

# ShALOM!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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## The Impact of the Justice System

DURING A JANUARY 2021 sermon series on “Pursuing Racial Justice” at my church, one of our guest speakers was Dominique Gilliard, the author of *Rethinking Incarceration* (2018). Much of his sermon focused on the story in Acts 16 of Paul and Silas being jailed for liberating a woman from demon possession.

Paul and Silas are arrested, severely beaten, and thrown in jail without a trial. The next morning when the jailers tell them that they are being released and can leave town in peace, Paul responds, “They beat us publicly without a trial even though we are Roman citizens and threw us into prison and now they want to get rid of us quietly.” Paul claims the privilege of his citizenship.

In his sermon, Gilliard interpreted this story as a commentary on privilege in the criminal justice system:

Paul and Silas prophetically demonstrated that privilege is something Christians are called to steward, not to exploit for selfish gain. . . . [They] knew that they were bludgeoned, denied the trial, and unjustly imprisoned because they were accused of being Jews, but they also understood that they could have ended their oppression at any point by simply declaring that they were Roman citizens. However, rather than exploiting their privilege to avoid suffering, Paul and Silas chose to endure persecution as foreigners in their hometown; they suffered in solidarity with the oppressed, exposing the systemic sin in which the Roman criminal justice system was mired.

Gilliard went on: “This passage in Acts 16 speaks to the role of the privileged Christian in the midst of a land littered with injustice. It has implications for how we think about racism and . . . deconstructing corrupt systemic institutions and reconstructing them in a way that bears witness to the love, mercy, and justice of Jesus Christ.”

He concluded his sermon with this challenge: “We all need to be involved in the criminal justice system in at least one of four ways. We need to be involved in the work of prevention, ministering to the incarcerated, walking alongside families with incarcerated loved ones, and the work of reentry. Paul and Silas’s prophetic witness has profound implications for us today. We need to strategically think about how we individually and collectively leverage our privilege to advocate for justice.” (Listen to the whole sermon at <https://vimeo.com/503459862>.)

This edition of *Shalom!* focuses on the impact of the criminal justice system on those who have been incarcerated and their families. Two women also tell their painful stories of what it feels like to be Black in a country where racial bias is inherent in the justice system. The words of Jesus continue to call us to action:

*“I was in prison and you visited me.’ . . . ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you in prison and visited you?’ . . . ‘Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . , you did it to me”*  
(from Matt. 25:36-40).

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Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

# Caring for Families of People in Prison

By Luke Embree

**THERE ARE AROUND** 2.7 million children in the US who have at least one parent incarcerated.<sup>1</sup> Five million people have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in their childhood. Incarceration numbers in the US are alarming in general, but these numbers are especially distressing.

One of the most troubling aspects of this reality is just how easy it is to overlook it. The impact of incarceration on the friends, neighbors, and loved ones of the incarcerated is substantial, but not as often recognized. Consider, for example, the following scenario:

A young man is arrested and convicted on a nonviolent drug-related offense. For his

time he receives a five-year mandatory minimum sentence. Let's imagine, under normal circumstances, his regular income places his household (a girlfriend with two children) well under the poverty line. This is not an actual scenario but it is also not an uncommon one. What happens next?

First, this young man's mistake carries significant consequences for his girlfriend, who is now a single mother of two. She has just lost a major source of security for both herself and her children. She'll need to find additional resources and possibly a new source of income. She's also under significantly more pressure to find childcare. Some cities and towns have free or low cost childcare, but these are often at full capacity and new clients are placed on wait lists. But our mother of two needs childcare now. More than likely she's going to have to depend on others within her community to meet both her physical needs and the needs of her children, including childcare.

Consequently, those around this newly single mother will begin to feel the effects of this young man's arrest. Families in low income communities often rely heavily on their neighbors, family members, and friends for support. But the loss of this young man will add a greater strain to an already limited pool of time, energy, and resources. Everyone within this young woman's network will begin to feel the impact of her boyfriend's offense.

It is not uncommon for the incarceration of a single individual to have real world consequences for people two and three times removed from the actual person under arrest. And so far we haven't even touched on the long-term emotional, developmental, and psychological effects such events have on the children who find themselves in these scenarios. The incarceration of a parent is among the top five reasons children enter the foster care system.<sup>2</sup> It can be difficult to determine just how far the consequences of a single person's incarceration can reverberate through our society.

People who experience the arrest of a

loved one are thrust into a scenario they did not design. Nonetheless, they will have to bear the burden of their loss. The experience can be isolating. In Lexington, KY, there is a ministry devoted to serving and supporting those with loved ones in prison. It is called Families of the Incarcerated, and our church has had the privilege of helping them help others.

Our church (Plowshares Brethren in Christ) is a home church network in Central Kentucky. Each of our home churches are encouraged to find some way of engaging the world in the name of Christ. One of our home churches decided to come alongside Families of the Incarcerated as their way of being the church in their city.

It's important to make clear that we do not lead this ministry. We don't organize the gatherings, follow up with their members, or promote their meetings. Families of the Incarcerated has excellent ministers who devote themselves to serving the needs and concerns of people in their ministries. What their ministry needed was a large, open, and central location for their members to meet. And we happened to have just the place.

What seems like long ago, before the days of COVID and quarantine, our church rented space in an old bread factory. More recently the bottom of the facility has been repurposed into a brewery (making a different sort of high calorie carbohydrate). But the second story was rented by a not-for-profit called The Plantory, and that is where our church set up its office and met for larger gatherings. We also had 24-hour access to a large conference room and a central kitchen. The location was exactly what Families of the Incarcerated was looking for.

Members of our church set up chairs. We brewed coffee, purchased donuts, greeted people as they arrived, and joined the circle to listen to the men and women invited to speak at the gathering. We also listened to the cares and concerns of those who have loved ones in prison—the ones who have come to Families of the Incarcerated to find help, support, and encouragement. We were



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honored to be included in their circle of trust.

We brewed coffee in one of those big, silver urns so popular at church functions. Those of us familiar with such gatherings can easily imagine the smell these things produce. But more importantly we can recall the people, the experiences, and the atmospheres that brought us together with styrofoam cups in our hands. For those men and women who gathered Wednesday nights on the second floor of an old bread factory, that coffee symbolized love, support, and hope. For us, that coffee was our way of representing Christ.

