brave. No system of punishment that asks a brave human being to surrender his or her

bravery can ever work for the common good. It violates the universal stuff of the soul out of which great civilizations are built.

We do not live, however, in a world that tries to solve its prison problems. Even to assume we do, is utopian. The underlying horror may be that we all inhabit the swollen tissues of a body politic that is drenched in bad conscience, so bad indeed that the laugh of the hyena reverberates from every TV set, and is in danger of becoming our true national anthem. We are all so guilty at the way we have allowed the world around us to become more ugly and tasteless every year that we surrender to terror and steep ourselves in it. The mugger becomes the size of Golgotha and the middle class retires into walled cities with armed guards. Here, the prisons have wall-to-wall carpeting, and the guards address the inmates as "Sir," and bow. But they are prisons. The measure of the progressive imprisonment of all society is to be found at the base—in the state of the penitentiaries themselves. The bad conscience of society comes to focus in the burning lens of the penitentiary. That is why we do not speak of improving the prisons—which is to say, taking them through some mighty transmogrifications—but only of fortifying law and order. But that is no more feasible than the dream of remission in the cancer patient. To read this book is to live in the land of true and harsh perception—we won't get law and order without a revolution in the prison system.

Let me take it, however, from another tack. At one point in these letters Abbott speaks of how he obtained his education by reading books brought to him by his sister from a friendly bookstore outside. For five and a half years in Maximum Security he

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read, with an intensity he has carried over into his style, such authors as Niels Bohr and Hertz and Hegel, Russell and Whitehead, Carnap and Quine. Crucial to it all was Marx. We have the phenomenon of a juvenile delinquent brought up in reform schools who stabs another prisoner to death, takes drugs when he can, reads books in Maximum Security for five years until he can hardly stand, and then, like Marx, tries to perceive the world in his mind and come back with a comprehensive vision of society. The boldness of the juvenile delinquent grows into the audacity of the self-made intellectual. Only by the tender retort of the heart can we imagine what it must be like to live alone with so great a hunger and acquire the meat and bones of culture without the soup. Abbott looks to understand the world, he would dominate the world with his mind, yet in all his adult life he has spent six weeks in the world. He knows prison like the ferryman knows the crossing to Hades. But the world Abbott knows only through books. He is the noble equivalent of Jerzy Kosinski's debased observer, Chauncey Gardner, who learns about the world through a TV set. Yet, what a prodigious meal Abbott has taken in. He has torn the meat of culture with his fingers, he has crushed the bones with his own teeth. So he has a mind like no other I have encountered. It speaks from the nineteenth century as clearly as from the twentieth. There are moments when the voice that enters your mind is the clear descendant of Marx and Lenin untouched by any intervention of history. Indeed, Abbott, who is half Irish and half Chinese, even bears a small but definite resemblance to Lenin, and the tone of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov rises out of some of these pages.

That offers a certainty. No one who reads this work will agree with every one of Abbott's ideas. It is impossible. On the one hand, he is the livid survivor of the ultra-revolutionary credo of the Declaration of Independence, "*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*" Freedom and justice are oxygen to Abbott. He even writes: "It has been my experience that injustice is perhaps the *only* (if not merely the *greatest*) cause of insanity behind bars. You'd be surprised to learn what a little *old-fashioned* oppression can do to anyone." Hear! Hear! It is the devil's voice. We know it is true as soon as we hear it. Of course, Abbott is also a Communist. What kind, I'm not clear. He seems to hold to Mao, and to Stalin both, but vaguely. It is more clear that his real sympathies are with the Third World, with Cuba, Africa, and Arab revolutionaries. How long he would survive in a Communist country I don't know. It is obvious we would not agree on how long. We have written back and forth on this a little, but not a great deal. I no longer have the taste for polemic that he enjoys. Moreover, I have not spent my life in jail. I can afford the sophisticated despair of finding Russia altogether as abominable as America and more, but then, I have had the experience of meeting delegations of Russian bureaucrats and they look like prison guards in prison suits. I am free, so I can afford the perception. But if I had spent my young life in jail, and discovered the officers of my own land were my enemies, I would find it very hard not to believe that the officers of another land might be illumined by a higher philosophy.

I say this, and add that I am much more impressed by the literary measure of Abbott's writings on prison than by his overall analyses of foreign af-

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fairs and revolution. One is for me the meat and bones—the other is the soup he has not had. Yet I do not sneer. He has forged his revolutionary ideas out of the pain and damage done to his flesh and nerves by a life in prison. It is possible that he would be as much a revolutionary or more after ten years of freedom. Or an altogether different kind of man. I hope we have the opportunity to find out. As I am writing these words, it looks like Abbott will be released on parole this summer. It is certainly the time for him to get out. There is a point past which any prisoner can get nothing more from prison, not even the preservation of his will, and Abbott, I think, has reached these years. Whereas, if he gets out, we may yet have a new writer of the largest stature among us, for he has forged himself in a cauldron and still has half of the world to discover. There is never, when we speak of possible greatness in young writers, more than one chance in a hundred that we are right, but this one chance in Abbott is so vivid that it reaffirms the very idea of literature itself as a human expression that will survive all obstacles. I love Jack Abbott for surviving and for having learned to write as well as he does.

Norman Mailer
March 1981