

information from all over the place – ancient Rome, ethnology, feudalism, physics, the Kalahari, Buddhism, Nazism, slavery, botany, sexuality – you name it. And as he skips happily from subject to subject he seems less like an omniscient polymath than like a toddler playing hopscotch.

The book's thesis is that beyond genes and memes the nature of our reality has been determined by 'elbes'. However the crucial thing for you to realise is that elbes are now being rapidly ousted by – wait for it – super-elbes.

Perhaps you do not immediately recognise these elbe words? Here is how Belbin introduces them. He is searching for a word to supersede memes – a new word to define, as he puts it, "a pivotal force" that is pro-active, rather than merely imitative like the meme. He discusses his dilemma with an old Cambridge friend, Hugh Hack. Hack doubts the need for such a neologism but Belbin won't be denied. So "to fill the gap in nomenclature" Hack lobs in the word Belbin. Belbin rejects Belbin, and responds with the obvious four-letter word: Hack.

"Unfortunately that appellation turned out to have unwanted overtones. A hack happens to be a slang word for a journalist or a horse for hire... or a clumsy shot in golf."

Unfazed, Hack whacks back the improbable suggestion that Belbin should remove the B and the n from his name. Belbin then takes game, set and match by turning 'elbi' into elbe.

"This persuasive choice evokes the river in Germany, which provides good historical support for the new term".

Space does not allow me to elucidate why the German river provides good historical support for the new term – so you'll have to take it on trust, or buy the book. (The explanation begins with Virgil and ends up, via Napoleon and World War I, in front of the Iron Curtain.)

What is an elbe? An elbe is "an abstract concept based on a core value that serves to unite a group and give it a distinct identity". Now joking apart, that isn't a daft notion. Belbin, who has specialised during his career on team roles and group cohesion, has arrived at a serious issue – even if he got there by a bizarre route. The process of identifying the core values which unite groups and give them distinct identities grows ever more crucial in this increasingly

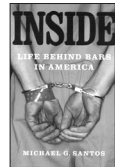
fragmented and fractious world. But whether inventing a new word, and a silly word at that, helps the process is questionable.

And to complicate matters further by introducing super-elbes is more questionable still. A super-elbe is "an abstract concept and humanistic value akin to an elbe, which differs in setting out to embrace a wider range of people. While elbes identify or imply outsiders, there are no outsiders in the case of super-elbes". In other words, having established a useful concept, Belbin then negates it. Later he claims elbes are essentially male, super-elbes essentially female – and that the Old Testament is elbe while the New Testament is super-elbe. Christ almighty!

*The Evolution of Human Behaviour and its Bearing on the Future* is a dippy hotchpotch of scientific, historical and cultural facts and ideas, blended haphazardly into an over-rich stew. But many of the ingredients are perfectly good – if you can extract them from the goo in which they are almost drowned. ■

## BANGED UP

ERWIN JAMES



**INSIDE: LIFE BEHIND BARS IN AMERICA**  
**Michael G Santos**  
 St Martin's Press  
 \$24.95

Despite the differences between the US and British prison systems, reading *Inside: Life Behind Bars in America* by Michael Santos took me back inside to my own incarcerated years many times. Yet the British prison system, almost bursting at the seams at present with a record population of more than 77,500, pales into insignificance when compared with the breathtaking scale of the American prison archipelago that holds almost two and a quarter million souls. American prisoners now make up a quarter of the world's prisoners, with close to one in every hundred citizens experiencing prison custody at one time or another. The cost in financial terms is an eye-watering

\$40 billion per annum, and as Santos reveals in his book, in human terms it is no less phenomenal. Yet I could relate to the description of the natural dynamics that occur among prisoners arbitrarily thrown together in transit. "It is like filling a tank with rattlesnakes and rabbits, wolves and sheep." I could relate to the distrust that he tells us exists between prisoners and between prisoners and prison staff, the false relationships that abound, the deceit and the dishonesty, all embraced in the cause of survival. But it takes serious time inside before a real understanding of prison life can be gained.

When we meet Michael Santos, convicted in 1987 of large-scale cocaine distribution, he has just made it to a minimum security 'facility'. But, after serving 18 years of his 45-year term in some of America's toughest high-security prisons, he retains the voice of the experienced convict. The book draws the reader into the bowels of the long term-prisoner's existence with a writing style of such crispness and clarity it could only have been produced by someone living constantly on the edge of hope.

Santos reports that in spite of the opportunities for education and other means of personal growth available in the US prison system, the social structure, "seems to suck people in, cultivating failure. Rather than encouraging people to grow, it pulls everyone down." The animalistic nature of prison life reverberates throughout the riveting chapters of *Inside*, the predators and the prey co-existing in a dangerous and uncertain world, all the time vying for position in the atavistic hierarchy. One big difference between British prison life and that in the US is the level of violence. While in Britain prisoner on prisoner assaults are not uncommon, killings are rare. In the States, it seems a serious assault by a prisoner on a fellow is more likely to result in a death, and the chances of a perpetrator being apprehended are very low. For example Santos gives us Shamrock, who has no qualms at all about laying a length of pipe over the head of his perceived enemy. In one attack he leaves a man permanently disabled. In another he leaves a man dead. Each time he gets away with it, his 'respect' quota among the rest of the population enhanced beyond measure.

