

**Book (Proposed title):**  
***The Palgrave Handbook of  
Incarceration across Popular Media***  
**Chapter:**  
***Women Behind Bars:  
Dissecting Social Constructs  
Mediated by News and Reality TV***



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Jennifer C. Thomas

Book Chapter Author

(Chapter abstracted accepted/ book under review)

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which the watchdog role of the news media oftentimes collides with the bottom-line objective of entertainment media when it comes to stories of women behind bars, and notably their children left behind. These inmates' true stories are sometimes shadowed behind distorted notions of so-called reality entertainment; their real-life stories become skewed behind the storylines, confusing the viewer with a warped sense of reality. This paper gives an in-depth look at several past and current examples of how traditional and new media, including reality television, profile incarcerated women and their children, and debates the media's role in the social construction of reality. The author, a veteran journalist-turned-journalism professor, reveals insights on the "bottom line" and decision-making processes which impact news and entertainment coverage, and discusses the long-term impact of such stories on the incarcerated subjects and their children. Journalists, by trade, use observation and interviews as a means of ethnographic research, while both news and entertainment are driven by among others, novelty and controversy. This, coupled by pressure of deadlines and competition, often lead to incorrect or subjective assessments and stories of singular or exaggerated subjects that do not shed true light on the interviewee or topic, but instead in the skewed elucidation of the media professional. Finally, the author questions whether the worlds of news and entertainment can co-exist when it comes to such coverage, to conclude that though seemingly far-fetched, entertainment can intersect with news if those in decision-making positions in both industries make a commitment to utilize impactful media strategies.

## Contribution and Impact:

This topic is among my research interests: the complex facets of women, media and images.

I am among one of the authors of a proposed book which focuses on "the spaces of prisoners and prisons, their stories in media and the uncertain space between both." As both a consumer of media and professional, I have both been storyteller and viewer and am able to discuss how the media's role impacts the viewer's consumption and interpretation.

The media's representation or misrepresentation of inmates and their families affects the global perspective of imprisoned individuals. In the United States, families and children learn about incarceration from the stories shared through various media outlets. This becomes problematic, especially in light of the negative views imprinted on the psyche of these children who love their parents regardless of the stereotypes imposed upon them through media representation.

As a journalism professor and veteran news producer and executive on the local and national level, I offer practical yet powerful insights on how decisions are made for such coverage, which ultimately impacts the types of stories shared on incarcerated women.

This chapter ultimately provides an important narrative which deconstructs the statement from noted journalist Edward R. Murrow that [media] can *teach, illuminate and even inspire*.

## Relevancy

This proposed book is for an edited collection of international contributors. Its focus on the (real or imagined) spaces of the prison and prisoners and the stories told about prisons and justice in media both fictional and non-fictional media and perhaps more importantly in the uncertain space between both. Reality television, tabloid media, crime and horror films, soap opera and pornography are all possible areas of focus.

My chapter relates to the topic, "The women in prison genre" (e.g. *Yield to the Night*, *Turn the Key Softly*), and Reality television of the world's toughest jails.

It will be edited by Prof. Marcus Harnes, University of Southern Queensland and discusses how prisons, prisoners, and crime are attracting unprecedented levels of interest from both predictable sources (tabloid media) to more unexpected (such as the prison setting of *Paddington 2*).

Globally, but especially in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, the real-life prison population is rising dramatically. The fictional presentations of prison, which may be prurient and exploitative, high minded or fantastical, is matched by the barely factual and highly sensationalized prison of reality television. *Orange is the New Black* is only the latest example of the compulsion media of all types have to look inside the prison. [\(from call for papers\)](#) (See attachment for portion of Proposal)