



Redeemable: A Memoir of Darkness and Hope

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Born in Somerset in 1957 to itinerant Scottish parents, Erwin James lost his mother when he was seven. Shipped from home to home and subject to the whims of various caregivers after his father turned to alcohol and violence, he committed his first crime of breaking and entering when he was ten. His teenage and early adult years were spent drifting, and his petty crime turned increasingly violent, culminating in the terrible events for which he was jailed for life in 1984.

Entering prison at 27, James struggled to come to terms with the enormity of his crimes and a future without purpose or hope. Then he met Joan, a prison psychologist, who helped him to confront the painful truth of his past, and to understand how it had shaped him from such a young age. Her sessions transformed his life. Encouraged to read and to educate himself, over the next twenty years Erwin James would go on to receive a BA in History, and become a regular columnist for the *Guardian*.

Speaking to the very heart of the human condition, this is a book that offers no excuses--only the need to understand how we become who we become, and shows that no matter how far a person may fall, redemption is possible with the right kind of help. It is an important and timely memoir.

Redeemable: A Memoir of Darkness and Hope Details

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Bethany says

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/book-revi...>

It has been said that to know true redemption, one must first know true devastation or destruction. After taking a step into the world of Erwin James through the pages of his transparent and candid memoir, one would agree that he has truly known and experienced both. Redeemable: A Memoir of Darkness and Hope is the firsthand autobiography of Erwin James, convicted murderer and journalist.

James' memoir is an equally beautiful and gritty story of a life filled with uncontrollable circumstance and damning response, interwoven with the insights from a writer who injects portions of humanity and compassion into an otherwise dire tale. Redeemable is more than another book on life on the inside; it is a story of triumph, raw humanity, and the depths of the human soul — ultimate redemption placed against the cold and unforgiving backdrop of a prison cell.

As memoirs can encompass a wide gamut of styles, tones, and forms, it is often more challenging to judge one as being “worthy” of a read. As it is a personal expression of life and experience, I find the highest criteria for this evaluation to be the humanity and authenticity of the work. Some prison writings can devote three-quarters of the text to defending the person on the inside, or it exists to incite a level of sympathy or even disgust.

By the time I finished the first chapter, I knew this particular book about life in prison would not fit the stereotype. While he first spoke of his trial and initial incarceration for murder, there was no pleading of innocence and no tragic monologue. His simple acceptance and abject “sense of relief” strikes the reader as altogether human and in no form, merciless. Then, James deftly and fluidly drew the reader back to the point at which he found out he was wanted for murder while serving with the French Foreign Legion. As romantic as his life sounded, the moral consciousness that the Legion had instilled in him compelled him to turn himself in, thus leading to the opening clause of the work.

A large portion of the story was the life that led him to murder, as he would put it. Growing up with an unstable, alcoholic father, a deceased mother and numerous emotional traumas, James began to steal at the age of 10 before being placed in a home. The bulk of his teenage years was spent doing much of the same, living as a drifter with limited education and often sleeping on the streets. His crimes escalated during this season of his life from burglary to assault and higher theft, before he committed murder. This act led him to the life of a fugitive serving in the French Foreign Legion, where he learned a number of key life skills, gained a moral compass and began to live a more honorable life. That life ended when he was sentenced to life in prison in 1984.

James is detailed in his description of life inside prison, as well as the impact of the therapist within the prison. It was during this time when he began to see the impact his upbringing may have had on him, while feeling for the first time “like an ordinary person.” The therapist made him “think that had certain things in [his] early life outside been different then [he] might have been able to have a life like any other right-thinking, normally functioning member of society.” For James, this was the turning point, a thought that “gave [him] hope.” From that point on, he poured himself into education, earning a degree in History and published articles in national newspapers. He was released in 2004, after serving 20 years of his life sentence.

While the events of his life parallel the lives of so many prisoners and ex-cons, James' story is a unique and rich one because it demonstrates the possibilities. His life shows clearly that a man can not only move past the worst thing he has done, but also succeed and triumph over it. Taking that a step further, James found true redemption, as his own trial enabled him to now be a voice for compassion and change in the prison system and with anti-violence lobbies. This transformation was told in a gripping, honest and simple manner, demonstrating the articulateness James gained while on the inside, as well as the raw, self-aware humanity and wisdom that he developed during those years. This would have wowed me as a fictional work; knowing that it is a true-to-life memoir is even more stirring. As a family member of an ex-con, I can see how his story and his method of storytelling — with its natural ebbs and flows, simple yet precise delivery, and compassionate undertone — would minister greatly to the heart of a felon. I would recommend this highly to anyone who has a criminal background, has been inside, or simply has a past of regrets and wrong decisions to overcome.

