

## Expat Living

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**Brother One Cell**  
By Cullen Thomas  
368 pages  
Viking Publishing (Hardcover)

By Paul Kerry

# One kilo of hash, three years in prison, one good book

"It was extremely challenging and I felt like I was losing my sanity for a while. But once I overcame that, grew up and started facing my own predicament I'd put myself into, I never felt peace like I did there. In that silence, in that bare living, there was almost a monastic peace in some ways."

If Cullen Thomas' account of his time in Korea may not sound quite like other expatriates', it's perhaps because his time here was spent mostly behind bars.

Caught smuggling a kilogram of hashish through the mail in 1993, Thomas spent three and a half years in Korea's prisons.

He admits his time there was hard, but insists that it was also invaluable.

"It was a really profound education for me, not only into Korea, but also into me and then into life itself," he told The Korea Herald.

"It wasn't easy, even in terms of our hygiene it was not optimal. There was dirty food and dirty water and cold water and the frigid winters. But overall there was an amazing peace to it and there's great value in it."

"We were totally removed from the modern world in a way that I don't think you can recreate elsewhere."

Thomas has written a book about his experiences, "Brother One Cell," which was favorably reviewed by the New York Times and The Chicago Tribune, and has since been published in Korean. It has been on the Expat Living-What The Book English bestseller's list since its release.

"The experience was probably the most meaningful one I've had in my whole life, and so to have a permanent record of it is extremely important to me," he says. "I wrote it from the heart and I was as painstakingly honest as I could be about myself and my experiences."

Thomas says he's delighted at the response to his book, although he puts its success partly down to the closed-off nature of jail.

"It's a different world in there and there will always be a public fascination with prison stories, because it is a secret world, it is a hidden world. These places are fortresses and dungeons closed off from the rest of society."

Prison is also an inherently demonized place. As a form of punishment, society requires it to be held up as unpleasant and even dangerous. Combined with the aspect of the unknown, it makes for a popular subject.

The personal narrative, ever more fashionable in non-fiction, is perfect point of view for the story. The fact that readers know they are getting only one side of the story allows for a paradoxical mix of bias and credibility — and with it a host of gory details.

To strengthen the integrity of the narrative, memoir writers often focus on the negative. Stories of injustice, torture and abuse dominate the genre, using sensational, if often true, details to woo readers.

But Thomas avoids both a partisan attitude and woe-is-me hand-wringing in his prison tale.

"It's just as well — self pity did nothing for Thomas in jail and it'd do him no good in his memoir. He was no torture victim after all, just a kid caught shifting drugs. Instead, he's frank about his crime, positive about his experience, and honest about how horrible it was."

"It is an atypical prison experience because it ends up being very positive. It was very benign for me," says Thomas.

"It was a big obstacle coming over some of the preconceptions, because we've all heard stories of foreigners getting in trouble abroad, especially with drugs. 'Midnight Express' is a cultural touchstone," he explains, referring to fellow American Billy Hayes' book about being sent to Turkish prison after being convicted of smuggling hashish.

"I feel like I gave it equal measure. In the first half it's more typical," he says. "The whole idea of look at what I'm suffering, the electric cattle prod on my leg."

"It's no advert for Korean prisons. Whatever the conditions now, at the time they were fearfully Spartan. His cell was no bigger than a bus shelter, with only two blankets for furniture, lights that wouldn't turn off and an open ditch at one end for a bathroom. Water came once a day. There were parasites. There was no heat in the winters and no protection from mosquitoes in summer."

"But with my story I felt like it went beyond that. It gets into Korea and into Korea's culture and what it's like to be a foreigner in Korea. And through the prisons I was afforded a kind of Korean life, and I don't see how else I could have learned what I did about Korea."

Indeed, much of his story applies to life in Korea, and particularly life as an expat here, as much as it does to life in prison. The different treatment awarded to foreigners is just one example.

"There are a lot of privileges that come along with being a foreigner, but I always felt like each one was

matched by some other disadvantage," he says.

In the book, he describes the lawyers queuing up to help him, a young middle-class American. Aware of his position as a comparatively wealthy suspect in Korea, Thomas finds it impossible to trust the advice of the lawyers who surround him.

Alongside this, his prosecutor seems to use Thomas' ignorance of Korean law and language to secure a conviction, only to get his sentence later reduced by pretending to believe his story that the kilo of hash in question was for personal use.

"There was this great push and pull constantly at work. It was very isolating — there were very few foreigners in the prisons, we were an extreme minority, the food was radically different, the language was radically different, and even though I'd been in Korea for seven months before I was arrested, you can float along the surface of the country."

"It's a common experience for foreign English instructors in particular. With reasonable pay and living conditions, it's easy to enjoy one's time in Korea, and even take in some of the more cosmetic aspects of the culture — the temples, the food, the festivals and palaces. But owing to the language barrier and other obstacles, expatriates often never really integrate.

"I was doing that too, I would teach for a few hours and then in the evenings I would meet up with friends from England, Australians, a couple Canadians, we'd hang out at each others' apartments. It was very easy to play it safe and not challenge oneself by diving into the strange mix."

Prison was a different story. There were few other foreign prisoners and there was no choice but to integrate with Koreans, learn their language and with it, the culture.

