



© Dramatic Media Ltd.

Inside Out

The story of a film – book – film collaboration

Author Julia Jarman and film maker Julie Laslett have produced a linked book and two films about a teenager from a desperate but not uncommon family background, who gets into trouble with the law. It seems that Bookstart, the scheme that gets books to babies, has been a great success. Maybe this excellent collaboration should be delivered in the same spirit to the other end of the age range. If we hope that the cycle of illiteracy can be broken, can we hope to affect the cycle of ‘offending’?

We first meet the teenager in *Lee’s Story*, a film produced by Julie Laslett’s company *Dramatic Media*, and co-written with Caroline Webster. Lee is an apparently confident, swaggering lad who is in trouble. There is, nevertheless, something likeable about him, still a ‘spark’ as a family friend puts it.

But, he lives on an estate where crime is usual; his violent father is in prison and his mother is near breaking point. Now, Lee’s petty thieving has taken an ugly turn. His elderly victim fell and was taken to hospital. Lee is not unduly concerned, it seems. Most of his mates are inside and doesn’t everyone say prison is like a holiday camp these days? Then, he gets his one chance to break with his background, get away from his environment and go to work for an uncle in Spain. He really wants this. This is the chance to turn his life around. Instead, it gets turned inside out because it now becomes imperative that he does not get a custodial sentence. It is heart rending to watch both his attempt to appease his mother’s loan shark and his badly thought-out attempt at restitution, which just frightens his victim further. His desperation leads to him lashing out at his mother. “Just like your dad.”

Our last view of Lee is below the Courts. He has been sentenced, searched, relieved of all his belongings and we see him being locked in a holding cell.

This is a beautifully made film. It is carefully and imaginatively detailed, unsentimental but compassionate. It makes some of the current TV dramas look facile and immature.

Julia Jarman already knew Julie from a previous collaboration on *Ghost Writer*, one of her books for younger children, and they often discuss their respective work with each other. Having seen the film, it is immediately understandable why Julia was so

emotionally engaged and wanted to know “What happens next?” It is impossible not to be involved with this character. She was full of questions and they had what they describe as “endless discussions”, not least about how Lee, who is not a hardened criminal, would survive in prison. There was only one way to answer all the questions. Julia would have to write a book, and that was how *Inside* came to exist. It starts in that same cell where the film left him and follows Lee’s days as he finds out just how unlike a holiday camp prison is. He discovers that it is a dangerous place to be. The first blow is that he has to share a cell with someone who knows him. This ‘mate’ introduces him to the prison politics – gang culture is alive and well inside, too. How he handles these complications will determine his fate.



Above left: Lee screaming in distress after a violent argument with his mother. Above right: Lee being processed after being given a detention sentence by the court. Both stills taken from the film *Lee’s Story*. © Dramatic Media Ltd.

We get a picture of daily life inside: the routine, the training which Lee can take seriously or not, the relationships between the prisoners and the staff. We feel he is partly willing to take on board the message that there are no actions without consequences and that *he* is responsible for those actions and we also know he is deeply affected by the fact that he attacked his mother. He does not want to be like his father. All this, however, comes against a background of the unending pressure of relationships between the inmates. There are two major factions: Craig leads one and he controls so many people, including Lee’s cell mate. Worse still, he seems to have contacts outside and Lee fears for his mum. Then there is Errol, the big black guy, who takes what he wants. There is, however, a moment when Lee realises how much Errol’s little daughter means to him and he responds with inarticulate sympathy.

How long can he survive in there without taking sides? The atmosphere is building within the prison and a final confrontation between the two big men culminates in a riot. It is during this riot that Lee faces events that force him to make his mind up. It becomes a personal crisis, too. When he is released, he is, in Julia’s words, “changed though not cured”.



Above left: Lee and partner Nicky bear the strain of bringing up their six-month old baby. Above right: Lee, in hospital, with Nicky after she is taken ill with alcohol abuse. Both stills taken from the film *Holding On*. © Dramatic Media Ltd.

