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Sensationally smug

Jeffrey Archer persuaded prisoners to open their hearts to him and then wrote prurient nonsense that will not advance the cause of reform, says the Prospect prisoner

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Book: A Prison DiaryVOL 1: Belmarsh Hell

Author: FF8282 (Macmillan, £14.99)

Four days before the end of Jeffrey Archer's trial for perjury, I was visiting the Royal Academy's summer show and, by chance, I bumped into him. He was standing at the top of the grand entrance staircase-no fans, no minders, no Mary anywhere to be seen. He appeared at first glance to be his usual confident self: straight-backed, chin up, the famous crew cut glistened, his necktie was flawlessly knotted and his suit looked as pristine as the day it left Savile Row. I tapped him gently on the shoulder and introduced myself.

"Hope everything goes well when the jury retires," I ventured. Archer stiffened. "Nothing to worry about," he replied. I could tell he didn't believe it. He looked at his watch nervously.

"I've served 19 years in prison," I told him, "and all the while I kept a journal of what was happening-to me, to those around me. It kept me sane... the unburdening of my troubled soul. If things should go wrong for you..."

"No." Archer was quite convinced. "They're not going to find me guilty. I'm an innocent man and I have every faith that I'll be vindicated."

"Just in case," I said, "spew everything out onto the page. With your name you could make a real contribution to the penal debate."

He seemed a little put out. "It won't come to that. Good to talk. Must be off." And with a nod he shook my hand, descended the great staircase and bolted out through the front door.

Well, as we now know, it did come to that. An irate Justice Potts sent him down for

four years. Archer was left to reflect on his own demise.

With the publication of *A Prison Diary* by "FF8282" (note the pseudo-Wildean allusion to anonymity-nowhere on the book's cover does his name appear) Archer has prematurely risen from his grave. In the year since our brief encounter, having seemingly taken my advice, he has reproduced in Warholian detail what happened to him during the three weeks he spent in Belmarsh top security prison in Woolwich, southeast London. Every day he must have been scribbling away in his cell, fastidiously charting the iniquities doled out by a vengeful world. The pity is that his efforts have such an empty ring to them. Archer's book oozes with self-regard and righteous indignation.

I had been expecting a work of sombre meditation. But Archer has not the slightest intention of admitting his own culpability, nor any sense that, after only 21 days inside, he may still have something to learn about prison life. Pontifically he pronounces on all aspects of prison life; rushing in where others more qualified fear to tread, lunging at windmills, committing numerous faux pas along the way to the great annoyance of this reviewer and, I suspect, anybody else with the slightest knowledge of the penal system.

On drugs, for example, so naïve is "Lord Jeff" that he thinks "china white" (a pure form of heroin) is a type of porcelain. After one half-hour conversation with an Irish "informer," he feels well qualified enough to deliver a six-page rant on how the home office has failed to contain the drugs menace. There are absurd italicised asides like "Are you still listening David Blunkett?"

His understanding of the drug subculture a couple of generations below him is hopelessly clichéd and outdated. He simply regurgitates in a sensationalistic way everything he's been told or overhears. Class A drugs, he tells us, are smuggled into prisons through every intimate bodily orifice. He reveals how dealers use the wraps of a Sikh's turban, the hollow studs of a visiting referee's football boots, the unwieldy spine of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, even the folds of skin across the belly of a 27-stone convict to secrete their wicked wares. (I suspect that revelations such as these-hitherto known only to the cognoscenti-will make Archer powerful enemies once his book circulates through our prisons.)

In a further attempt to shock comes a list of available, easy-to-construct weapons fashioned from, inter alia, toothbrushes and toilet brushes, bedstruts and table legs, sandpapered serverly spoons, filed down phone cards, serrated can lids... as if there isn't enough violence already.

The inevitable set pieces in these diaries- Archer at the Sunday service (sermons on

Cain and Abel, the Prodigal Son and the Lost Sheep); Archer in the gymnasium ("sweaty tattooed rippling muscled youths pumping iron"); Archer running his "creative writing" class (yes, really); Archer shaking hands with Ronnie Biggs-could, in more capable hands, have been turned into genuinely amusing interludes.

But very little, if anything, of consequence will follow the publication of these diaries. This is a pity because they could have achieved more if only Archer had stopped to consider anybody else but himself. For the most part, he comes across as an egotistical buffoon-with, as one of the governors points out, "too much attitude." Archer harrumphs: "He wouldn't last long in the House of Commons." But then neither did our Jeff. All he has left of his parliamentary career are his portcullis cufflinks. Even these are confiscated as he passes through the prison reception.

Whilst ostensibly trying to bring to the attention of a wider audience the troubles of his fellow cons, he will only have embarrassed those of them that read A Prison Diary with his unrelenting prurience. He succeeds in persuading simple men to open up their hearts to him. Then he scuttles off back to his cell to write it all down in his usual melodramatic way.

He threatens to continue writing at his present rate (six hours a day), promising us another million words by the time of his release. And beware the ermine-shouldered ranks of Another Place, for "My God, there are going to be some speeches I will make should I ever return there." My noble lords, in less than 12 months, he could be back amongst you making more mischief.