We never advertised our church at these meetings. We didn't leave out literature or Bibles or information about Plowshares. But neither were we shy about who we were or why we were there. We were simply a small

church caring for our community in the name of Jesus. And that didn't go unnoticed.

Among our number were a couple of men who had spent time in prison. They had "paid their debt to society" (whatever that means) and are now living successful lives and caring for their families. They joined Plowshares through an Alpha Group that we hosted. These guys really aren't the "churchy" type, though they have a great respect for Christ and depth of spiritual concern. And they were thrilled to join us as we served the Families of the Incarcerated. One of them recalled how a similar group had supported his mother when he was in prison. They heard the Gospel in a powerful way by participating with those seeking to live it out on behalf of others.

Jesus once told the story of a group of incredulous saints who had visited him in

prison. When asked when, he simply stated it was when they had done so for "the least of these my brethren." Those who are overlooked, those are the ones with whom Jesus identified in the final analysis. In the final analysis, we may all be surprised to discover that Jesus himself has developed a taste for coffee brewed in those big, silver urns.

**Luke Embree** is pastor of the Plowshares Brethren in Christ Church, Lexington, KY.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>"Children of Incarcerated Parents," National Institute of Corrections, US Department of Justice, [tinyurl.com/1na90fsm](http://tinyurl.com/1na90fsm).

<sup>2</sup>"#NationalFosterCareMonth: Why Children End Up In Foster Care," A Family for Every Child, [tinyurl.com/4halg4zp](http://tinyurl.com/4halg4zp).

## Dream Denied

By Tracie Hunter

AS THE FIRST and only African-American and the first Democrat to be elected to the Juvenile Court, and the first African-American elected to the Common Pleas Court, my historic achievements that opened the door for all who succeed me should have been celebrated. Instead, I was humiliatingly dragged across the courtroom floor on national TV and thrown in jail for months in 2019. I was treated like a common criminal for crashing the glass ceiling designed to prevent people like me from making it to the top of my profession.

My only crime was daring to defy a system controlled by White members of the other party and their families and friends. For the first time in history, a person of color was elected to the helm of one of the largest courts in Cincinnati that controlled one of the largest county budgets. I would administer millions of dollars in contracts and make personnel decisions that impacted old white political families who relied on the court's patronage jobs.

I ran for judge to instill equality and justice in a broken system. When God told me that I won the election, which had been called in favor of my opponent, I hired a

lawyer to investigate my suspicions. The Board of Elections confirmed that thousands of ballots in primarily Black and Democratic precincts had not been counted. I sued the board to make them count valid votes that had been discarded. After a hostile 18-month federal court battle, during which I was bullied to drop my lawsuit, I won. I was sworn in as judge in May 2012, nearly two years after my term began.

My case changed federal election laws that ensure that validly cast provisional ballots are counted. My lawyers received one million dollars. I received none. I was denied over \$254,000 in back pay, and ultimately over \$600,000 in judicial salary. My opponent, who lost the election, was appointed a judge in the Juvenile Court and given the administrative title that legally belonged to me. He controlled my budget and tried to keep me from adding diversity to the court. I made many historic appointments, including hiring two Black magistrates who were just elected as judges.

I inherited a judicial case backlog spanning over 10 years. A Casey Foundation report showed that cases had been backlogged for decades before I was elected. When

Supreme Court reports showed that the white judge who reported me had the most backlogged cases, the county covered it up and sued me. I exposed that the Juvenile Court had submitted inaccurate case statistics to the Ohio Supreme Court for years. The entire case management system was overhauled as a result, but they penalized me for exposing the problem rather than thanking me.

Whenever I ruled against the prosecutors, there was public backlash. I was informed that prosecutors hated me and told by a police officer to watch my back. The media constantly reported that I was incompetent, even though I set many judicial and legal precedents and changed multiple federal election and state laws. Notably, my judicial ruling ordering prosecutors to turn over police reports became Ohio law.

I declined to accept pleas from children who were poorly represented, overturned cases where laws and procedures were not properly followed, requested competency reports on children who were clearly incompetent, or reversed cases where they weren't provided legal counsel. As a result, I was accused of being an advocate for children.

Prosecutors were angry when I followed laws they should have been following and implemented changes to fix injustices.

A local newspaper and TV station repeatedly sued me after I prohibited the media from publishing the names and faces of children. That's a national policy that all courts and media follow. When I followed the law, an appeals court judge held me in contempt. It didn't matter that the child psychologist I retained to evaluate the children agreed with my ruling.

Nearly 30 unprecedented lawsuits were brought against me as a judge. Case managers altered my judicial entries, but prosecutors alleged that I forged my own entries and charged me with a crime. The state's software expert admitted they knew before I was charged that I was innocent. He admitted that the prosecutor's office instructed him to withhold that evidence, so that I would be falsely charged with tampering with evidence and forgery.

The worst thing I could do as a Black woman was to upset their well-controlled system of manipulating the county electoral process and disrupting the financial applecart that relied on the Juvenile Court system for its bread and butter. When the jury was stacked with neighbors of Republican judges, a forewoman whose husband was an attorney for the law firm of the TV station that sued me, and an employee of the station, it was apparent the fix was in. It is nearly impossible for that many people with direct ties to the case and prosecutor's office to occur in a randomly selected jury pool. Moreover, the judge refused to poll the jury, as the law requires. Then he failed to grant a mistrial after three jurors reported immediately after the trial that their verdicts were not guilty.

The county spent millions of dollars to destroy my career and reputation as a Black woman for having the audacity to make it to the top of the Juvenile Court and do what they had prevented from happening for over one hundred years. They depended on patronage jobs in the juvenile and adult court systems to employ their families and train handpicked prosecutors. My ability as judge to hire new staff disrupted their ability to control human resources and money, including millions of dollars in service contracts.

In 2014, I reported the prosecutor for un-

ethical conduct. Soon after I reported him, the prosecutor retaliated by accusing me of crimes. At trial, a prosecutor testified that I must pay for filing ethics complaints against them. It was clear that I was falsely accused, convicted of crimes, and sentenced to jail because I had the audacity to fight back in a system that has been systematically and strategically destroying Black and poor families and children for more than a century even though my court was being hailed as a model across the state. I passed an order prohibiting juveniles from being shackled in my courtroom. The order I passed in 2013 was opposed, but then in 2016, the Ohio Supreme Court followed suit and also prohibited shackling juveniles throughout the state.

