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The Prisoners, Mothers behind bars by Isabel Nery – Portuguese Literary Journalism at its best

Abstract:

The “human interest story as social parable” (Kerrane 1997: 17) is the cornerstone of Isabel Nery’s book *The Prisoners, Mothers behind bars* (2012). It pays respect to ordinary people with extraordinary lives, a relevant feature of literary journalism (Sims 1995: 3). For months, Nery sat, observed, listened and talked to the jailed mothers in two prisons in Portugal, *Tires* and *Santa Cruz do Bispo*, and in *Rhode Island* in the USA. The author tells their stories and gives voice to their thoughts and feelings in an attempt to uncover and recover the dignity of human life. Immersion reporting and a critical standpoint result in an impactful testimony of the harsh reality of imprisoned motherhood and childhood and the experience of constrained freedom where the absence of sun, joy and care are deeply felt. Nery is a literary journalist who reveals the emotional state of feminine human nature behind bars where survival, (re)adaptation and guilt go hand in hand with despair from lack of fellow human concern.

Keywords:

Portuguese Literary Journalism, Isabel Nery, Motherhood, Imprisonment

Resumo:

A “história de interesse humano como parábola social” (Kerrane 1997: 17) é a pedra angular do livro de Isabel Nery, *As Prisioneiras, Mães atrás das Grades* (2012). É uma homenagem a pessoas comuns com vidas extraordinárias, uma característica relevante do jornalismo literário (Sims 1995: 3). Durante meses, Nery sentou-se, observou, ouviu e conversou com as mães presas de duas prisões em Portugal, *Tires* e *Santa Cruz do Bispo*, e em *Rhode Island* nos Estados Unidos. A autora conta as suas histórias e dá voz aos seus pensamentos e sentimentos na tentativa de desvendar e resgatar a dignidade da vida humana. O relato de imersão e um ponto de vista crítico resultam num testemunho impactante da dura realidade da maternidade e da infância na prisão e na experiência de liberdade restrita onde a ausência de sol, alegria e cuidado são profundamente sentidas. Nery é uma jornalista literária que revela o estado emocional da natureza humana feminina atrás das grades, onde sobrevivência, (re)adaptação e culpa andam de mãos dadas com o desespero da falta de preocupação humana por parte do outro.

Palavras-chave:

Jornalismo Literário Português, Isabel Nery, Maternidade, Prisão

Telling the story of the Other

In 1973, a collection of essays published by Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson entitled *The New Journalism*, paved the way for a new, less conservative, more creative and narrative form of journalism. Referred to by Soares as a phenomenon or style (2011), by Bak as a discipline (2011) and by Hartsock as a form or a genre (2011), literary journalism, is also known as narrative journalism or literary reportage. Literary journalism has been extensively studied by US scholars as Norman Sims (1984, 2007, 2009), John C. Hartsock (2000), Richard Lance Keeble and Sharon Wheeler (2007), Thomas B. Connery (2010), Bak and Bill Reynolds (2011). However, literary journalism is by no means exclusively Anglophone as Alice Trindade so brilliantly reminds us through the title of her Keynote Address to the conference of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies at King's College (Canada): *Literary Journalism: Many Voices, Multiple Languages* (2017). Literary journalism has been practiced and studied worldwide for the past a hundred years. The pioneering researchers of Portuguese literary journalism, where we aim to situate our research, are Alice Trindade and Isabel Soares, co-founders of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS) and holders of an extensive curriculum. The August, issue 12, 2020 volume of *Literary Journalism Studies*, of which they are guest editors, illustrates well how literary journalism in Portuguese “heir to a long historic lineage, is thriving” (Soares 2020: 12). Gathering articles from various Portuguese-speaking countries as Portugal, Brazil, and Angola, these authors have proven literary journalism is a story unique to each nation (Bak 2011). In Portugal, the genre goes back to the end of the 19th Century, with Eça de Queirós, Ramalho Ortigão, Batalha Reis and Oliveira Martins as the first “new” journalists in Portugal (Soares 2011). All, simultaneously writers and journalists, immersed to depict the lives of real people they encountered. In 21st Century Portugal, Sílvia Caneco, Paulo Moura, Susana Moreira Marques, Pedro Coelho, Miguel Sousa Tavares, José Luís Peixoto, Raquel Ochoa and Isabel Nery continue this heritage of non-fiction writing or reportage, which is as stimulating to read as fiction.