There is a clever simplicity about the language in which the book is written. Julia particularly wanted potential Lees to be able to read it. It is not an 'easy reader' but clear and lucid while dealing with complex events. The style is cool, factual, even matter of fact. She was partly constrained by the fact that Lee already existed as a character on film but now we are inside Lee's head and the character deepens and expands. The second film is equally clear sighted and challenging and Julia knew how this film ends so, she explains, this kept her realistic in working out Lee's development while in detention. It was, in fact, very difficult to do research for the book. Whereas Julie worked with a Youth Offenders Team, no one really wanted Julia to go inside a Young Offenders Institution, especially their PR people. She found people, including a deputy prison governor, who would answer questions but she wanted an inmate's view and when she did get in, she managed to speak to some detainees and saw the cells. One valuable asset of the collaboration that she particularly valued, however, was that Julie, who knew the character too, listened to the book read aloud as it was written and that tested the voice that was otherwise only in her head.

Julie, as a filmmaker, of course, acknowledges other collaborators. The sound is particularly important and Julia feels she learned something from film making during their first collaboration when music proved so effective in *Ghost Writer*. Both feel they owe something to the excellent actors. Liam Barr, who plays Lee, shaved his head for the part and arrived already hooded and swaggering. He also helped with a practical problem. The fact is that the realistic language of the characters, if portrayed exactly, would ensure that the film and book would never get to the target audience. While Julia's approach is to create a skilful illusion, the film has the added advantage of the actor's body language brilliantly conveying attitude. The publishers seem to have missed a trick by using a 1950s style 'mug shot' on the book cover whereas the cover of the film, using the young actor, already speaks volumes. Ironic that the cover for the film is the more eloquent.

The second film, *Holding On*, is slightly different. It is more episodic and an excellent teaching resource about young parenting. We learn that the indication that had been signalled in *Inside* about the change in Lee bears at least some fruit in this film and there

is hope that, whatever else, the cycle of family violence has been broken.

Clearly, both Julia and Julie have found this juxtaposition of book and film fascinating. Their "endless discussions" included a film versus book element. Julia says films do not show thought processes in the same way as a book can. She had to show Lee confronting what was in his head. Julie writes for a visual process. Note, for example, how much we learn about Lee in the opening sequence of *Lee's Story* which is entirely without words. Both

say they feel more alive to each other's medium.

Julia and Julie know from their collaboration that using books and films together enhances both, as their work on *Ghost Writer* in a school proved. The aim was to turn a chapter of the book into a film. As they worked, the pupils (KS2 and 3) were obliged to look more closely at textual and visual processes. It was done in after-school workshops. Julia talked about the writer's intentions and Julie explained about film making and then they set about writing the film script. They examined how a writer can show the passage of time but how do you do that on film? How do you create a climax? What about structure? One of the advantages was that elements they had discussed when writing, like beginnings, middles and ends, now became concrete on film. The teachers, who were the film crew, found visual and textual literacy go together. Possibly, there will be more collaborations and they talk of more material for the primary age range.

Inside and both the films about Lee, *Lee's Story* and *Holding On*, can each stand alone and all are being used now in schools as well as in areas where they deal with youth offending. The films are a part of *Dramatic Media's* resources for PSHE, English, Literacy and Media Studies and come with teachers' notes, lesson plans, photocopiable resources and suggestions for activities.

Any teacher or group leader using *Lee's Story*, would benefit from showing the 'interviews' which follow the film. In short sequences, someone like a local reporter is questioning the social worker, Lee's mother, the family friend and the victim. It is a brilliant idea. Their answers cannot fail to provoke discussion and the degree of emotional engagement experienced means the question will inevitably come: "What happened to Lee after that?" Now, they can be handed *Inside* and find out and, maybe, in the future, Lee's story, Julia hints, will come full circle with a second book, *Outside*.

Pat Thomson



Inside J.A.Jarman Andersen £5.99 ISBN: 978-1842709771
Ghost Writer Julia Jarman Andersen £4.99 ISBN: 978-1842708279
Young Offender: Freedom or Detention (pack includes *Lee's Story*)
Young Parents: Pressures and Problems (pack includes *Holding On*)
Book to Screen (pack includes a copy of *Ghost Writer*)
 For details of the films go to www.dramaticmedia.net