In a display of God's justice, four judges who were involved in the false case and putting me in jail were voted out of office last November. I continue to fight the one wrongful conviction that is on appeal in federal court. The other nine felonies were voluntarily dismissed by the prosecutors immediately after a forensic computer expert exposed that the prosecutors and court employees working for my opponent tampered with the court's computer system and altered my judicial entries to frame me.

I never set out to make history. God called me into the criminal justice system to ensure equal treatment for all. Eleven years after my historic win, the media refuses to report the multiple federal and state laws I changed or the legal precedents I set as the first Black judge. Instead, those who oppose racial progress and change strategically diminished and disregarded me as a Black woman and judge. I was treated differently than every preceding White judge and criminalized for implementing justice, upholding people's constitutional rights to be treated with dignity and equality, and exposing internal corruption.

I no longer march with hope or sing with conviction that things will change in Cincinnati. Eleven years after I fought for equality and justice for all, I am still futilely pursuing the dream for which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. died. Justice has not rolled down like water, or righteousness like a mighty stream. Instead, I have been treated like a black stain on the white fabric of a system that continues

to feed the school-to-prison pipeline and turn children into profit. Now I too am a part of the system I fought so hard to change. However, this unimaginable experience has not weakened my faith in God, but only made me more committed and determined to keep Dr. King's dream alive for all.

**Tracie Hunter** is pastor of the Western Hills Brethren in Christ Church, Cincinnati, OH. She broke barriers when she became the first female pastor of Western Hills and the first Black senior pastor in the Brethren in Christ Church US. She owned and operated a Christian radio station for over 14 years and hosted a Christian radio talk show and cable TV show for the city of Cincinnati. She has been a lawyer for over 28 years.

## Editor's Notes

### Subscription renewals and contributions:

You will receive the 2021 subscription renewal letter soon if you haven't already. The subscription rate is still \$20 for one year, and we continue to welcome additional contributions to help pay for increasing postage and printing costs, and complimentary subscriptions for Brethren in Christ students at Messiah University and several international recipients. Checks should be payable to Brethren in Christ US and sent to the editor (address on page 2), or renew online at [bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/](http://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/).

**Topics for 2021:** Potential topics include foundations for active peacemaking, stories from the global Brethren in Christ Church, and economic justice. Contact the editor if you're interested in writing or if you have other suggestions for topics.

**Celebrating 40 years as editor:** It's hard to believe that this June I will celebrate 40 years as editor of this publication. It's the longest I've done anything continuously besides being a wife (50 years this year) and mother! Editing *Shalom!* has been one of the most important ways I've been able to use my skills and passion in service to Jesus and the church. I've been blessed!

# Restoration and Reconciliation

By David Blow

I TURNED 65 this past November. This milestone, plus the ongoing pandemic, has nudged me to reflect on my life. I have been a follower of Jesus since the age of 14. Looking back, I am grateful that I had two wonderful, supportive parents and enjoyed a stable home life growing up. I met my wife of 43 years in the church youth group. After a few years of dating, we were married. Throughout those early married years, we had two children and became active in ministry in our local church. We enjoyed good fellowship with a number of families. Vocationally, I was active in the financial services business in our local community. Some would say I had it all.

As I reflect on my spiritual life, I see that my foundation was not solid. It looked good from the outside, but inside was a different story. I was never hit by one particular hurricane, just steady erosion over time. Serious financial pressure became part of my business life, and I made some incredibly poor and illegal choices to try to dig myself out. This did not end well, and for the last 20 years, I have been a man with two identities. The first is that I am a sinner saved by God's grace. Secondly, I am a man with a criminal record, having been convicted of fraud. Although my sentence expired almost 20 years ago, this will always be a part of me.

When I think about those days, I wonder if I ever took the time to really listen to God, and form that intimate relationship that helps withstand the storms of life.

On the outside, my life seemed so perfect. I had a great family, a prosperous-looking business with a storefront location on the main street of town, and a thriving active church life. However, I believe that darker forces used the culture of the day to trip me up. The desire for acceptance, status, and materialism became my Achilles heel. I failed to realize that I was loved by God and my family for who I was, not what I had. The lifestyle that had provided many belongings had come with a huge cost, and as a result, all our material possessions were gone. My wife Sheree and I went on separate journeys with Jesus to rebuild our personal, spiritual, and

married lives.

I was incarcerated for 14 months and then reintroduced into the community through a halfway house. I came home on weekends for the next six months. I took a job delivering sandwiches to support my family—a far cry from the days of expensive suits. Sheree, who had not worked outside for many years, found employment in the retail sector. We were totally dependent on God, and he answered our prayers by providing just enough.

I realized that I was longing for the community of a local church but was not sure how to go about it. One Sunday morning, I walked alone into a small church in the community where we are now living. I wondered if I would be welcome with my long story and much baggage. The pastor said something I will never forget: "The Lord and this church are in the restoration business." I have never forgotten that conversation, and it has become the foundation of the past 15 years of ministry.

As Sheree and I began to rebuild our lives, God was working, and we both began to sense a call to something very different. We became volunteers in a program that supported men after serving prison sentences. We shared a meal and a reflection time together on a regular basis. There were men who were stigmatized for what they had done in the past and who had come back into the community with no support.

I explored what this calling might look like vocationally. After discussing what was stirring within me with my mentors, I attended seminary in the evenings and completed my studies in 2007. A passion for restorative justice was burning in my heart as I explored the biblical call for restoration and reconciliation. God had something ready for me upon completion of my studies. In the fall of 2007, I began my assignment with Mennonite Central Committee Ontario in the restorative justice program, Circles of Support and Accountability. This is a program that seeks to promote safer communities by working with men who have offended sexually who are returning to the community

after serving their sentence. I am still serving in that program.

Looking back, I notice a few patterns that have been woven into my life that are worth sharing. I still feel called to continue moving forward and not look back. The past will always be part of our life, either good or bad. Even in the darkest days, God provides a way forward.