Literary journalism is described by Bak and Reynolds (2001) as nonfiction narrative journalism, or factual reporting resorting to stylistic strategies and narrative techniques. Hartsock states that it is “a ‘narra-descriptive journalism’ with literary ambition” (2009: 5). He adds that the author or narrator tells real stories making use of his senses and his point of view (2000). Literary journalism resorts to techniques related to literary discourse as scene construction, dialogue and concrete detail. Soares (2018) describes this genre as a narrative kind of journalism, from the perspective of its tone, and a journalism with a literary flair, from

the perspective of its style. It is a journalism of embellished writing. Trindade refers that it involves the reporting of new facts using a literary style where imagination selects elements and presents them in manners never thought (2012). Connery (1992) refers that its main features are immersion, structure, precision, voice, responsibility and symbolism. He states that it differs from conventional journalism by the choice of real subjects and of literary writing techniques as *mise en scène*, detail and descriptions. Hersey defends that “the journalist must not invent” (1986: 314) and Yagoda that he should be “informed and animated by the central journalistic commitment to the truth” (1997: 13). For Abrahamson, literary journalism at the regional, national and international level shapes and reflects “larger social, cultural, and political currents” (2011: 80). According to Trindade, literary journalism narrates “verifiable events using techniques and strategies that are culturally meaningful to their reading public(s)” (2020: 15). Bak (2011) describes international literary journalism as a significant form of writing which raises sociopolitical awareness about the relegated and disadvantaged.

As a literary journalist, Isabel Nery engages in the world by telling stories of reality in the conventional sense of storytelling, using her personality, subjectivity and personal imprint. As a narrative journalist, she uses interviews to immerse herself in, research and report on the neglected and forgotten, those society does not see or chooses to disregard. According to Vargas “The conversation or inter-view-encounter is a fundamental method of the reportage methodology since it allows us to interview beyond the surfaces and to understand a phenomenon in depth in order to narrate it” (2018:731). The uniqueness of literary journalism is about being on the ground, careful observation and notetaking, realistic dialogue, the possibility for readers to be inside subjects’ minds. By means of interviews to subjects about their thoughts and feelings, and descriptions of subjects’ real lives and backgrounds, Nery becomes the revealer who experiences life through words and her book under scrutiny here qualifies as literary journalism.

Recovering the dignity of human life

Although they are not old enough to understand these words, I dedicate
this book to all the prisoners’ children [...] a lesson of courage.
(Nery 2012: 5)¹

Isabel Nery is a well-known Portuguese writer and journalist. She holds a degree in International Relations and a Masters in Communication, and she is the vice-president of the Portuguese Journalists Union. She has worked for some of the most significant television stations and magazines and is currently carrying out a PhD in Literary Journalism and neuroscience. She has written several non-fiction books: *Política e Jornais: Encontros mediáticos* (2004), *Chorei de Véspera – Ensaio sobre a Morte, por amor à Vida* (2016), *O Inferno aqui tão perto – Literatura de Viagens e Reportagem de Guerra* (2009) and has received several awards including *Mulher Reportagem Maria Lamas*, *Prémio Jornalismo pela Tolerância*, *Prémio Paridade Mulheres*

e *Homens na Comunicação Social* and *Prémio Jornalismo e Integração* from UNESCO. In 2007, she won the journalism award by the Novartis Oncology Foundation for her articles *Eu venci o Cancro* (I survived cancer). The non-fiction reportage book analyzed here, *The Prisoners – Mothers Behind Bars*, was written in 2012, and adapted into the short movie *The Prisoners* in 2015.

