DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Bill and Liz Oswald

who introduced me to the joy of reading from birth, enabling such a study to take place today.
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PREFACE

Prison, a place that no one can call home, a place where all that was familiar no longer exists, a place where a friendly face is nowhere to be seen, a place that is full of hostility. That which becomes ‘home’ is nothing more than a concrete space, a hole in which one is expected to live. Those with whom the prisoners come into contact are hostile, unkind and unfair. Thus, as a means by which to retain sanity and show the world what happens on the ‘inside’, prisoners begin to write – they begin to write in hostile spaces.

This study will argue that the body of writings that constitute ‘South African prison literature’ is both substantial and under-researched. For both of these reasons it warrants closer examination. Another argument that this thesis will advance is that specific authors have made major contributions to this collection of works, with Herman Charles Bosman being the foremost of these. Bosman not only pioneered the prison novel in South Africa, but also set the mould within which most of the other prison-authors have patterned their works.

Herman Charles Bosman is often referred to as the ‘father’ of South African prison literature. Such a statement of course presupposes that there is a discernible body of writing that can be called ‘prison literature’. This study will attempt to show that within the larger corpus of South African literature there is indeed a body of writing that can usefully be categorized under the broad rubric ‘prison literature’.

Undertaking such a categorization, however, requires generating certain criteria, and then applying these criteria to determine whether specific works adhere to them. For the purposes of this study, the most important
criterion is that, for a work to be considered as belonging to the corpus of South African prison literature, it must be about the writer’s personal experience of prison. In other words, fictional (imaginative) narratives about prison life will fall beyond the purview of this study. While it must be conceded that this criterion is not unarguable and self-evident, as the study proceeds it will, I believe, be seen that there is good sense in excluding purely fictional works. (Chapter Three advances the argument for this criterion in more detail.)

Other variables have been accommodated – for example, from which prison the prisoner is writing, whether the prisoner writes about his or her experience during or after imprisonment, the nature of the crime committed and when the imprisonment took place. In addition, there is no rigidity about the number of criteria a particular work must fulfil in order to be included in this study (Chapter Three also discusses these criteria at length).

One of the questions this thesis will attempt to answer is why prisoners write in the first place. Society’s stereotypical view of a criminal – someone lacking in morals and education – is no doubt dominant, and the notion of a ‘criminal’ adding value to the study of literature is not often conceptualized by many. Writing becomes a powerful tool for the authors examined here, often for different reasons and purposes, but a tool nonetheless. Paul Gready says that,

“the word is a weapon that both inflicts pain and secures power. Prisoners are relentlessly rewritten within the official ‘power of writing’… Within this process the prisoner’s sense of self and world is undermined, pain is made visible and objectified in writing and converted into state power [but] prisoners write to restore a sense of self and world, to reclaim the ‘truth’ from the apartheid lie, to seek empowerment in an oppositional ‘power of writing’ against the official text of imprisonment” (1993: 489).

The thesis will attempt to show that, notwithstanding their considerable diversity, individual works within the corpus of South African prison literature share many common characteristics. Despite this the study will show also that, even though the prison writings have many common threads running through them, there are many differences within individual writings and the body of literature as a whole.

It could be argued that, in earlier years, the works that are the subject of this study were quite satisfactorily regarded as part of other genres (for
example, autobiography). So is the whole process of reclassification necessary? In other words, is there any point in attempting to argue for a distinct category of writing (‘prison literature’)? One of the points that will be made in detail later is that frequently the prison writings of a particular writer are only a small aspect of his or her larger oeuvre, and these writings have merely been included in more general discussions of the author’s body of work as a whole. Clearly, this does not do justice to the distinct nature of such a writer’s prison writings. It is the purpose of this study to give the works that make up the corpus of South African prison literature their due.

The thesis begins with a brief summation of the prison system in South Africa. This chapter puts the experiences that follow into context. Many of the laws under which these writers were held no longer exist and so, in the interest of better understanding, these are explained in the first chapter as well.

This is followed by a brief survey of prison literature. Chapter Two attempts to provide a concise and up-to-date list of the primary and secondary sources that make up the category ‘prison literature.’

Chapter Three introduces the term ‘prison literature’. The chapter includes many of the common characteristics found in prison writing, and outlines the essential criteria of this body of writing. This is followed by a brief examination of the various theories of literature that can be found in prison literature.

Chapter Four introduces a vital aspect of the thesis and the argument provided within it. An examination of the theories of Foucault takes place in this chapter. He offers a thread that binds all prison literature together when he states that the prison system is put in place to punish an offender. Modern power to punish is based on the supervision and organization of bodies in time and space. The thesis will then argue that it is in this very space that prisoners write. Thus the hostile space of prison and prison life provides the context in which the literature under examination can be created.
The second section of the thesis contains the close examinations of the prison writings of various authors. This section begins with a fairly comprehensive chapter on *Cold Stone Jug* (Chapter Five), and attempts to describe the foundation that Bosman laid in the writing of this novel. The chapters thereafter include comparisons between each individual prison-author’s work and Bosman’s seminal novel, noting the similarities and differences. Each of these chapters (Chapters Six to Nine) also provides a justification for the selection of each of the authors discussed and attempts to show why their writing must be considered some of the greatest prison literature produced in South Africa.

Chapter Six examines the prison novel as exemplified in the writings of Breyten Breytenbach and Hugh Lewin.

Chapter Seven introduces the concept of prison poetry. It is shown how poets like Jeremy Cronin and Dennis Brutus have also followed the example of Bosman, despite the generic difference in their work. This chapter also attempts to show why poetry must be considered an important part of this novel-dominated category of writing.

This argument continues in Chapter Eight, in which prison letters and diaries are discussed and shown to be a vital part of prison literature. The main focus of this chapter is the writings of Ahmed Kathrada.

Chapter Nine introduces the writing of women prisoners. This writing shares the typical characteristics found in the works of the prisoners’ male counterparts. No one novelist or poet is examined in detail. This section rather examines women’s writing as a topic in terms of the study as a whole. Importantly, however, it shows that prison writing is not gender- or race-specific.

The thesis concludes by discussing the notion that these authors wrote and lived in hostile spaces not only during their imprisonment, but also afterwards: life after imprisonment becomes a hostile space too. The conclusion argues that a clear development can be found in this writing –
from the publication of *Cold Stone Jug* in 1949 up until the publication of the final documents from Robben Island in the 1990s.

“Come, let’s away to prison;
We too alone will sing like birds i’ the cage…”

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V, iii, 8–19