

CLINK'D FOR LIFE



True stories of finding love behind bars

By CAROLINE HOWE

Some women find love online — while others focus on those who have been in a lineup.

Bloomberg reporter Christie Smythe made headlines in December when she revealed she had quit her job and divorced her husband after falling in love with reviled Pharma Bro Martin Shkreli, arrested for securities fraud in 2015. Smythe insisted that her beau was just misunderstood. (This came after he had been dubbed “the most hated man in America” for price gouging a drug for people with HIV.)

Bizarre though the story was, Smythe has plenty of company. For every incarcerated man, it seems, there’s a woman interested in being his pen pal — or more.

It’s a trend explored in the book “Love Lockdown: Dating, Sex, and Marriage in America’s Prisons” (Gallery Books) by Elizabeth Greenwood.

Greenwood decided to start researching prison marriages after her own extensive correspondence with jailed white-collar criminal Samuel Israel III, currently serving a 22-year sentence in a Butner, NC, federal prison for mail fraud and investment-adviser fraud.

Israel had faked his death by staging a suicidal plunge off the Bear Mountain Bridge in upstate New York in June 2008. He turned himself in to the feds three weeks later, and Greenwood reached out to him while researching her first book, “Playing Dead,” about people who fake their own deaths or disappearances. They have stayed in touch for seven years, corresponding frequently, although they have never met.

“Throughout the half-dozen years I’ve known Sam, he has gone from my subject to my stalker to my friend,” she writes, noting that the correspondence helped her understand the “laserlike attention” an inmate — with little to do — can “lavish on a lady.”



THE WRITE MATCH: Sheila Rule met her husband Joe Robinson while he was serving 25 years for murder. They became pen pals as part of a church program and have been married for 15 years.

For her latest book, Greenwood followed the lives of five couples who met while one of them was incarcerated — colloquially known in prison-relationship circles as “MWI” — in the US prison system.

“To the prison wives who have long histories with their men, MWI women are seen as pathetic losers or, worse yet, prison groupies,” writes Greenwood.

But what she found were relationships that were at times romantic, messy, complicated and sometimes heartbreaking — in other words, not too unlike those in the real world.

One couple includes Jo, an ex-Army medic who had worked as a prison guard at a Kansas City jail, and Benny Reed, who was serving a 10-year sentence in the maximum security Oregon State Penitentiary for the attempted murder of his then-girlfriend.

The pair met on a prison pen-pal site. Jo knew the stigma of associating with a felon, but it didn’t deter her. In recovery from an addiction to pain pills, Jo credited Benny with



JAILSPOUSE SHOCK: Jo married Benny Reed, who was jailed for attempted murder of an ex, in his Oregon prison.

“making me the best possible version of myself.”

The pair even got married at the prison — he saved up from his \$1.81-an-hour prison call center job

to buy her a ring off Etsy — but the relationship ended abruptly when Benny found other companions online.

Just why do women fall for imprisoned men?

According to Dr. Fred Berlin, director of the Johns Hopkins Sex and Gender Clinic, there tends to be “this trait of intense mothering in prison wives,” writes Greenwood. “I think these women tend to be very nurturing. They have a sense of wanting to be caring for someone else, and men in prison, for obvious reasons, are quite needy.”

But not every prison wife goes into a pen-pal relationship looking for love.

Sheila Rule, a longtime foreign correspondent for the New York Times, met Joe Robinson while doing volunteer work for a prison ministry.

She was corresponding with more than a dozen inmates when a “compelling” letter came from Robinson, an East New York native serving 25 years for murder.

As a pen pal, he was looking for a “young lady,” and Rule, who had been married twice, was in her 50s, 20 years his senior. She let him down and flat-out told him that she couldn’t be his companion, but could be his friend.

For a year, the two exchanged letters that were deeply vulnerable but never flirtatious. In 2003, he convinced her to visit him in person, where the relationship switched from friendship to romance, and they wed in 2005. They’ve now been married 15 years, 12 of which Robinson was in prison. She says the marriage is happy and familiar, “like an old shoe.”

Still, Rule initially told few people about the relationship.

When she decided to tell a friend who she thought was progressive, the friend asked how she could be with someone charged with murder.

“I’m not marrying Joe’s past,” she told the friend. “I’m marrying the person he’s become.”

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