According to António Vitorino, the Portuguese former MEP (Member of the European Parliament), who writes the preface to the book, prison is about punishment and resocialization or reinsertion, to repair the harm done to society (Nery 2012: 10). For Nery, prisons are places where you “lock up – and hide – the dangers in society” (*idem*: 21) or the women that society rejects. Nery tackles a sensitive human issue, lack of freedom. She empathizes and gives voice to an invisible, forgotten and frequently underprivileged minority, the prisoners. She does it in “total dedication to collect voices unjustly unheard, to bear witness to events we are unaware of, and to share heart-breaking testimonies from both survivors and dreamers” a feat Isabelle Meuret considers inspirational (2019: 109). To write *The Prisoners – Mothers Behind Bars*, Nery spent two years visiting three prisons; *Tires* and *Santa Cruz do Bispo* in Portugal (the only two female prisons in the Portuguese mainland) and *Rhode Island* in the USA. For four months, the author participated in “immersion in intimate experiences” (Vargas 2018: 735) interviewing women, mothers, children, guards and family members. In literary journalism “the principal sources are typically interviewees, including participants in or witnesses to the events which constitute the central narrative” (Mitchell 2014: 3). An outsider becomes the insider who listens to those who just want to tell their story, their version, their truth. For Vargas, the interview that “comes out of the everyday life, of Human Being, weaves the stories that are part of the event in the community” (2018: 732). This book is a privileged insight into real life behind bars or life behind real bars. A bare portrait of a reality still very much stained by prejudice and ignorance. Vitorino believes Isabel Nery “is able to [...] take us with her to the atmosphere and environment of her dialogues with the prisoners, whom we follow as if we were present in the room, in the sharing of their reactions and feelings” (Nery 2012: 12). The reader feels the presence of the journalist through her subjectivity, her personality, and the style of her observations. For Vargas, “the sharing of life experiences is the moment in which the revelation of the other can be produced in depth. In the interview method, the participant observer enters the reality of his research subject through empathy” (2018: 734). Nery lives, experiences, shares and reports as “The conversations of reporters with their interviewees show us the ways of communication, i.e. communion” (*idem*: 732). Isabel Nery’s book is both literary and subjective, as the reader becomes present inside the writer’s self, endorsing Hartsock’s “writing subjectivity” (2000: 17).

In the twenty-first century, we have witnessed an appetite for fact, for the real and for true stories (Meuret 2012). Nery’s immersion discloses one of the most surveilled, yet least known universes. Behind high walls, barbed wires, iron bars, gates and locks, she finds ordinary people with extraordinary lives. Two separate worlds, the inside and the outside. As Vitorino highlights: “it is still very evident the relationship of ambivalence between the whole

Portuguese society and the reality of prisons” (Nery 2012: 9). This book is about imprisoned mothers and their children. Some on the East, some on the West, ‘separated by an ocean, united by dope’ (*idem*: 39). Nery learned of homicides, suicide attempts, burglaries, frauds, drug traffic, loneliness, homosexuality and guilt. She observed the behaviors of human beings aged from two-months to 30 year-olds. She found on the other side of the walls “a condensed version of human state. The good and the bad. Depression, physical and verbal violence and suicide, but also comradeship, friendship and love” (*idem*: 153). Nery narrows the distance between subject and object, us and them, free and chained.

According to Soares (2021: 64), literary journalism is reportage because the literary journalist takes on his role as a reporter in his commitment to detail, and to understanding the real, as truthfully and completely as possible. In an interview² Nery states her drive for immersion and reportage stems from her respect for freedom: “Sometimes we do not know that losing freedom is not just about being locked up (...) being told to do everything (...) as if we were children again, which we are not”. Paradoxically, towards the end of the reportage Nery felt her own freedom as a journalist curtailed. Her interviewing rights were temporarily suspended because of the content of her questions. It is well known that drugs exist in prison especially on visiting days “Everyday hundreds of people go in and out of a prison. The high walls should, in fact, be called membranes – they swallow, but they also spit” (Nery 2012: 234). The issue is still silenced but Nery felt “avoiding the topic would mean rendering the reader a bad service” (*idem*: 234). A grown up son of a prisoner Nery interviewed outside prison mentioned being pressured not to talk to the journalist. His mother feared getting a bad probation report. Nery leaves the reader a subtle notice “we are used to considering prisoners as people who disappoint their families, friends, colleagues and society in general. They pay disillusion with freedom. And those who are free, what do they pay with?” (*idem*: 278).