"It's a real compromise. And that was part of the surrender in prison. If you're in Rome, you have to follow Rome's rules, and so we had to become Korean. We had to greet our elders respectfully. We had to understand all of those age dynamics, we

had to bully the younger ones, make sure they didn't get to step up and get comfortable with us and challenge us."

Such thinking is foreign to most Westerners at best, and more often reprehensible to them. Accepting — or just living within — a Confucian dynamic is not something that is easily done by halves. Since Western ideas of hierarchy and equality no longer apply, some values have to be left behind, if temporarily.

"It does require really sacrificing part of your original self and forming a new one, and also compromising some of your values. I remember thinking 'why should I speak respectfully to some of these older convicts who are just these reprehensible characters?' Because that's not how I am. If I was in the States I wouldn't respect some guy just because he's older. That's not my values system. But you have to adapt."

With all this, you may wonder if Thomas would have preferred an American prison. But he says that although he could wear his own clothes there, eat familiar food and the accommodation would be better, he wouldn't have learned the same lessons.

There's the violence, too. American prisons are notoriously lawless. Reports of violence and rape are rife.

In Daejeon Prison, where Thomas spent most of his sentence, he says there was no rape — although there was some male prostitution. A tacit agreement between the criminal gangs and the prison guards meant that violence was prevented. Occasionally contraband was allowed in, but we're talking coffee, not cocaine.

But Thomas says the punishment went beyond four bare walls and boredom.

"In the beginning, the shock of it," says Thomas, describing the worst aspect of imprisonment. "At first it doesn't sound very bad. I'm quite fortunate in that there are lots of much worse stories. But the process of incarceration, though, is psychologically intense."

"I saw so many hardened criminals and it just broke them down.

Scarred and tough older Korean men, just going through the courts, and the experience of being judged, what feels like by the entire of society and being told that you're not good enough, that you're not capable of being decent and that basically you're scum and that process is incredibly forceful, and I think traumatic."

"And I went through an intense depression. I'm not typically a depressive person but the experience of being stripped and having all of your belongings removed and being locked away is incredibly scarring, and that took me a long time to get through."

"And then of course you feel like an idiot. I mean, of all the things I could have done, of all the opportunities that were open to me at the time as an educated American, I put myself into a horrible situation, and so there was also a lot of self-loathing."

With little to do, Thomas describes himself coming close to losing his mind. Things begin to turn around when his basketball skills land him favor with one of the gangs. With inter-gang matches all important, Thomas finds his way to the workshop through a basketball scholarship of sorts, and from then on he begins to bridge the gap between himself and the prisoners that surround him.

It's at this point that he comes to terms with his situation.

He says the secret was "actually finding peace in it. It's okay not to have coffee, not to have all of those things, even not to have a girlfriend, to let it all go. All that."

"All of it. You just have to say goodbye to it. You knew that if you lived through it — if you came out the other side — you would maybe have those things again, but really you couldn't look that far forward. You had to just live each day very simply."

"There's no other way. You either let stuff break you down or you let it become part of your goodness. It either beats you and you become worse off or you take it and somehow make it work for you. You turn it into a positive."

He compares this idea to Buddhist thinking.

"They have this great metaphor of taking poison and transmuting that poison into an elixir," he says.

Writing was also important. At the time he was incarcerated, he wasn't even allowed a pen. He wrote prison diaries on scraps of paper with an illicit ballpoint, until finally he was allowed to write home.

The letters from home loom large in his book, and their importance to him is repeated.

"The letters were so valuable, to all of us," he remembers. "Even the guys who didn't get any would look to see who was receiving mail. And I got a lot of mail. It gave me status even. It showed that as a convict you still had a strong connection to the outside and that you weren't forgotten. There was a status in that, and just personally it kept me sane."

On his release, he was sent straight to America, where he was greeted with hugs from his family and a slap from his mother. After recuperating, he began to work as a writer.

"The transition back to normal life was dramatic. Little things made big impressions. Just the ability to open doors and go in and out of them freely was a big thing. I remember being able to go into stores and buy things. I remember being shocked by that. Everything was new. Not in the sense of technology and the world having stretched beyond me — but just being out in the free world again was a sea change."

His book has been picked up by people in similar situations. Cullen notes that people still get into the same fixes, in the same way. "One woman was writing me," he says. "She was on trial for having been mailed marijuana."

"There's a lot of myths about what happens in Korean prison, these urban legends about what happens to English teachers that get in trouble with drugs. I've noticed people saying 'hey, there's this guy who wrote this book and that's not how it happens.'"

"Of course, I did become an 'ugly American' through committing the crime," he says when asked whether his book might confirm certain stereotypes of English teachers. "But if they read the story they will get a sense of Korea. I think I told a story of Korea that is pretty unique."

"That's why also it was a great honor for them to publish the book in Korea, and also to receive some positive press," he says. "But the fact that the Koreans saw the positive side of the story, that I still hold a lot of love and respect for Korea and for the Korean culture and the people, the fact that they heard that and accepted that message and published it, was a great honor."

"Brother One Cell" is published by Viking and is available from What The Book? in Itaewon, Seoul and other bookstores. The Korean version "Na-neun Hangukeseo eoreuni doeotda (I came of age in Korea)" is published by Bookscope.

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