Others might use a 'shank', a home made stabbing tool, to inflict damage on their enemies. They do so with almost mundane repetitiveness. Sexual violence, too, is rife in the US system it seems. Santos tells us about Todd, "of average height and build" who ends up sharing a cell with Stump, who at 6' 4" "...towers over Todd. His arms bulge from years of lifting heavy weights. Along with his long, ragged, and unkempt hair, he sports a goatee, the devils' beard that accentuates Stump's fierce look of hatred. Tattoos of skulls and swastikas and demons sleeve his arms. The words FUCK THE WORLD are inked boldly in capital letters across the front of Stump's neck." Stump intends to glut his sexual hunger on Todd's body. Being vulnerable and locked in a cell with Stump has to be one of the worst visions of hell imaginable. Thankfully Todd somehow survives. Others are not so lucky.

It was in prison that I learned that the survival of the fittest, that is those who are most fitted for the environment, meant the survival of the meanest, the most devious, the most corrupt and the most treacherous. After 20 years I came to the conclusion that the potential for these satanic qualities exist in us all and could manifest in any one of us depending on the circumstances. Prison, I found, is the ideal breeding place for such human baseness, yet while prison life can bring out the worst in people, it can also bring out the best. I think that is what has happened in the case of Michael Santos. In order for this to happen however he has had to learn to walk the middle path – to be neither a stooge of the authorities, nor a confederate of his fellow prisoners. It is perhaps the most difficult path a prisoner can tread.

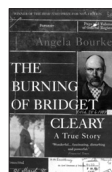
Though he only cooperates with prison officials to ensure a smooth passage as possible through his confined years, his deeper motives for his good conduct and his self-improvement using study and writing are convincingly noble. He has his own agenda and apparently the moral strength to carry it through. He wants to be released a better man than the man he was at 23, when he went away. The strength of this book, written in a forensically detailed yet utterly compelling narrative, is that it is written by a man who in another

life could have been an academic (Santos dropped out of school, but has gained a clutch of higher education qualifications during his time inside), or indeed could have reached the highest echelons of any other chosen profession, had he not embarked on the criminal path when he was barely out of adolescence. Santos is an unusual prisoner in that he comes from the white middle-class, business-owning community in North Seattle. With his social credentials in prison he would fit the bill of the 'white-collar' criminal, an embezzler or a fraudster, instead of a big-time dealer of hard drugs. His earliest year of release is 2013, yet he is at pains, as he writes, to emphasise that he seeks no sympathy, and he makes no attempts to minimise the seriousness of his crimes.

The American prison system has produced some outstanding writing in the past, in particular the letters of Jack Henry Abbott to Norman Mailer (later published as *In the Belly of the Beast*), George Jackson's letters published as *Soledad Brother* and Edward Bunker's *No Beast so Fierce*, which secured him a post-prison berth as an Oscar nominated Hollywood scriptwriter, and a role as Mr Blue in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. To these illustriously literate products of the American prison way we should add the name of Michael Santos. I hope he makes it to the end and beyond. ■

## FAIRY TALE

MARTINA EVANS



**THE BURNING OF BRIDGET CLEARY**  
Angela Bourke  
Pimlico  
£6.99

In 1895 Bridget Cleary was tortured and burnt to death in her own fireplace in County Tipperary while her relatives stood by and watched. Michael Cleary believed that his 26-year old wife was a changeling, and he burnt her in the belief that his real wife would emerge the following night from Kyleneagranagh, a local ringfort believed by some locals to be

inhabited by fairies.

When the details of this story were revealed to the general public, nationalist newspapers struggled to play the story down. "Strange Death Near Clonmel", said the embarrassed *Freeman's Journal* while Unionist newspapers like the *Dublin Evening Mail*, on the other side of the Home Rule divide, seized the opportunity to argue that Ireland was not fit to govern herself.

At the trial of Michael Cleary, Coroner John J Shee said in his address to the jury "...it was one of the most fearful things which happened in the country for years. Amongst Hottentots one would not expect to hear of such an occurrence."

This was the age of progress, railroads and newspapers. Ireland had been increasingly peaceful of late. Various land acts had been passed allowing tenants to own their own land for the first time. The 'civilised' world of the town recoiled with horror to think that such barbaric acts could still take place.

The miracle of storytelling that Bourke performs in this tightly-packed, meticulously researched book is that she allows us to see the main players of this tragedy up close and in detail. This book reads like a novel. A novel where the reader knows the ending yet cannot put down the book because the manner of its execution is so compelling. The striped petticoat Bridget wore the night of her death; the blue handkerchief that was a present for her husband; Bridget's pet cat Dotey who liked to sit on her shoulders; these precise and touching details provide us with a link to a vanished world and a people who were half in thrall to a world of ancient beliefs. Yet Bourke reveals that these people were far from the simple labourers they were portrayed in the newspapers.

While members of Bridget's family born before the famine were illiterate, Bridget herself was educated and articulate. She was a successful milliner and her husband Michael, also literate, was a cooper by trade. They lived in a fine cottage and were making good money. Bridget dressed better than other