Separated by an ocean, united by dope

Erving Goffman in his book *Asylums: Essays on the Condition of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* presented prisons as totalitarian institutions, with characteristics of segregation, homogenization, generating norms and stigmas. These “total institutions”, impose a strong relationship of authority and power that reflects on the personality and individuality of inmates, especially women.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of female inmates but the lack of scholarly attention and research on female prisoners reveals a male oriented policy. In the US, *Health Issues Among Incarcerated Women* by Braithwaite, Arriola, and Newkirk (2006) has been a major contribution to the research on women in the criminal justice system, as well as the works of Kathryn Watterson, Susan L. Miller, Kathleen Ferraro and L. Mara Dodge.

In “Gender and Crime: Toward a Gendered Theory of Female Offending,” Darrell Steffensmeier and Emilie Allan, refer that women are less likely than men to commit criminal acts (Annual Review of Sociology 22) (1996: 459), highlighting that women fall into crime

through “victimization, role entrapment, economic marginality, and survival needs” (470). Female prisoners are more vulnerable and disadvantaged by the current structure of the criminal justice system. Kathryn Watterson highlights “we are talking about power and powerlessness” (1996: 19). Women in prison represent a population that is even deeper entrenched into poverty and inequality.

According to the U.S., Bureau of Justice Statistics, between 1991 and 2007, the number of children with a mother in prison increased by 131% (Office of Justice Programs, Special Report: Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children, by Lauren E. Glaze and Laura M. Maruschak, NCJ 222984 (2008). Furthermore, statistics show that 80 percent of women in prison have children of some age (Braithwaite, 2006, xviii) having “heartbreaking collateral damage, because women are disproportionately likely to be primary caregivers” (Kristof, "Mothers in Prison," November 25, 2016.) In 2002, the sociologists Anália Torres and Maria do Carmo Gomes carried out a survey in 47 Portuguese prisons, concluding that the percentage of female inmates with children was 81.6%.

The criminal justice system tends to forget that the reasons that lead women to commit crime are very often related to survival, addiction, economic needs, and child support: “In the vast majority of cases, prior to offending, female offenders are already victims in one way or another” (40-41).³

Drugs, common to the United States and Portugal, take more women to prison than men.⁴ Men traffic to satisfy their addiction, women do it to support their family or feed their partner’s addiction. Judges disregard this and aggravate women’s sentences for trafficking, which may be considered gender discrimination. Worldwide, the number of incarcerated women is increasing as they are quick, safe, secure mules. They are mothers who fear for their children “They sell the illusion of happiness to feed their family, not to ease addictions” (Nery: 199). A prison warden says that when men enter, they leave their problems outside but “Women carry everything on their shoulders” (*idem*: 133). On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, women are free of handcuffs while giving birth. On both sides, anti-depressive and anxiolytics are the most prescribed drugs. In Portugal, women may wear their clothes and keep their children to the age of five. In the USA, they wear uniforms, and have no children with them. In Portugal, a next of kin raises their children outside. In the USA, they are given up for adoption to foster families. On both sides of the Atlantic the social reality is the same, women go after men and engage in delinquent acts because they confuse love with submission or they do it a means to other purposes (*idem*: 209). The Portuguese sociologist Anália Torres referred by Nery highlights that female criminality is related not just to survival but also to gender issues and frequently as an escape from poverty (*idem*: 208). In the USA, Nery interviewed six women, three blonde-haired whites, two blacks, one Hispanic. In Portugal, she interviewed sixteen in the two Portuguese prisons. Many were anxious to talk to Nery to unburden and unleash their anxiety.