A stunning and humbling read, Redeemable does more than tell a story of a life; this well-written memoir draws the reader in to the very pit the author found himself in. As a reader, I walked through the back streets of England, mourning over the loss of James' mother with him. I felt the despair as he spiraled down into the same behavior he had watched his own father succumb to. I felt the traces of pride he felt as a member of the French Foreign Legion, venturing out even as his past loomed over him like a bayonet ready to slice. I also felt the mix of relief and emptiness upon his incarceration. Lastly, I felt the hope he felt as he identified the things in his past that had contributed to where he was, as he took ownership of his life and sought higher education and in the end, a profession in writing. His journey from darkness to redemption was a riveting one, and his memoir is a beautiful encapsulation through which he invites the reader to join him.

Ellen says

Well written and easy to read, which kind of contradicts the subject matter. A dark tale of how one individual can be so failed by society - his family are there to look after him in a superficial way without there ever being any real connection. And the overriding, dark theme of alcohol made me want to vow to stop drinking. The moment of redemption wasn't as 'wow' as I was expecting from the blurb but was written in a genuine way. An interesting read, although it's easy to forget that this is someone's actual life experiences.

Anne Fox says

Really enjoyed this memoir. Would like to read more by James

Samantha says

An honest and eye-opening account of a lad growing up rough and the dangerous road it takes him on. Losing his mother was a pivotal point in a young Erwin's life. It changed his relationship with his father and brought out the worst in his father. Erwin and his sister being moved from one house to another and eventually being separated had a negative effect on Erwin and he began to stray from the right side of the law.

The fact that Erwin gives an honest view of his criminal activity and the attitude he had, never believing that these minor offenses would hurt anyone. It was only after his sessions with Joan that he started to understand

the downward steppingstones of his life.

Having had an alcoholic father myself I can relate to many of the memories Erwin shares about his father. However trying to understand the choices he made is still difficult, though he indicates the understanding that they were his choices and he could have chosen a different path.

I enjoyed reading about how Erwin turned his life around, even if it took the entire incarceration. It truly gives an insight into the life of the not so blessed youth.

In some ways, Erwin's story has many similarities of another Scottish lad in Jimmy Barnes, told by him in Working Class Boy and Working Class Man.

Jared says

An enjoyable read. However, I was hoping for more insight into James' prison-time transformation, and less focus on everything else leading up to his incarceration.

Jack O'Donnell says

'Writing makes me feel I was really living.' There's irony in when Erwin James writes that he's a Category-A prisoner and banged up for killing two people. He doesn't dwell on that. No excuses of how it was a robbery that went wrong –twice- and turned a thief and his mates into murderers. I'm not usually criminal, although sense of humour border on it, but I also write to make sense of the world and there is a lot of Erwin James I recognise in myself. This is Jack Abbot territory, an insider account 'In the Belly of the Beast'. Not a plea for redemption, but understanding. The material Erwin James works with is himself, his memories:

'Understanding how I'd become what I'd become before prison was central to me agreeing that is was possible for me to live again.'

His father Erwin senior was born in Stevenson, Ayrshire and his mother from Paisley. Erwin was born in April 1957. There's a post-war boom and the family move to England. Alison, a baby sister, soon follows. Fast forward to when Erwin junior is inside serving his term for murder. He's told his dad is dead. Erwin senior was sixty-four and he'd been found alone lying on the floor of a sheltered housing complex. No great loss was my way of thinking. He'd smashed up people's lives beat up whatever girlfriend he'd hooked up with, abandoned his kids, and spent all the money that should have went on caring for his kin on drink and drunk himself to death. But here's the rub, Erwin junior always dreamed of living with his dad. Of his dad loving him. And them living happily ever after. The boy that was in the man never gave up on that dream, even when he was inside.

