

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | July 27, 2016

Thomas Bartlett Whitaker is serving time in solitary confinement on Death Row at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas, after being convicted in 2007 of hiring a gunman to kill his family. While in prison, Whitaker, now 36, completed a bachelors degree in English and sociology, graduating summa cum laude, and he is studying toward a masters degree in humanities. A prolific writer, Whitaker is a three-time winner of the PEN Prison Writing Contest, and a contributor to the book [Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement](#). With the help of individuals on the outside, Whitaker also started a website, [Minutes Before Six](#) (referring to the hour at which executions take place in Texas). There, he and other incarcerated writers publish their work. Below is an excerpt from a letter Whitaker wrote to Solitary Watch about his experience with solitary confinement and what Minutes Before Six has done for him. Julia Hettiger

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Writing is just the only tool I have in my toolbox. Its pretty much this or suicide, to be honest with you. Its still very strange to me that some people seem to think I have some facility with the written word, because Ive never really been pleased or even impressed with anything I have pounded out. I keep saying that Im going to keep doing this until someone better comes along and relieves me of the duty. This is the reason that I ultimately opened the site up to writers from other jurisdictions. I always wanted to do this, but I didnt have the support structure to manage it. There is a certain politics to death penalty support. The guys that are claiming innocence get nearly all of the support, as they should. Those of us who admit guilt are pretty much ignored. Ive never had more than a handful of supporters, and I am loathe to ask anyone to spend more than a few minutes on my nonsense each week. Somehow, amazingly, a few people over the years have found mb6 and realized what I was trying to do with it.

I built a platform, but Im glad that others are really carrying it now. They are the future of the site, especially since it is very likely that I will be executed in 2017. I just led my NOA in the 5th Circuit, which is about the worst court in the western world to pursue relief if you are a capital defendant. Its hard to say exactly how things will go, but if I am not denied and on my way into the SCOTUS by spring I will be rather amazed. I hope mb6 survives for a while. If it doesnt, well, I think we tried to do a good thing. I think there is some good information on there, and I know that our writers got a feeling of purpose due to their participation. It gave them something positive to focus on, not to mention I think the craft of writing to be fundamentally rehabilitative.

In regards to solitary confinement, you asked how I got through it. Im not sure I have, not really. It changes you, even those of us who were introverts long before coming to this place. Its not always easy to see how this place creeps up on you. Sometimes you dont realize it until you vocalize an opinion that doesnt sync up with anything youve ever said before, and you are left stunned, looking at yourself in the mirror, going: where the fuck did that come from? Despite being an introvert, I always liked the city. If I wanted Vietnamese food at 3 am, well, I liked to have options. Some aspects of cities still interest me, but I know without a doubt that if I were to be released tomorrow, I couldnt live around people. Ive been forced to exist compressed into this tiny little space with a bunch of degenerates for far too many years. I need space and quiet. Silence, real silence. I exist within this strange tension of believing in people and progress in abstract terms, but really, viscerally disliking many people when it comes to specifics. Every time one of my neighbors disrespects a female officer, I quietly burn inside. Every time one of them gets into a shouting match with someone, same thing. And yet I would get gassed and beaten for any of them if the greater good required it. Its weird, I know. I like them as an idea, as a people repressed and defeated, but please dont make me actually listen to one of their complaints.

Does this make sense? Probably not. But I know youd understand it if you lived here. Thats the best way I can describe this place to you: it twists you up in contradictions. I have to stalk myself almost constantly, to make sure that I dont say or do anything dishonorable. I was messed up when I came here, and in many ways I have far more self-control. But at the same time, I feel frayed, like Ive been living in the face of this sandstorm for 11 years, and its worn my soul down to a pathetic little nub. They dont really kill you when they give you a date. You are pretty much already dead by that point. The only ones that really bemoan their fates are the ones that were too dense to learn a lesson from this place. Thats sort of the sad part. This place ruins people. Some it makes insane. Some, like me it forces to go so deep that they arent ever able to crawl back out again. Some people get so hard that discipline simply cant ever imprint on them again.