The USA, Rhode Island

Though not considered a high security prison, very strict rules are felt at this prison facility. Fifty four percent of the 181 women are black. Some have life sentences. Sentences can be reduced for good behavior, studying or working. Many of these women have no jobs and just lie in “lethargy or depression or depression and aggressiveness” (Nery 2012: 31). Time has a special dimension in prison. There is always too much of it, like leftovers. There are no hurries, urgencies or will. Women claim their sentences are due to unemployment, poverty, abuse, criminality and prostitution, all by the hands of men, all leading to addiction. They must wear uniforms “the greatest denial of identity in US prisons” (*idem*: 32), and tobacco and physical contact are not allowed. The walls are clean, dispossessed of photographs or drawings. The general idea is that prisoners are criminals no longer fit to be mothers: “society is still less tolerant towards imperfections of the feminine gender” (*idem*: 36). The punishment is double. Once in jail, it is difficult for these women to keep their children and they frequently lose custody. Difficult family relationships, separation from children, the loss of the role of mother and rights to children are painful. According to Sandra Enos,⁵ the sociologist who took Nery to *Rhode Island*, some can still be good mothers when they leave. Thousands of children grow up in the USA without their mothers. Thousands never visit their mothers, as women’s prisons are few in number and miles away. Nery states that the American system emphasizes punishment, not rehabilitation and “to enter here means to stop being a woman, a mother, an individual” (*idem*: 46).

Portugal: Tires (outskirts of Lisbon), Santa Cruz do Bispo (Oporto District)

Gender inequality allows a man to receive his wife in his cell but not the opposite (*idem*: 164). This means men are entitled to sexuality, women are not. In both Portuguese prisons, 600 women live without any form of physical contact. A guard in Tires states: “Those who are not lesbians become lesbians” (*idem*: 166). Having a child alleviates depression and suicide rates and lessens relapses (*idem*: 89). Eight Portuguese interviewees gave birth while in prison and six deliberately got pregnant to have company inside prison: “what helps reduce loneliness is not a husband, it’s children” (*idem*: 158). The author divides mothers into two groups, those without the children they miss and those with their children whose innocence they have stained with guilt (*idem*: 19). Cunha (1994) states that children minimize the mother’s shock and softens the prison experience. Children turn prison into a piece of heaven “children are being brought into the world with the mission of making mothers’ punishment more bearable” (Nery 2012: 119). As mothers tend to polarize on their children the need for affection the baby “is born and lives destined to compensate for the mother’s problems” (*idem*: 188). For the prison system, children mean less violence and aggressiveness from the female inmates. On the other side, in the house of convicts life without children is hell “tiredness is from the neck up, because it is psychological” (*idem*: 117).

Tires prison holds women for homicide, assault or trafficking “a place for punishment. With or without children inside” (*idem*: 20). It contains *Casa das mães* (The house of mothers) where mothers are allowed to keep their children from birth to the age of three and the adjoining *Casa*

da criança (The house of children) where children remain from three to five with visits from mothers. It also has children who have been abandoned or taken from their families for ill-treatment or sexual abuse. Some dread their families more than strangers, others dread the police for stealing their families. Women compare *Casa das mães* to heaven and the remaining premises to hell. Being a mother means privileges, more freedom and a better chance of a job. Above all, with children “life in prison seems humanized. Almost normal” (*idem*: 21). While in prison, some women conceive a child “to have some company as a premeditated decision by many of the mothers I interviewed” (*idem*: 89). The child is a passport to physical and psychological survival. In a cell, no one can rid them of their conscience “but even with children around, time in prison is wicked. It makes you think. What you want and what you don’t want” (*idem*: 98).

Santa Cruz do Bispo holds 264 women, is not high security and was designed specifically for children and mothers. There is more control over prisoners but less tension than in *Tires*. It is compared to a *Ferrari* as it offers special health and education services as training classes on motherhood skills. Mothers can keep their children up to the age of three or five. After that, children are taken away to a next of kin, something they do not understand and only adds to their trauma (*idem*: 69). Mothers want someone who will listen patiently, they did nothing wrong, they should not be there, what will happen to their children? Number 94, as she is called, “accepted to give me her guilt, excuses and solitude” (*idem*: 63).

