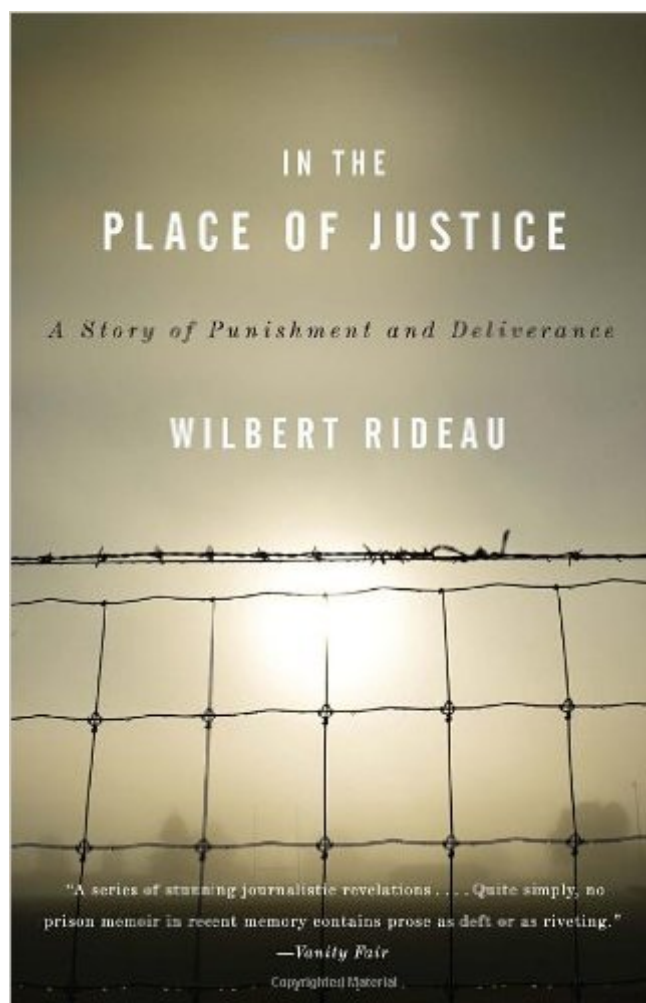


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In The Place Of Justice: A Story Of Punishment And Redemption



Synopsis

Wilbert Rideau, an award-winning journalist who spent forty-four years in prison, delivers a remarkable memoir of crime, punishment, and ultimate triumph. After killing a bank teller in a moment of panic during a botched robbery, Wilbert Rideau was sentenced to death at the age of nineteen. He spent several years on death row at Angola before his sentence was commuted to life, where, as editor of the prison newsmagazine *The Angolite*, he undertook a mission to expose and reform Louisiana's iniquitous justice system from the inside. Vivid, incisive, and compassionate, this is a detailed account of prison life and a man who accepted responsibility for his actions and worked to redeem himself. It is a story about not giving up; finding love in unexpected places; the power of kindness; and the ability to do good, no matter where you are.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have lived in Louisiana since 1980 and have followed Wilbert Rideau's story the entire time. I always believed that he should be eligible for parole at some point when fair-minded people in charge of the system believed it was time. I also saw that fair-minded people were not in charge of the system. He was too famous, too outspoken, and a black murder in a racist state with corrupt whites and blacks in power. I was glad in 2005 when he finally got out. It always seemed to me that he had changed and had proven he had rehabilitated himself with some help from the prison system amid a hellish environment. I don't think prisoners should be in a spa-like setting, but they surely should be in a humane environment and should at least have safe conditions with fair options to be

rehabilitated and then freed to go into society and have a second chance. Otherwise we just reinforce the violence and anti-social actions that led them to crime in the first place. I think we should set an example of how civilized humans act. Otherwise we are no better than the criminals. Thus, it was with great delight that I saw this autobiography was for sale. I went to a book signing and purchased it and had it signed by the author and spoke with him slightly. He seemed a decent, intelligent, quiet-spoken older man. Now to the book itself. It is a page turner. At each sitting to read it, I have read at least 100 pages at a time. He is a very good writer and re-creates the world of the Parish jails and of Angola quite vividly. It is all so awful with immense unfairness and in truth evil that it is hard to believe it is not fiction. But it is true. The parts that describe large and small acts of kindness and fairness from fellow prisoners and prison employees and others are very moving.

This is the author's life story which includes FORTY-FOUR-YEARS incarcerated in Louisiana prisons. The first thing potential readers should be aware of... and don't let the title fool you... is that Wilbert Rideau is guilty of murder. He openly admits it. But there's a difference in being guilty of murder that is judged to be manslaughter as compared to being convicted of premeditated murder. Wilbert was nineteen-years-old in 1961 when he attempted to rob a bank in Louisiana. This was the Louisiana that was still influenced by the Klu Klux Klan and other openly racist behavior. It should be noted that this was not a well thought out... highly intricate bank robbing scheme. It was a spur of the moment... immature... ridiculously... stupid... robbery attempt. Wilbert took three bank employees' hostage and left the scene in a car. He wound up killing one woman, Julia Ferguson. When Rideau was quickly caught his biggest fear was that he would be lynched... burned... and dismembered. When Wilbert went to court all the testimony was falsified which made the charge pre-meditated murder rather than manslaughter. His court appointed lawyers didn't even cross examine. The verdict handed down was the death sentence. The power and breadth of this story is not so much (though not minimizing the importance) the original maneuvers that changed the charges... but what the author lived through and shares from that point on. The next forty-four-years are spent in numerous prisons... with times in solitary confinement that broke records in their longevity... but the core... and very soul... of Wilbert's life and story resides in the "LOUISIANA STATE PENITENTIARY, MORE POPULARLY KNOWN AS *ANGOLA*"... *THROUGHOUT THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY IT WAS KNOWN AS THE MOST INTIMIDATING PRISON IN AMERICA.

I came to this book hesitant, too. Previous reviews are split, but I sense its detractors so far haven't read it. In the start, I thought that Rideau lacked compassion, but he sets up his narrative so you follow his own gradual understanding of the terrible tragedy as he does, bit by bit while in prison. Rideau admits remorse and expresses only that he committed the crime under "panic and impulse" and that legally this qualified him, as his fourth trial's jury agreed, to manslaughter and not murder for no premeditation was meant. This does not ease the loss of Julia Ferguson, but be fair to the book under review, for if you read it all the way through, you get a fuller depiction of the crime, the trials, and the man who took her life. While I would have liked more insight into the prison industry that Angola profits from, and while the minutiae about the trial does weigh the book down for those less versed in legal or police procedure-- it's of course understandable that the author wants to set his story straight against over four decades of vehement opponents to his release-- the book does serve not to entertain but to educate. You will not find wry stories of characters or the typical anecdotes of ingenuity or shock that many prison memoirs tend towards. The tone is sober, the pace steady, and the scope wide. Readers may come away, if they truly study this narrative and not post reviews based on preconceptions, with a better comprehension of how our system's determined on keeping prisoners ignorant, illiterate, and violent. This, to me, is the topic as much as Rideau's own struggle.

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