I am blessed to be credentialed with a denomination that supports God's call to "shalom." I am doubly blessed to have been supported by friends in the Be In Christ community that stood with me and my family through all of our challenges. As I strive to serve well these days, I wrestle with the question, "How do we receive back into community those who have committed crimes with victims but are reaching out for support?" I would concede that this is not an easy question. When I was released from my period of incarceration, I had a family and some community to go back to. Most of the men who come into our program do not.

Experience has taught me that when men are supported coming back into community, there is a much greater chance of a positive outcome. That is only half of the equation. Accountability is just as important in the journey towards restoration. It was in my life. Having a safe space to have hard conversations while moving forward is so important. I am grateful for a dedicated group of volunteers in our program who walk with our men on a daily basis doing life together.

The last 20 years have not been easy. I still lament some of the choices that I made in the past. That being said, I am blessed to be part of a community that loves Jesus and seeks to serve him daily. It is different now, but the opportunities are endless. As they say, "age is just a number."

**David Blow** is credentialed in the Be In Christ Church of Canada, on assignment with Mennonite Central Committee Ontario. He and his wife Sheree have two children and three grandchildren and attend The Meeting House in Newmarket, ON.

# Stepping Into the Gaps

By Harriet Sider Bicksler

**JULIA JOHNSON STEPS** into the gaps and helps to meet the basic needs of people who are struggling with addiction, making a new life for themselves after being incarcerated, and finding suitable housing and employment. Two stories illustrate the impact of her calling and passion on real people.

Erna, who was born in Armenia and came to the US as a young child, started using drugs when she was 15 and became addicted to heroin. She has had to be revived from an overdose four times, and after one of those overdoses, she was non-responsive for four days resulting in some brain damage that affects her memory. She has spent time in the county jail several times for drug possession.

She also suffers from anxiety and depression and took medication. She didn't always take her medications properly and had some bad interactions, including one episode that resulted in driving while intoxicated. As a result, the local Children and Youth Services investigated, put her daughter in protective custody, and supervised visits between Erna and her daughter for several months. She also still has fines and court costs to pay.

For the past year, however, Erna has not been on any medications and is thriving. She is pregnant with her third child, and has developed confidence and a sense of well-being. She started coming to the Grantham Church more than a year after meeting Julie, and was baptized last fall. In her testimony, she said about the first time she came to church, "What would all these good people think of an addict like me? I was at the end of my rope. I sat in the pew that morning and something washed over me. I know now it was the Holy Spirit, and I gave my life to Jesus." She continued, "It's been a year since that day, and I'm slowly healing and understanding God's love for me. Grantham Church has been a safe place to explore what that looks like and to grow in faith."



Erna and Julia's daughter Payton organize supplies; Ben in Jewel's Closet.

Ben was seriously abused by his parents, removed from his home, and eventually adopted along with some of his siblings. When he was 12, he was abused again, this time by an older sibling, and then he witnessed the same sibling abusing Ben's adopted sister. In an effort to protect her, he responded with anger and violence (he had a gun and wanted to kill his sibling, but the gun jammed), and ended up in a juvenile detention residential facility until he was 18. Later as a young adult, he had a job as a firefighter. He and several other firefighters would set fires in empty buildings, and then they would help put them out so they could be heroes. After he was caught, he refused to snitch on the others and was charged for five arson crimes even though he was only involved in two of them. He spent 10 years in state prison. He too suffers from anxiety, as well as schizophrenia.

After his release from prison, Ben has had a support system to help him. At first he lived in a halfway house for ex-offenders on state parole. He had to pay rent, so he



needed a job, but he also had to fit in time for community service. Julia met Ben while he was living in the halfway house and has been "doing life" with him ever since. He now has two jobs and his own apartment and car. Julie has worked with him on developing a budget and checks in with him regularly. He also regularly attends the Grantham Church and was baptized last fall.

Julia's passion for prison ministry comes from her own life experience. Her mother was addicted to drugs and alcohol, and spent

time in prison. She felt like there was no safe space to share her guilt for loving her mother even though she was a prisoner. She started writing letters to other women in prison as a way to show love to them. Then when these women were released to halfway houses, they needed someone to walk with them and be their friend, and Julia stepped into the gap. They usually didn't have anything, not even clothes. That's how Jewel's Closet was born—a resource for free clothing, personal essentials, and household goods headquartered in a room at the Grantham Church.

While Jewel's Closet is an ever-expanding ministry involving many volunteers besides Julia, it's only part of her larger ministry. Most of the people she works with have had or continue to have serious addiction and other mental health problems, and she estimates that about 70 percent have also been in trouble with the law. Of the approximately 35 women she currently works with, some are homeless and many have been incarcerated at some point. She provides clothing

and other essentials (which are mostly donated) and transportation, including bringing them to church, a place where they feel safe and valued. She credits her husband Dwayne, himself a former addict, with working 60-75 hours a week so she can do her ministry.

One time someone gave her family \$100, and she used it to take the women out to lunch after church. That started a weekly fellowship meal at the church after the service. The

meal started out with eight people, and before the pandemic temporarily ended the practice, up to 50 people were attending, including many regular Grantham attenders who began making friends with the women, getting to know them as people with real substance, and making no judgments about what they may have done in the past. Since church has not been held in person for almost a year due to the pandemic, Julia held smaller services outdoors at her home during the summer and continues to host small

Bible study groups.

Julia knows she also has to take care of herself, and credits the Holy Spirit with helping her discern when she needs to step back a bit and consider how she's spending her time. Occasionally, she will post on social media that she is not taking messages because she's spending time with her family or re-treating for her own well-being. She is also beginning to delegate leadership roles to

some of the women, including Erna, who has arranged to bring women she knows to Jewel's Closet to "shop."

Stepping into the gaps and following the call of God is a way of life for Julia. It's no wonder that many of the women called her "Mom," as she carefully and prayerfully mentors them, leads them to faith in Jesus, picks them up when they fail (such as ending up back in jail or relapsing), and helps them find

solutions to the struggles with housing and employment—two of the biggest issues for people with addiction and/or who have been incarcerated.

**Harriet Sider Bicksler** is editor of Shalom! This article is based on a Zoom interview with Julia Johnson in January 2021. Julia and her family attend the Grantham Church, Mechanicsburg, PA, where she and her husband Dwayne serve as deacons.