The worst criminals, but still good mothers

Isabel Nery experiences and discloses prisoners’ realities and truths: “four months of reportage in prisons demand that I imagine myself in the place of these women” (*idem*: 273). Nery reveals past trails into crime, present reactions to punishment and no freedom, and hopes for a future outside. It reveals true accounts of pregnancies and childbirths, upbringings and relationships. It also brings forth intense, personal testimonies of loneliness and silence, regret, redemption and self-punishment, suffering and grief, anxiety and tension, anger and frustration. A make believe environment of experiences and feelings, which attempts at normality, sometimes achieved, others reinforced or remembered. A world of pretend affections. What Nery observes, she registers and reports as a literary journalist: “she chews her teardrops in a self-determined silence, while massaging her belly with the cutlery free hand” (*idem*: 23). Nery offers her commentaries and point of view as is natural to a literary journalist, yet she passes no judgement on these women “I always try to remember I am not here as a judge” (*idem*: 64). The author knows of human nature “whoever is on this side could end up be there, and whoever is there will, sooner or later, come to this side” (*idem*: 153). The reader is led to set aside pre-made judgements: “In these endless trajectories, prisons are nothing more than an enlarged mirror of what happens outside of them” (*idem*: 208). Nery speaks of the genealogy of crime “reoffender on the mother’s side, drug dealer on the father’s side, plotted on the husband’s side” (*idem*: 142) and adds “among the honest majority there are criminals, as among the convicted there are honourable people. But it takes a lot more work

to see that. You only see it if you want. Or if you have been on both sides of the walls” (*idem*: 227). For the author, prisons have “high walls, borders between good and bad. They are not mere fences. They hide fears. They keep delinquents in. They shelter children” (*idem*: 278). Women tell their life story with roughness as if “they want to neutralize the listener, empty him of criticism” (*idem*: 45). Nery’s empathy goes to the woman more than to the prisoner. As a prison guard states “They may be the biggest criminals, but they are good mothers” (*idem*: 55). It is through motherhood that they are dignified as human beings, that they attain an identity and social recognition. The reader is overwhelmed by the author’s humanistic nature, compassion, condescendence, benevolence, sympathy, respect, and understanding: “Some women’s life-stories can be read in their faces. Early aging skin, damaged teeth, looks that cannot decide between sin and anger” (*idem*: 122). The author establishes a close, intimate relationship with the interviewees. She stays by Adília’s bedside through labor and comforts her: “She’s a woman, I know she is in pain and she misses her children. Talking is a harmless painkiller” (*idem*: 25). She strokes her and tells her of her right to a painless childbirth. Nery meets all sorts of women, the drug addict whose biggest challenge is to resist addiction and shows she is still a good mother and the one who cannot admit to prostitution and jail is a blessing where she got clean (*idem*: 206). In Nery, there is the personal tone, the intimate familiarity, the sensitivity of the woman who details, first-person accounts of real relationships, friendships, sufferings, and losses. Nery displays the genuine involvement with the imprisoned Other. Nery’s drive for immersion and reportage came from her respect for freedom: “Sometimes we do not know that losing freedom is not just about being locked up (...) being told to do everything (...) It’s as if we were children again, which we are not”.⁶

Guards keep authority through respect, not weapons. Although the rules disallow friendships between guards and prisoners, there is more to their relationship than meets the eye “it is with them that they cry their absent children, curse their unfaithful husbands, judges and the law” (*idem*: 115). Guards frequently act as mothers, confidants or nurses. Adília, a 22 year-old-mother embodies the new criminal tendencies hiding old social miseries and extreme poverty. When she arrived in prison, she did not even know how to bathe or make a bed. She had her baby in prison and “if repentance was paid with crying and courage was measured with silences, Adília would have her accounts settled” (*idem*: 47). The guards held her hand “A guard is guard and a prisoner is a prisoner, but a woman is not made of iron, and the pain of giving birth touches both innocent and guilty” (*idem*: 47).