Erwin junior and Alison's life might have been different if his mum had lived. But their dad insisted that one of their pals drives her home, even though he was incapable of turning the ignition key in the barrel, and he drove off the road and killed himself and the kid's mum. Erwin senior survived. People like him always do.

John Steinbeck got it about right, 'A sad soul can kill you quicker than a germ'. And for a boy aged five, his sister aged two, he latched onto the only thing he knew, his dad. One of the images that sticks with me is young Erwin sent to school with a cut down pair of wellies and on the school trip the teacher rounds up all the other pupils as his mum had 'forgotten' to make him a packed lunch. Erwin eats everything thrown at him before the bus leaves.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's, *The Spirit Level*, gives a checklist of some killers i) low social status, ii) lack of friends iii) stress in early life. Erwin had all of these things in spades. He ends up in a care home and graduated with honours in drinking, fighting and stealing.

Erwin recognised that is needed not be that way. He had a choice. But the pattern was there. 'The majority of people in prison had similar life experiences to mine – they had been in care, limited education, had family problems from a very young age, had issues with alcohol, drugs and mental health.'

The father of two kids he's abandoned, Erwin found redemption in the French Foreign Legion. He didn't know that the majority of recruits don't get into the Legion. They are rejected. He was used to that. On another school trip a swarm of school kids had poured into a public toilet, he was sleeping in one of the stalls and the school kids had rejoiced that they'd found a tramp. Erwin was twenty-three. In the Legion he found the French language and that he was a natural soldier. Everything he did, he did well and got into an elite regiment in the Legion. But wanted for murder he decided to go home.

Erwin finds hope in Joan Branton, a prison psychologist, who believes in him and his ability to change. And Erwin finds education allows him to think. Writing in beautiful prose allows him to create a voice out of the mosaic of his past. It's a voice that holds true through the difficulty years inside. He wins the Arthur Koestler award and gets to write for *The Guardian*. Twenty years later he walks out the door and into a new life. The old lives are not forgotten, but part of his new life helping rehabilitate other offenders. Erwin knows better than most that when cuts to the system come they start with the poorest and those most in need, they start with the prison system. Lock them away and forget the key. That's not a solution we can trust but is a vote winner. There is no redemption there.

Fiona says

A memoir of Erwin James's descent into criminality after his mother's death when he was a young child, which is also a moving testament to the power of empathy, psychological understanding, reading and education to effect personal change.

After the loss of his mother, James is given no care or support and instead is at the mercy of his violent, alcoholic father, shuttled about between various of his father's girlfriends and the care system. The book clearly maps the links between James's offending behaviour and the chaos, insecurity and lack of love he experienced in childhood. What begins as petty theft and alcohol misuse slowly escalates into more serious crime and ultimately murder.

It can be hard to read the somewhat emotionless way in which he talks about his crimes, and he completely avoids writing about the murders - the only description of what he actually did is a copy of a short newspaper article. However this affectless description fits his mental state at the time - it is only after he is sentenced to life in prison and starts seeing a prison psychologist that he gains any understanding of his own behaviour and begins, belatedly, to see the devastating impact his actions had on others and to feel guilt and shame. The book is a powerful argument for rehabilitation through care and learning, showing that rehabilitation rather than punishment is what protects the public, as well as being the humane option. It also demonstrates that it was only when James was shown empathy that he was able to comprehend what he had done to others and to feel remorse for his actions. It's a strong argument for prison reform, showing that harsh treatment in prison only serves to harden already dysfunctional behaviour.

AJ says

I found this memoir difficult to read, and couldn't finish it, even though I had bought it from my Amazon wish list. The grammar was at times poor and I had difficulty keeping events straight. I may finish it some time, since it sits on my kindle, but for the moment I couldn't.

Caroline says

I had the pleasure to meet Irwin, briefly, at the Hay-on-Wye literary festival and was enamoured by his humbleness and his repeated re-iteration of remembering his victims and their families.

I thought this book was very open and honest and just proves how one's life can take the completely wrong path because of the behaviour of one's peers and the lack of love from the ones you most expect and desire it from. Despite following this path to its blackest depth, he had the strength of character to do a complete u-turn and turn his life around and for the good of others. His work within the prison service is commendable.