## Trapped in a Duality

By Bethany Stewart

**TO BE BLACK** in America is to navigate the duality of two existences running simultaneously alongside one another. The great W. E. B. DuBois described this as "double consciousness." As described by W. E. B. DuBois, double consciousness is the internal conflict of an oppressed group, particularly Black people, seeing themselves through the lens of a deeply racist society.

The duality that I am describing creates two different versions of one Black you. There is the version that exists when you are alone, with family and close friends. This iteration is seen as fully whole, valid, and valued as an individual. Then, there is the existence placed upon you without consent; this is the way America views you. America projects its ideas of you as subhuman with limited value and as an issue needing to be fixed. This duality is troubling, knowing who you are and knowing who America insists you are—knowing that if you ever forget who America insists you are, there are systems and structures in place to enforce this insistence of who you are. One of the strongest and most insistent structures that does this is the prison industrial complex.

Over the last few years, I have found myself fighting this insisted identity placed on me and other Black people through community organizing work and criminal justice reform. I organize in Black-centered spaces and my church, Circle of Hope. Lately, I have focused my time organizing with a grassroots coalition, the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund, that advocates for the end of the cash bail system while providing those that are currently incarcerated with the funds for

their freedom.

In Philadelphia, most of the people housed in the local prisons are awaiting trial. They have not been convicted of a crime but are simply unable to afford their freedom. Overwhelmingly, these people come from poor Black and Brown communities. Cash bail disproportionately rips apart the lives of the disenfranchised Black and Brown people in urban centers. And yet, despite this organizing, social action, and many victories against these sinful systems, I often feel stuck because we still have so much further to go. Once one victory is won, another emerges. Systemic racism is sinister and evolves in order to continue to exist and insist on who I am. I am often worried, scared, and discouraged, but most of all, I feel trapped.

I feel trapped in a system, a city, and a country that cares very little if at all for the wellness of its poor Black and Brown communities. Within a week of the New Year, I watched white supremacists take siege of the United States Capitol, fearful of what a new and equal America would look like or that it would forget about them completely. I watched police allow those white supremacists access to the Capitol by opening strategically placed barriers. I watched those same police politely ask the insurrectionists to leave because, "this is like . . . sacred. This is like . . . a really sacred place, so please just go."

I watched this all while comparing these images to my hometown, Philadelphia. I thought about the child I met who was incarcerated for a long time due to such a large bail that the person missed their high school graduation and subsequently aged into an

adult prison facility. In that adult prison facility, the person was given the wrong medication that caused seizures. The prison facility responded simply by throwing them into a wheelchair and accusing them of faking their illness.

In these moments, this duality feels overwhelmingly separate and torturous. Yet I know that both of these truths live inside me: the truth of who I am as a whole and precious Black woman and the truth of who America says I am, neither whole nor precious but a problem to be tolerated, disposed of, or destroyed. White supremacist insurrectionists are afforded tremendous humanity and grace. It is maddening, and I feel as though I am being strangled by this duality daily. Every time I try to catch my breath, I am suffocated by another injustice involving cash bail while the QAnon Shaman is given access to his dietary needs. Every time I try to catch my breath, I am again choked by another injustice involving police brutality, while an insurrectionist's wife swears her husband is "really a sweet man." Every time I try to catch my breath I am again stifled by another injustice involving forced plea deals from scared yet innocent people. I. Can't. Breathe. Not in America.

I find myself gasping for the sweet air of freedom and thirsting for even a sip of justice, only to have the cup of justice ripped from my grasp again and again. I am constantly faced with the realization that I cannot possibly do enough to save people. In that realization, I recognize that I myself need saving, especially from this conflicting duality. I need to be saved by a Jesus who was

a victim of state-sanctioned violence like so many of my comrades in this fight. I need to be saved by a Jesus who was followed by many early Christians who lost their lives to state-sanctioned violence as well. I need to be saved by a Jesus who inspired the writings of a man who spent most of his time incarcerated, and those writings later became the majority of the New Testament. Those ancient prison writings hold the beliefs and teachings that Christians hold dear thousands of years later. I need that Jesus. I need to be saved by that Jesus, not this construction of a tough-on-crime conservative Jesus who I barely recognize when touted by White evangelicals who mask their racism with the gospel. I need the Jesus who sees me and knows me deeply.

This Jesus that I know and recognize took

those who have been imprisoned seriously; he was passionate about loving those suffering from incarceration. In Matthew 25:41-45, we read: “I was hungry and you gave me no meal, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was homeless and you gave me no bed, I was shivering and you gave me no clothes, sick and in prison, and you never visited.” Then those present are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn’t help?’ He will answer them, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.’”

The Jesus I know fully understood marginalization and injustice. He urged us to

care for those in prison, he urged us not to forget them, and he urged us to be present in their suffering. He sees us as whole and precious. He invites us to rest in the truth of our wholeness despite America’s bitter insistence on a dual and conflicting existence. Despite America’s structures that enforce this duality, I invite us all to live into that wholeness.

**Bethany Stewart** is a graduate of a Historically Black College/University (HCBU) living in what she describes as the perfect city, Philadelphia, PA. She works as an education and employment specialist for young adults who are formerly homeless, while also working as a community organizer focused on ending mass incarceration. She attends the South Broad Street congregation of Circle of Hope, Philadelphia, PA.

## Hiding

By Zach Spidel

**WHEN IT RAINS**, it pours. The old saying holds true more often than I would like. It held true a few years ago during a stretch of time in which I found myself regularly visiting five different people in the Montgomery County jail. I’m changing their names for this article. Among those people was Martin, a young Black man being held in the jail as part of a prosecutorial ploy to get him to admit to a crime he didn’t commit (firing a gun as part of a fight at a party). Steve was a friend whose conversation and partnership in prayer I cherished whenever he was sober, but who was seldom sober for long. Terry was a loveable goofball of a guy when he was sober who did things that weren’t so much goofy as stupid in order to avoid sobriety.