Foreign truths, universal lies

Nery discovered that “truth is the least relativized value in jail. I have known it from the first day. I felt deceived sometimes, but I also found sincerities rarely found outside walls” (*idem*: 64). Many women lie about their past and their connection to drugs. Selling drugs is so natural that they hardly associate it to crime (*idem*: 66). Though many traffic for a living and some even get their children to do it, they state it was a one-off occasion. They are frequently abandoned by their partners and start trafficking because it is their responsibility to raise and

feed the children (*idem*: 68). It is twice as difficult to accept their fate: “I’m forgotten here. If my grandma dies, who will take care of my children?” (*idem*: 68). They also lie to their children, as they do not know what the future holds. Ivo, a six-year old boy who was born in Casa das Mães and at three moved to Casa da Criança explains: “I was born in prison. Then I came here. After I don’t know...” and adds “I would like to know when I’m leaving this house, but nobody tells me...” (*idem*: 73-74). They can only offer their children half-lies. When Nery observes the surroundings and behaviours, she realizes she is going to interview children “with an upside down world” (*idem*: 76). She adds: “In prison, the truth is garnished with mannerisms to make sense to a child. Even if it does not” (*idem*: 69). At the age of eight children leave and are raised by family members or an institution outside. Society decides in the child’s best interest, however, Nery questions: “where is it written that it is best to live in freedom than in jail with the only ones you had the chance to love? Somebody will have to explain to the children that they are not grounded, though they are the main victims of the solution found by adults” (*idem*: 69).

In *Casa da Criança*, wardens, guards, psychologists and voluntary workers try to simulate family life as “the word ‘family’ is not exclusive to blood ties” (*idem*: 87) states psychologist Carla Semedo. These children suffer from numerous separations, heartbreaks and disillusiones “If the mother has the right to cry for the future, he (the child) has the right to cry for the present” (*idem*: 91). They know how to live with very little and are a lesson to everyone. The adolescents or young adults living outside, the most difficult to interview, suffer sometimes more than those inside. Some try to pretend it is not happening to them, they have no role model. They speak by gestures and silences more than words. Revisiting the past is hard.

Final Remarks

The true literary journalist immerses into the bare truth, to uncover the unknown, and “delve beyond the surface of the issues” (Trindade 2020: 31). In Nery’s work, one finds careful observation, the wealth of detail and the sociological value (Trindade 2020). She delivers the real as she sees, hears, and feels it. There is intimacy and sensitivity, warmth and compassion in her storytelling. Her respect and impartiality are moving. Giving voice to forgotten, concealed human beings, she alleviates their burden, restores their dignity. The reader cannot but be changed by this enriching experience of the “theatre of reality” (Herrscher *apud* Soares 2017: 131). Female prisoners have been almost invisible under the criminal justice system facing countless challenges covered by a past of poverty, abuse, mental illness and drug abuse. Behind prison bars, women appear primarily as a human, rather than a criminal. Nery restores unheard stories of isolation and loneliness conferring dignity to their traumatized and marginalized lives.

NOTES

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¹ Translation of Nery's work by authors of this article..

² Isabel Nery – Mães Atrás das Grades. *Revista Máxima*. 02.01. 2013. <https://www.maxima.pt/actual/detalhe/isabel-nery-o-lado-de-1%C3%A1>

³ <https://digitalworks.union.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1086&context=theses>

⁴ <http://www.dgsp.mj.pt/backoffice/uploads/atuais/2018052211054210Q-reclus-sitpen-sx-nac.pdf>.

⁵ Author of the book *Mothering from the Inside – Parenting in a Women's Prison*.

⁶ Interview with Isabel Nery – Mães Atrás das Grades. *Revista Máxima*. 02.01. 2013. <https://www.maxima.pt/actual/detalhe/isabel-nery-o-lado-de-1%C3%A1>

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