**Bridge Behind Bars – Julian Pottage and Nick Smith**

 Books which contain a series of bridge hands – even hands that are played well – can on occasions be a little tedious. To avoid this, there have been many attempts at making the bridge more interesting by having the hands played by characters with whom the reader can sympathise. Classic examples of this include the wonderful *Bridge in the Menagerie* series and the tales of the monks in the books by David Bird. Now we have a book where the heroes (and villains) are prisoners at Great Yarborough Prison.

Our hero, Timothy Newman, manages to endure his time in prison thanks to the very regular games of bridge. An expert player, he finds that his ability at the bridge table earns him some respect with his fellow prisoners. He learns how to avoid trouble when dealing with Bossman, who (until Tim’s arrival) is the undisputed top dog, and also how to get the best out of some of the lesser players such as the elegantly-named Goat and Turnip-Head.

He also encounters some clever bidding methods which will be new to the reader including Bossman’s POOT (Pass Out of Turn) convention, used when your partner deals and you have a very bad hand – described by Bossman as an “opening gambit” which voluntarily gives away some of your bidding rights but gets a whole lot more back in return, We also encounter the familiar Alcatraz Coup and the very inventive Reverse Tempo Doubles and Passes, which follow “Bossman’s Golden Rule”: the more you want partner to pass at his next turn, the longer you should spend over your bid – or indeed your pass. Partner’s reaction to your marginal doubles can now be made with some degree of confidence as the precise length of time that you pause before doubling can give a very accurate definition of the strength of your trump holding.

Tim’s nemesis Bossman is also quite happy to tackle that old question of exactly how long you should hesitate before following suit with a singleton. We also discover how Bossman always seems to make a flying start to any session with a great result on the first board.

Many of the hands are well constructed, although some of the points made are quite difficult and are aimed at the more advanced player. Perhaps the character of some of the other inmates who make up the numbers could have been developed further, as, apart from Goat (who ends up as Tim’s regular partner) we seem to learn relatively little about many of the supporting cast. Alternatively more attention might have been paid to competition between them, as for most of the time the hands are a straight battle between Tim and Bossman. However, I enjoyed this book: the narrative is entertaining, there are some genuinely amusing episodes (you even get to feel sorry for Bossman at one point when he thinks that he has won a fortune on a side-bet only to be disillusioned) and overall this is a welcome addition to the genre of bridge fiction.