

Noel 'Razor' Smith, *The Criminal Alphabet. An A-Z of Prison Slang*, London, Penguin, 2016, 448 p.

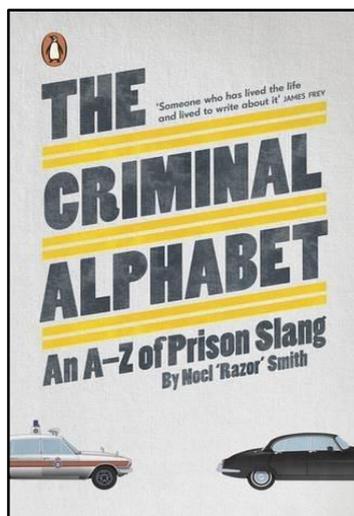
George VOLCEANOV

*Spiru Haret University, Bucharest (Romania), Faculty of Letters
CeCArg (Slang Research Centre) of University of Craiova (Romania)*

geovolceanov@yahoo.com



he Criminal Alphabet. An A-Z of Prison Slang is one of the best books I have ever read. One of the best not just in the field of slang studies. The author is endowed with a genuine talent for storytelling. Blended with good memory and first-hand knowledge of the contemporary British underworld, Noel 'Razor' Smith's talent generates a superb, memorable monograph and data base that will soon be milked or plundered (you may choose your favourite synonym) by authors of more comprehensive slang dictionaries given that his 'alphabet' lists mostly fresh material, items that do not appear in earlier dictionaries.



Its author's name and career have instantly reminded me of someone mentioned by Margaret Atwood in the Acknowledgments appended to her *Hag-seed*, a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which a great deal of the plot unfolds in a prison. To write her novel, Atwood drew, among other writings, on Stephen Reid's *A Crowbar in the Buddhist Garden: Writing from Prison*. Wikipedia describes S. Reid as a 'bank robber, writer'. According to the same source, Reid was 'convicted twice of bank robbery' and 'served time in over 20 prisons in Canada and the United States.' Reid began writing in 1984, while serving a 21-year prison sentence at the Kent Institution in Agassiz, British Columbia. During his first sentence, he submitted a manuscript to Susan Musgrave, then writer-in-residence at the University of Waterloo. He later married Musgrave and, after many ups and downs in his life, in 2013 he won the Victoria Book Award for his collection of essays Atwood read while preparing her own novel.

Noel 'Razor' Smith's career is astoundingly similar to Reid's. Wikipedia dubs him, in a less flattering way, 'a British criminal'. One who 'spent the greater portion of his adult life in prison', who 'taught himself to read and write whilst in prison', who has contributed articles to *The Independent*, *Punch*, *The Guardian*, etc.; and one who, most impressively, gained an Honorary Diploma from the London School of Journalism and an A-Level in Law. Author of several books, the first of which was issued in 2004, while he was serving a life-sentence for armed robbery, Smith is also the recipient of several Koestler awards. His unique contribution to slang studies is based on the first-hand lifetime experience of a man who committed over 200 bank robberies and has become so well acquainted with the ins and outs of the British legal system, the British penitentiaries and the dark side of the British underground and (quite surprisingly) the British police, often bent on corruption, unjustified violence and tampering with evidence...

In the Introduction to his 'alphabet', Smith frankly admits, 'I'm no language expert. What I know mainly comes from the practical experience of using slang in my everyday life. In the criminal and prison worlds slang is just another tool for survival, another safeguard for the cautious, who rightly believe that someone may be listening in and hoping to take advantage, sometimes to the cost of their liberty' (p. 7). Notwithstanding his alleged lack of linguistic expertise, Smith manages to construct a perfectly balanced, coherent glossary structured in four thematic sections containing a variable number of chapters.

Some of the very titles of the sections and chapters are expressions of the ineffable poetic quality of slang:

The Out (including the chapters *The Language of Crime*, *Going Equipped for Crime*, *Transport*, *Working the Con*) presents from A to Z a comprehensive inventory of crimes and of all the possible human and logistic means used by perpetrators of various types of crimes;

Interlude, the Purgatory of the arrested criminal, has a single chapter, titled *Get Your Strides On*, *Chummy*, *You're Nicked*, listing the slang terms used between the moment of one's being arrested and the sentence passed on by a court;

Doing Bird, i.e. serving time, has four chapters allotted to various aspects of jail life (*The Language of the Greybar Hotel*; *Prison Violence*; *Drop Me Out*, *You Lemon*; *Drugs*) – most of the titles clearly suggest the issues they are to deal with, the only exception (for a non-native speaker of English) is the third

chapter, which lists the pejorative, derogatory terms used among inmates, terms referring to / derived from either race or individual habits.

The final section of the book, *Giving It All That*, has a single chapter, titled *Old Bill, Persians and Rabbiting the Script*. It lists 'everyday slang words which have become the norm for a lot of people, whether they're connected to the criminal world or not' (p. 327).

The author is aware that 'once a word comes into common public use it usually falls out of the criminal lexicon' (p. 296). But, at least for a while, Noel 'Razor' Smith's *Alphabet* will be a source of huge delight for a general readership and a scholarly source of information for linguists. I hope that the author will not share the gloomy fate of prison *grass*, *nark*, *Cat's arse*, *stoolie* or *sweetgrass* for publicizing the secret code of the underground in this fabulous book. To conclude, hats off to you, Mr. 'Razor'!

