

## ***Furnace: Lockdown* by Alexander Gordon Smith**

The start of this novel is gripping. More importantly, any teen male reader will just want to turn the pages as quickly as possible. A prison that is chiselled out of a huge underground cavern is an amazing setting for the incarceration of teen male offenders. The twist arrives early in the novel when it becomes apparent that prison officials head out into communities and set up potential inmates. The chapter delineations also add to the tension that the author intertwines into the plot. The temptation is to read just one more chapter.

Prison life is described with great detail and with multi sensory language that engages the reader. The use of guards and their wolverine type assistants spread a fear through the 'Furnace'. There is no escape and the inmates recognise this hopeless state. During evening lockdown, the Warden of the Furnace sends out a group of creatures called 'wheezers'. These beings visit the cells of the teen prisoners and mark the cell bars with a large cross.

The significance of this action is not only literally terrifying for the characters in the story but also for the reader. There is graphic description of the aftermath of being selected by these beings and the unfortunate cell dwellers become transformed in what appears to be secret experimentation on human teenage bodies.

As in all large gatherings of people, smaller social groups develop. As expected, some of the inmates tend towards dominating as many others as possible. Alex and his small group attempt to break this standover group with violent consequences.

The underground cavernous prison does have a geological flaw which is discovered by the main character Alex. Seeking the help of his cell mate Donovan, a plan of action is developed to attempt an escape. But no one escapes from Furnace! The plan becomes known to two other inmates and one of them is Kevin, the leader of the standover gang. This puts a higher risk of failure to the group but they persist. Some action packed events then occur which makes the reader feel as if there is some justice at times, no matter how small.

The final chapter provides an insight into the emotional desperation of Alex and friend Zee, as they make their way to an improbable escape from Furnace. Not all of the group attempt the final step and the torment of Donovan being taken from his cell the evening prior to the escape haunts Alex. If caught, death from the Furnace authorities would result. There was only one chance for freedom and Alex took it. However, success is not guaranteed.

**Trevor Dangerfield, Elisabeth Murdoch College, Vic**

Set in the future, in a time of zero tolerance of youth crime, following the Summer of Slaughter, *Furnace: Lockdown* transports us to a sinister penitentiary, the toughest maximum security prison in the world, named after its builder, Alfred Furnace. At some twenty six floors deep into the bowels of the Earth, it is a place of violence and evil, with giant guards in black business suits, mutant dogs to chew up inmates, 'wheezers', with filthy coats, ancient metal gas masks stitched permanently into their skin, and carrying syringes of contaminated blood and disease, and cruel Warden Cross, 'patched together from darkness and filth', with 'eyes like vortexes to suck you in'. Furnace is a place of monsters and murderous hatred, unending terror and humiliation, where food is a pulverised rotting mush, tempers are frayed and inmates endure 'exhausted bodies and fear-stricken minds'. 'You're dead. You just don't know it yet', the reality, as inmates' endless days of mind games and bloodlust, rotting in the guts of the Earth, desensitise and dehumanise.

Into this inhuman, unpredictable living Hell comes teenager, Alex Sawyer. With a two year history of bullying school kids for money, and of burglary, his conscience buried as "King of the World", Alex is framed for the murder of his best friend, Toby. As 'fresh meat', placed in a cell with Carl Donovan, Alex quickly learns about sirens, The Skulls, work as a 'chipper', 'trough time', the 'blood watch' and The Hole, with other 'new fish', Zee and Jimmy sharing his plight. Escape appears implausible and impossible, but Alex tries to keep the idea of freedom alive. As the story reaches its powerful climax, Donovan is taken away on the 'blood watch' and Alex may have found a way to break the power of Furnace. 'Death is behind him, death is ahead'; what hope? I am eagerly awaiting the sequel, *Furnace: Solitary*, due for release in September 2009.

Though confronting and possibly disturbing for some, *Furnace: Lockdown* is an amazing, highly imaginative futuristic fantasy. As an action-packed, adrenaline-charged, page-turning novel which

will definitely engage readers aged 14-18, particularly males, I was hooked too. The grim, taut prose, with its horror-filled, fast-paced action and realistically chilling descriptions, brilliantly evokes the escalating tension and suspense and the terrifying, sickening brutality of this debasing, disgusting, almost demonic death camp.