Terry died not too long ago of an overdose. His on-again, off-again girlfriend of many years discovered him passed out over a toilet into which he had been vomiting after a bad hit of something or other. When I heard the news, it hit me hard, but I was not surprised. One of the last times I had seen Terry, he was glassy-eyed on my front porch, asking to come in my house and use my bathroom to clean up. He had a six-inch gash in his leg that went to the bone. Fat and muscle

tissue were spilling out of it. He had been literally thrown out of his girlfriend’s house by a group of guys she’d asked to come over and do the job for her. As they threw him over the back fence, his leg caught on a shorn-off piece of fencing.

I begged him to let me call the squad, but he had arrest warrants out and didn’t want to do it. So instead he came in and bloodied up our bathroom before I drove him to multiple destinations looking for various people who he thought would put him up for the night all while I kept begging him to let me take him to the hospital. This was what Terry’s life was like when he wasn’t spending time behind bars on various petty theft and drug charges.

His last stint in jail lasted several months. He lost 40 pounds and came out skinny as a rail. This is because of what they fed him at the jail, or rather, what they didn’t. I’ve been there at lunch time. A piece of plain white bread, a small dollop of an unidentifiable casserole, one lunch tray well’s worth of canned peas, a small carton of milk, and that was it. I was shocked the first time I saw how little they were given. I thought, “This can’t be legal, can it?” Apparently it is, or maybe it’s not. The county has quite a few lawsuits

pending against it. Even if the courts say it’s legal, God knows it’s wrong.

Terry didn’t want to see me much when he was in, so I didn’t know how hungry he was. I bought food for some of the others, especially for Steve. I bought that food using the online system where inmates’ loved ones can purchase them extra food items. Mostly it’s junk food (it’s impossible to eat healthily inside the jail as far as I can tell). There’s a big markup on the ramen noodles and Twinkies that sad or pestered family members, usually strapped for cash themselves, buy so their loved ones don’t go hungry while they’re behind bars. Someone is making a profit off those markups, though I’m not sure exactly who.

I met with Steve most regularly and still have some of the artwork he drew for me during his longer stints in jail. He’d illustrate Bible verses on the paper I helped him afford and mail it to me with the mail credits I also paid for—the best money I ever spent. He’d



tell me about how badly he wanted to clean up and be there for his kids, and I knew he meant it. Then he'd get out, and within a week or two be running the streets, breaking into abandoned houses to strip them for scrap to sell to feed his habit. Jail just interrupted this behavior; it never ended it.

Martin was picked up at that party I mentioned by police officers who claimed they had seen him fire the gun in question. The gun was never recovered. Martin did not fire it, though he knew who did. They kept him for weeks on end. They'd schedule a court date and threaten to throw the book at him unless he took a plea deal, but he didn't give up on his own innocence. Multiple times they changed the date on him at the last minute, keeping him locked up longer, put-

ting more pressure on him to confess. The whole church was praying for him; I'd known him since he was a boy in the youth group. He wasn't too much more than a boy when all this went down. Eventually, God worked a miracle. The young man who had fired the gun wrote Martin a letter saying how sorry he was that the police were pinning what he had done on Martin. Martin showed this letter to his public defender who went to the judge with it and finally got the case thrown out. We were overjoyed, but Martin, who'd never spent even a single night in jail before this, was shaken by the months he'd spent unjustly behind bars, his job lost, his savings spent, his confidence gone.

We live in a broken society that is producing broken people, and we hide that fact

from ourselves by warehousing so many of those broken people in cages. We warehouse millions of people in our cages every year. We hide from our own failures by sweeping these children of God under the rug of incarceration. The broom we use to push these brothers and sisters under that rug is so broad it sweeps up lots of folks, especially folks of color, who haven't even broken any laws. It's time we stop hiding and start repenting. It's time to do what Jesus tells us and to release the captives and let the prisoners go free. It's time for a Jubilee.

**Zach Spidel** is pastor of *The Shepherd's Table*, Dayton, OH.

## "You Got Booked": Experiencing the Prison System

By Ben White

**LAST YEAR, THE** Peace and Justice Project, a grassroots group of Brethren in Christ individuals interested in promoting peace and justice throughout BIC US, sponsored a seminar on criminal justice. On Saturday, February 15, 2020, a couple dozen people gathered at Mechanicsburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church to learn about the injustice of the criminal justice system in the United States and listen to stories of formerly incarcerated individuals. The event was co-sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

I came to the event because I care deeply about this issue as a matter of my Christian discipleship. When Jesus said in Matthew 25 that we would see him when we visit people in prison, I think it's pretty straightforward. "The least of these" clearly include everyone in prison. Christians are called to address the hopeless situation so many people find themselves in when they, for whatever reason, are involved with the US criminal justice system. I have been face-to-face with people while they were incarcerated only once, but I know many people who have come out of the system and faced innumerable challenges as a result of their incarceration. This event was a golden opportunity to be face-to-face with people who were willing to tell their story

and help us to understand the gravity of the problem we face in this country.

The event helped the participants learn about and feel the injustice by playing a game MCC developed called "You Got Booked." It's an interactive board game, kind of like Monopoly, where each player assumes a character caught up in the criminal justice system



Marsha Banks, foreground, playing "You Got Booked."

who starts the game with various resources. It is true to reality in that the people of color in the game have a disadvantage, both in the rules that apply to them and the resources

with which they begin the game.

I played the game as Professor Patrick, a 43-year-old Black male with a college degree, who started the game with money, a job, no criminal record, and a house. By the end of the game, I had gone to jail three times which means I lost (the three strikes rule). The two White characters, as almost always happens in the game according to MCC staff person ChiChi Oguekwe who has facilitated the game many times, made it all the way around the board, one of them getting paid regularly because of his investments in the private prison industry.

When I went to jail after a traffic stop, I lost my job and my house. How often does a life fall apart because of incarceration? Pretty often, you can imagine. When I got out the first time, I had a criminal record, no job, and no housing, which made it almost impossible for me to not go back to jail. Restrictive parole regulations, disadvantages in employment opportunity, and the color of my character's skin all made it very difficult to not go back to jail.

One of the speakers at the seminar was Marsha Banks, a Black woman who spent time in jail for drug offenses. Her insight was powerful. During the game, she added to the facts and figures with her own story and the

stories of others. We almost couldn't wait to start talking about it.

