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Review: BAD – The Autobiography of James Carr

Phil Mailer

1996

From Gangster to revolutionary – This book tells the brutally honest story of a Black American brought up in the ghettos of LA to become, alongside George Jackson, one of the most intransigent prison rebels of that period of the late 60s and early 70s. It is now available in bookshops in Dublin.

The book is a raw story of everyday ghetto life and tells how a petty criminal turned into one of the more coherent revolutionary minds of that period. Linking up with George Jackson in Folsom, they led the notorious Wolf Pack which first fought its way into a position of strength in the prison race war, then worked to stop that war to work solely against the system. He reveals the horrors of prison life, murders, rapes and corruption from the standpoint of one who had to overcome them. And at the same time he shows the joy of condemned men who refuse to bow under, and confirm their ultimate humanity through rebellion, despite all the odds.

The book is in two parts, the first the story of life in the streets with all its attendant aggression and terror. The second is about how consciousness changed his attitude and brought it round to

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Retrieved on 5th December 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 47 – Spring 1996.

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a more cohesive critique of the penal system as well as the whole structure which had created it. Through his friendship with George Jackson he had ties with the Black Panthers (being Huey Newton's bodyguard at one point) but becoming influenced by the Situationists he broke with their pan-Leninism. Just after this book was completed, in 1972, he was shot down in a 'gangland style' murder. And on its first publication in 1975, the book was completely suppressed by the California Department of Corrections.

Given the background information highlighted in the recent struggles about Mumia Abu Jamal (-which Workers Solidarity members were involved with here in Ireland) and the recent statistics about life in the Black areas of American cities (-which the controversial Million Man March demo in Washington demonstrated) it is a good book to put all of this in context by going back to look at the experiences of a Black revolutionary in the 1960s.

A very interesting afterword sets the connection between the revolutionary black movement of that time and the gang-type warfare of today, including the LA riots in 1992 and tries to make connections. As gangsterist activities and ideologies take on an ever increasing role in modern capitalism – from Dublin to Moscow – this book has an uncannily modern bent to it. In many ways it should be mandatory reading in the outskirts of Dublin and in Irish prisons -where the book 'The General', through lack of anything else has become a kind of gospel. While James Carr was blown away, his ideas and experiences have not been and it wouldn't be at all bad if its ideas and story were retold to a younger audience.