

EMERALD STUDIES IN CULTURE,
CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND THE ARTS

HAUNTING PRISON

EXPLORING THE PRISON AS AN ABJECT
AND UNCANNY INSTITUTION



TEA FREDRIKSSON

Haunting Prison

EMERALD STUDIES IN CULTURE, CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND THE ARTS

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Haunting Prison: Exploring the Prison as an Abject and Uncanny Institution

BY

TEA FREDRIKSSON

Stockholm University, Sweden



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For mom and dad

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Preface

This study that makes up this book began as my doctoral thesis, which I started working on in 2016 and completed in 2021. When I first started analysing prison stories from different times, places, and points of view, I was surprised by how coherent they were in terms of theme and imagery despite being historically, geographically, or socially distant from one another. While narrators in this genre are often both literally and literarily confined, even when they were free from incarceration they still depicted prison in much the same way as those who were imprisoned by it. The same held true across regions and historical time. Moreover, it did not take long to note how the themes and images these novels conjured were closely tied to the ghost- and horror stories of Gothic literary conventions.

Commercially published prison autobiographies create a grey area between fact and fiction. Their stories are framed as true, but at the same time they are edited for entertainment purposes and mass-market appeal. While their truth claim is clear, the extent of the truth itself in these stories is not. Nor does it really matter how true these stories are. What matters is that they are presented as true, while also presenting a horror-storied picture of prison for readers to experience through imaginative engagement. As a result, these truth claims become part of how prison stories use a Gothic frame of narration.

This discovery was the starting point for seeing how prison stories are not only bound by prison, but they are also bound by a gothicized literary tradition. To explore how this overlap of prison and gothicity speaks to the cultural anxieties that underpin them both, I turned to the uses of psychoanalytical theory found in sociology and the humanities. What quickly became clear was just how much these stories present abject and uncanny encounters that showcase anxieties about selfhood, life, and death. The prevalence of such themes made these prison stories an intriguing case for the study of a social unconscious. The way content with documentary ambitions uses horror tropes gives rise to so many questions, and so many possibilities for interdisciplinary research.

Rewriting my doctoral thesis to suit the book format has been a bit of a challenge, but it is a challenge I am very happy to have been offered. I especially want to thank Yvonne Jewkes for encouraging me to go for it, and the editorial team at Emerald for making the process of reworking this study so enjoyable. My deepest thanks also go out to those who read, listened to, and commented on this research while I was pursuing my degree, including – but by no means limited to – Frida Beckman, Eamonn Carrabine, Michael Fiddler, Kristina Fjelkestam,

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Tea Fredriksson
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