Irwin has completely changed my view on what happens in prisons and how prisoners should be treated. I am sorry to say I was of the view that hard labour was the order of the day, but now see how wrong I was. If only more prisoners could find their 'Joan's' and have the help that people like Irwin offer, I am sure the reoffend rate would drop drastically.

I wonderfully enlightening book that I would recommend to anyone.

Esther Nussbaum says

I won this book in a giveaway and read it cover to cover in one sitting, loved it. Amazing how resilient someone can be!

Jaelyn (sixminutesforme) says

Total page-turner! I would never have picked up this book of my own choice, but glad it came my way via the @booksontherail #senseisubscription! A fascinating insight into prison life, but also a really endearing story of redemption and overcoming adversity. Highly recommend!

Jenny Mackinlay says

Perhaps my expectations were unreasonable. And the flat, affectless tone is perhaps a deliberate choice; it's a grim story and doesn't need melodramatic flourishes. I think I was expecting to gain more insight into why James managed to turn his life around when so many long-term prisoners don't. He gives great credit to the psychotherapist he saw during his early days into his life sentence, but the bits of her work with him that we hear about are unresonant clichés. If anyone needs to stop and think about how criminals are made, not born, this book is a graphic account of how one little boy, who wanted love and security and a family and had none of them, grew up to be convicted of double murder. I'm glad the book exists as witness--including the critical fact that James is now 'outside' and living a good life, which includes working to help prisoner rehabilitation--but I didn't find it a good read.

Michaela says

I received Redeemable as part of the Sensei Subscription pack brought to you by Books on the Rail. Redeemable is the story of Erwin James, who had a tough upbringing after his mother died in a car accident and his father turned to violence and alcohol eventually leading him to a life of crime. First appearing in court a month shy of his eleventh birthday this book details how he ends up in prison serving a life sentence for murder. There he meets a prison psychologist who helps him turn his life around. This was an incredibly honest and thought provoking tale, which I am glad to have had the opportunity to read.

Seriously, my subscription to Books on the Rail has already paid off. I had never heard of this book before I received it and probably never would have or even picked it up if I had heard of it. Non-fiction is not my usual go to but I'm finding I'm continuously surprising myself and loving these books. One of the main takeaway points from this tale is that of empathy. Being able to place yourself in someone else's shoes and see things from their perspective. The lesson that Atticus Finch famously teaches young Scout. This is an ability I highly value in those around me and is an important lesson for us all to take on into our own lives. This is in part what draws me to not only reading but reading such an unorthodox mix of books. I cherish the ability to put myself in so many different shoes, all different shapes, sizes and colours. This book does this in such an eloquent way, taking you in to a life you can only begin to imagine and understand.

James is careful in his writing. He in no way writes this to garner sympathy, or pass off the blame of his actions to his traumatic upbringing. In fact he is very careful to explain that he was responsible for his actions and that he in no way can atone for what he has done, particularly for the hurt he caused his victims families. I think it is respectful that he doesn't discuss the murders that he received his life sentence for. He isn't using their story to get attention, he is using his own. The way he describes his life and his lessons is with no nonsense, a sense of honesty and integrity. A lesson to those out there that life is a series of choices. That you can make many mistakes that take you down a path but you can always change that. There is much to be learned from this novel and I implore you to give it a go.

There isn't much more to say about this piece of work other than to pick it up and see for yourself. I finished it in two days despite attending a music festival at a winery leading me to feeling quite tired today. I was consumed by the story and couldn't put it down. In the words of James himself he "went from being a prisoner who wrote to being a writer in prison" and has gifted us his life lessons in Redeemable. A worthy read I give Redeemable three typed pages of James' columns.

Ben says

Erwin James had a peripatetic childhood with a violent drunken father whose behaviour worsened after James' mother was killed in a car accident. Left to run free for much of the time James bunked school and began a career of petty crime. His itinerant lifestyle continued into his early adulthood and he also became an abusive drunk getting into fights.

He does not give details of the circumstances that led him to be jailed for a double murder out of respect to his victims relatives. He escaped to the continent where he joined the Foreign Legion for two years but returned to face justice.

Like his Guardian columns he describes his time in jail unsparingly and without self pity. It was a psychologist who set him on the road to an understanding of the life paths that had brought him to life imprisonment. Ultimately this is an uplifting memoir of crime and punishment but showing how redemption is possible from the direst of circumstances.