The game is incredibly frustrating, to say the least. It functions as a parable of the criminal justice system. It does not focus on the crimes that any of the individuals committed, just on how the system works once you're in it, and the disproportionate likelihood that you will end up in it if you are not White. The dominant narrative in our country about this issue mostly focuses on individual responsibility and the rule of law. Mercy is not at play in policy-making or many of the perspectives that even Christians hold in evaluating the decisions of those policy makers. As a people called to reconciliation, we who follow Christ must change our perspective and see people as the beloved ones of God they are, no matter what they have done. Wisdom and an enduring desire for public safety lead me to conclude that hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people, are incarcerated who should not be. Why is punishment paramount in our perspective if we are Christians?

The game was peppered with revealing facts and figures given to us by the facilitators

ChiChi Oguekwe, MCC East Coast Philadelphia program coordinator, and John-Michael Cotignola-Pickens, former MCC criminal justice education and advocacy coordinator. The game can be so frustrating that they are trained not just to help participants play the game, but also to process the intense emotions that often come with it.

The "What are the odds?" card was kind of like the "Chance" card in Monopoly, but the deck was pretty stacked against people of color. Playing the game with Marsha Banks and Eddie McCreary, a formerly incarcerated Black man, made it an even more enriching experience. At one point during the game, Marsha suggested that a person who had lost the game by being sent to jail three times should remain standing in jail instead of going back to their seat and sitting down. She said that it would be a symbol of how many people feel stuck and without hope. The game offered that kind of visceral connection to the difficulties people face. It was an opportunity to feel it, even in our bodies.

Both Marsha's and Eddie's faith played an important role in preserving their hope as

they struggled in prison and when they were released. Marsha gave birth in prison and had to fight to get custody of all of her children, which she did. She also later earned a Master's degree. Eddie was incarcerated for 36 years and experienced several incredible miracles to fuel his faith in Jesus and his hope for his future.

Obviously, Marsha's and Eddie's experience with God and God's people helped them, which I think ought to encourage us who follow Jesus to find ways to participate in community with people like Marsha and Eddie. Looking for hope in a hopeless situation is a community project that should not be left to just those afflicted by the injustice of our criminal justice system. This is our issue, too, and these are our people.

**Ben White** is pastor of the Pennsauken, NJ congregation of Circle of Hope, a network of Brethren in Christ Churches in the Philadelphia area. He also serves on the leadership team of the Peace and Justice Project. More information about the Peace and Justice Project is available at [peaceandjusticeproject.org](http://peaceandjusticeproject.org) and its Facebook page at [facebook.com/groups/PeaceandJusticeProject](https://facebook.com/groups/PeaceandJusticeProject).

## Understanding the Issues Faced by Navajo People

By Jason Oberholser

"**TOTO, I HAVE** a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." This famous line from *The Wizard of Oz* came to mind when my wife Rebekah and I moved our small family across the country to the Four Corners Region in New Mexico. I grew up in south central Pennsylvania where I didn't have many first-hand encounters with topics such as "serving time behind bars," "drinking under the influence," "reporting to a parole officer," "living with the stigma of a criminal record," etc.

As we assimilated into the Navajo culture, these terms quickly became common in the conversations I had with our Native friends. Alcoholism and illegal drug use are pervasive problems that have affected almost every family in one way or the other. Because crime is often associated with these destructive behaviors, it's normal and almost expected among many Navajo families to have regular encounters with the criminal justice

system.

It was so easy for me to view the Navajo people as criminals who deserved to be punished by the law. However, after 12 years of loving the Navajo through the lens of Jesus's love, I've gained a deeper empathy for our Native brothers and sisters. A follower of Jesus who takes the Bible seriously must dig deeper into the issues before hastily slapping labels on people. It's imperative that we treat every person as the treasured creation of an almighty God that they are. I'm thankful for my Navajo brothers and sisters and fellow colleagues who have been willing to sit with me over the years and share their stories and wisdom. Still, the question needs to be asked, "Why is the incarceration rate so high among the Navajo population and what can be done to change the tide?"

The Navajo culture has a beautiful family structure that esteems the elderly. However,

this same structure also places a strong emphasis on female leadership in the home, which often causes men to be pushed to the margins. Ben Stoner, along with his wife Eu-nice, have spent half a century living among the Navajo people, learning their culture, and pointing people to Jesus. Ben retells this personal experience: "Several years ago when I shared my cultural observations with men in the BIC Overcomers Program (a drug and alcohol rehab program), one man leaned toward me and shook his finger at me, saying, 'Now you know why we drink!'" Ben's story speaks to the reality that if men don't have honor and responsibility in their own homes, they often seek it elsewhere, taking them down a path of criminal behavior.

Another issue is the Navajo view of sin and punishment. Navajo religion is animistic. They believe that spirits reside in animals, spoken words, mother earth, father

sky, sun, mountains, and other things. When something bad happens, they blame the spirits; they don't recognize that their personal sin might also be to blame. Ben Stoner tells this story: "When Matt, driving drunk, wrecked his uncle's pickup and broke his neck, people blamed Matt's uncle for the accident, because 'he owned the pickup'. Although Matt took responsibility for wrecking the truck, his family still blamed his uncle."

Closely related to the Navajo view on sin is how they view punishment as penance versus correction. Penance says, "you've done something wrong and now must pay or make atonement for the wrong." Correction says, "you've made a mistake, but let's correct the behavior, so you don't do it again." Unfortunately, many Navajo children are punished for the wrong they've done. I saw this played out when a grandmother harshly criticized her grandson in front of my family when she discovered that he caused mischief at our house. My heart was to love the boy in the process of providing correction; however, the grandmother could only see the shame he caused his family and was determined to make him pay for his mistake.

Sadly, Navajo children who grow up with that kind of discipline become adults who live as victims instead of taking responsibility for one's actions. Therefore, our county jail is filled with people who can't admit that their bad choices landed them behind bars. They find ways to pin the blame on anyone but themselves. A person who has a healthy perspective of how self-choices affect their life learns to admit when they've made a mistake and takes ownership of their choices. Brian Myers, a Brethren in Christ worker and the

director of Byron's House of Hope (BHH), has spent more than 11 years in jail/prison ministry. He shares a statement from a former inmate: "You don't have to be in prison to be imprisoned." We all are imprisoned by something, and we all need to experience God's love and healing power to overcome those things that imprison us."