*Furnace: Lockdown* is recommended for inclusion in the secondary school library collection, for individual borrowing across all year levels, with an awareness of the extremely graphic and brutal nature of the story and its 'eternity of hopelessness and misery'. Though a matter for individual school decision, with this in mind, for study as a shared class reader within English or Social Science classrooms, the book does have a lot to offer and, on a positive note, Alex does not give up hope. It is an excellent, cleverly crafted, thought-provoking discussion starter, presenting issues of justice, violence, punishment, power, survival and inner strength. Interesting to consider Alex was the school bully and extortionist, yet he comes to the defence of Monty when he is being bullied, it being the unwritten rule not to help, because 'the place needs scapegoats'. Also for discussion, Alex's family and social / cultural background pre-empting his life of crime, along with a range of creative writing extension activities the book offers.

The hint of a river running deep under Furnace, as a possible escape route, is also symbolic and a clever parallel. For Alex, having enjoyed Greek myths and legends at school, he must now get back over from the other side of his own River Styx to escape his Hell.

Alexander Gordon Smith has indeed penned a riveting, sure-fire winner.

**Alison Cassell, Qld**

Hold your breath. Hold tight. This is a journey of fear and trepidation, of horrors no one would want to imagine. Worse than your worst nightmare. Imagine you were "actually in hell" for one of the crimes you didn't actually commit. Well welcome to Furnace, welcome to a living hell. Thoughts of escape will be the only thing to keep you alive and wanting to go on. No sky, no daylight.

Forget the niceties of *The Great Escape*. This is not a heroic tale. It is a story of survival.

Every page unravels new fearful images - the wheezers with their faces removed. The fellow prisoners who might get to you first. Childhood is a thing of the past. You are taken through the terrifying journey of Alex and he needs to get out!

This novel is not one I could say I enjoyed, but one that grabs you by the throat and leaves you with an insignificant level of hope. It is a novel I think may leave younger readers a little unnerved and therefore it really is aimed at 14+. Boys would find it interesting as it takes them into a futuristic prison world for Juveniles. It deals with the moral issues about incarceration and how we punish crimes. It also examines the concept of innocence and how they are abandoned by the legal system. There is no justice, yet the legal system is expected to do something about juvenile crime. These not-so-innocents are the scapegoats. This novel would work well with a unit on "Conflict" but be warned, it does contain violent actions that may shock so be aware of your audience. Extracts from this could also be used with more academic students due to its appropriated references to Dante's *Inferno*.

This novel would entice boys to read and teach them a moral lesson along the way. Some may not like the uncertainty of the ending but there is a sequel!

**Regina Forrester, NSW**

When I began reading *Furnace: Lockdown* I was merely an adult reviewing some teenage fiction. I did not expect to find it particularly stimulating to the adult mind but I was pleasantly surprised! I now find myself quite a fan of Mr. Alexander Gordon Smith.

*Lockdown* is a thrilling read! It drew me in with its excellent writing, vivid descriptions and chilling mysteries. It is not however, a book for the faint hearted. The premise is ghastly, throwing a 13 year old boy into a violent, hell-like hole in the ground that is the Furnace Prison. If it were ever made into a film it would need a rather heavy rating for violence and horror if the filmmakers were to do the writing justice. Characters include writhing, demonic dogs, creepy sub-human guards and the terrifying Wheezers with their syringes "full of blackness and death".

*Lockdown* however also has emotional depth. I found myself laughing at the lighter moments, particularly the witty repartee between our hero Alex and his cohorts. The book is also not afraid to be tender. As a mother of boys the same age as Alex, I found myself invested in his emotional roller

coaster, feeling proud of his wins, devastated by his setbacks and also a little sad as the hardness of The Furnace begins to have it's way with him.

In a classroom setting, the topic of justice is opened up widely by this novel. When is it right to do what is usually wrong? How does injustice affect people in the short and the long term? Alex's reflections of his earlier life and the decisions he made that led to his life of crime could promote excellent conversations amongst students.

I am really looking forward to reading the next instalment in the Furnace trilogy purely for my own enjoyment! I cannot wait for more of the deeper, darker secrets of this horrific yet fascinating place to be revealed.

**Jodie Sheppard, Mountain District Christian School, Vic**