Another issue is corruption within the justice system. Ralph Yoder, BIC Overcomers director, says that "the problem is not the system; human hearts have created agendas that have skewed the system." Yoder says that lawyers, judges, police officers, and wardens often make decisions that benefit themselves personally rather than the greater community. The system was designed with checks and balances, but it has become skewed. The problem of criminal justice can't be fixed by humans, only by a true heart transformation from God. Yoder also questions if our society is truly seeking justice today, or are we only seeking revenge for past wrongs? He says that revenge won't solve our societal issues; only true justice aligns with the heart of God.

Even with many unique challenges, there is hope for the Navajo people. People are slowly coming to Jesus and are learning healthy coping mechanisms to help them through the ups and downs of life. Rebekah and I are grateful to partner with the greater Brethren in Christ community in the Four Corners region as we all seek to shine God's light on peace and justice issues. As church planters, we regularly counsel with and minister to those desiring to live a productive life. In addition to Ben and Eunice Stoner and Ralph Yoder, Denise Conway is a Brethren in Christ worker who assists students in getting their GED. She also leads a faith-based

12-step recovery program and pastors the Broken Walls Brethren in Christ Church which ministers to many in recovery.

Byron's House of Hope is a six-month residential program to which qualifying inmates from the New Mexico state correctional system can be paroled. Men in this program receive biblical and life skills training and are expected to find employment while in the program. Graduates from BHH are equipped with skills to help them integrate back into society. The BIC Overcomers Program is similar to BHH, but focuses specifically on offering practical help for men recovering from addictions.

The goal of these programs is to introduce Navajo people to Jesus and equip them with skills so they can make wise choices no matter what life throws at them. We may not make an immediate impact on the justice system, but perhaps we can empower one individual at a time to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God as Micah 6:8 instructs us.

**Jason Oberholser** and his wife Rebekah and their six children are Brethren in Christ church planters among the Navajo people in the Four Corners region of the United States. For this article, he consulted with other Brethren in Christ who also work among the Navajo.

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is also about longing and survival. Loss is portrayed as a moving away like an older sister outgrowing a younger sister, a husband finding a new love, a daughter running away, a father leaving a son behind, a mind slipping away, or leaving freedom at the prison gate. Survival is continuation like finding a life even in prison, successive generations, or the mountains of Idaho with a history and future of people whose stories are lived in the valleys and on the mountain sides—one story

giving way to the next.

*Idaho* should be read slowly and bravely letting the poetry of loss work its sorrow, its beauty, and its softening into our hearts. For there is no healing from loss without first feeling the depths of its sorrow. Ruskovich invites us to explore loss and longing, struggle and survival through her characters and with them to find a place to live in the world, an inner space of redemptive solace.

**Note:** Emily Ruskovich grew up in northern Idaho and teaches creative writing at Boise State University. Her debut and only novel to date, *Idaho*, was a best seller and won the 2019 Dublin Literary award, the world's richest literary prize. She lives in Idaho City with her husband and daughter.

**Lois Saylor** attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and serves on the Shalom! editorial committee.

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## BOOK REVIEW: A Story of Loss and Survival

By Lois Saylor

**IN IDAHO,** A novel by Emily Ruskovich, we find a story written with a poetic sensibility of both wording and insight into our human psyche. While the title *Idaho* stands as strong and solid as the mountains and river valleys of the state itself, the novel's concerns deal with the more intangible aspects of life. Ruskovich pulls us inside the minds of her characters as they try to understand their lives. They struggle to know if their inner lives are based on fact or false memory and imaginings. The characters' lives, like the landscape they inhabit, can disappear in a blizzard of white snow and become unfathomable.

Appropriately set in Idaho, the story centers on a man named Wade. His family faces a tragedy that sends his first wife, Jenny, to jail and takes away his daughters—one in death and one who goes missing. His new wife, Ann, lives in this tragedy too and tries to find her place in it. Wade, like his fathers before him, is starting to suffer from dementia, and Ruskovich weaves various ideas of loss through all her characters. There is the loss of loved ones, loss of freedom, loss of memory, a loss of grounding, and even one person's loss of limb. There is also a loss of control, and a question arises of whether losing the memory of pain is a release or a further prison. Whether imprisoned by

confinement like Jenny or dementia like Wade, there is the loss and the strain of those on the outside trying to look in and understand. Like Ann, we may try to understand the suffering of another, to think about our part in causing it and our responsibility in alleviating the suffering.

In the structure of the book, chapters focus on different characters during different time periods in a disruptive but effective non-chronological order. This weaving of viewpoint and time periods keeps the story enfolded in mystery and adds to the sense of struggling to understand what happened in the central tragedy, why it happened, and how to make sense of it. Several of the chapters involve Wade's first wife Jenny who is imprisoned for her part in this life-altering event. The literal aspects of her life in prison like work duties, walking the painted yellow line, or her cell, hold some sense of prison life, but fail to seem altogether authentic. The real story of prison that Ruskovich wants to tell, however, takes place in Jenny's inner life and in her relationship with her cell mate.

In this way the novel's main themes are taken into prison with Jenny as she too struggles with how to live with loss. What do you do to dull the pain—something mind-numbing like scrubbing floors every day for decades? What portions of your past can you

face? Can you go back before the tragedy and live only there, or do you need to erase it all? Can you still be kind and giving in prison? Do you have anything to give? Compared to Wade whose imprisonment is the betrayal of his own mind, Jenny has the boundaries of walls and schedules and the yellow line painted on the floor to follow, giving her a structure to inhabit. In contrast, Wade is losing all sense of boundaries and the timeline of his life. And there is no yellow line painted on the floor to tell him where to stand and where to walk. All his guides are leading him to vacancy.

In her characters, Ruskovich explores the inner and hidden ironies of life. Of Jenny and Ann, she writes, "Perhaps it's what both their hearts have been wanting all along—to be broken. In order to know that they are whole enough to break." She also writes about computer renderings that age a nine-year-old missing girl over time, giving her a life on paper with no assurance she is actually alive somewhere in the dirt and dust of the real world. An artist too, offers portraits aging her and placing her in real life situations, but they too are just the figment of his imagination. Reality and imagination clash in almost all the characters Ruskovich creates.

If the novel is about loss and struggle, it  
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