You ever read Foucault? He got it totally wrong when it comes to the way discipline inscribes itself on the discursive space of the body. The Panopticon? Some people here would laugh at that sort of technology. I do things right in front of the guards, and dare them to stop

me. Why? Too many antibodies built up to the idea of fear or power. They cant inspire fear in me. I act ethically because I choose to, not because they have gas or batons or extraction teams. Weve gone beyond their ability to hurt us, in many cases. The irony is that they built these places to house a theoretical super-predator that didnt really exist at the time, and ended up .actually building that very individual. Some people that spend a decade or two back here cant really be released, ever. They are going to recidivate, because they dont believe in the idea of law any more. Theyve seen through that to the truth, that its just one group applying power over another, and this just makes them laugh. Once you truly see the world as *bellum omnium contra omnes*,* you dont ever really come back from that. The only way Ive been able to avoid this sort of conclusion is that I always sort of saw the world as absurd to begin with. Too much Camus and Sartre in my youth. None of this really seems serious enough to get upset about.

Ha, I just reread what I wrote, and I hope you arent prone to depression. Not sure how I ended up this way. I used to be funny. Seg turns you into a buzzkill, apparently.

*The war of all against all, which is the description that English philosopher Thomas Hobbes gives to human existence in a state of nature.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

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September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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Does anyone know where Thomas is located and whether he continues to write? Did he complete his Masters degree in Humanities?

Bell Omnium Contra Omnes interesting and very true.

I do not see the fascination with his writings. I hear a sociopath in his writing. He, a man who murdered his mother, is calling the people he is locked up with, degenerates. Humerus. I do commend his father. Part of the fathers zeal to save his son, I believe, is to not own the fact that you produced a monster.

He killed his family, and he deserves to die for it. You dont like it on death row? Dont commit murder, and you wont end up there. I have zero sympathy. His situation is of his own making.

Good to see Thomas has had the pleasure of finding his voice after silencing his families.

The next time I hear how death is too quick a punishment compared to rotting in a prison I will think of Thomas writing his blog and reading the same books that I find beauty in.

Whitakers 5th Circuit appeal was rejected in April, so if history is any guide, he will probably get an execution date some time around February of 2018 and be executed some time around May of 2018.

Its a very tragic situation. Certainly his crime was heinous. The fact that hes a great writer and thinker doesnt mitigate his guilt of course.

He really is an extraordinary intellect. There is no shortage of prison writers of course; the phenomenon is practically a cliché. But Thomas is unique in that his writing isnt compelling simply because of the fact its written from death row. This guy is a legitimate world class intellect.

With most prison writers even the best of them at the end of the day its not their writing or ideas that are so compelling so much as is their situation. If they werent in the situation they are in I doubt Id find anything they have to say particularly interesting.

With Thomas its very different. His writing is compelling because it is genuinely profound; not because of where he is but because of what he says. He doesnt only write about prison and the death row experience; he has many profound insights about the human condition and the nature of existence which are more like something you would expect to see in some tome written by a world renowned philosopher than a death row inmate.

So hes not interesting simply because hes in death row; quite the contrary, its hard to wrap my head around the fact that someone has

interesting as Thomas is on death row. That makes him unique in the realm of prison literature.

What a tragic waste of potential.

He may be a latter day Mark Twain, but he murdered his own family and he deserves to die for it.

Your response suggests that you presume I think the fact that his blog offers a fascinating read in some way mitigates his guilt; I do not.

If any crimes warrant the death penalty, his would certainly count among them.

I personally don't support the death penalty of course.

I first came across Whitaker's blog after seeing a cable TV documentary about his case and googling his name.

The phenomenon of prison writers isn't new of course, and I've read the writings of other prisoners and in particular death row inmates before. In most cases their writing is fascinating primarily due to the fact that the writer is on death row. To the extent they write about that experience it's a spellbinding read.

But Whitaker is different. Not just because he doesn't only write about prison and death row, but because some of his most compelling writing is about topics having nothing to do with either.

I would find those writings compelling even if I had no idea it was written by a prisoner, let alone a death row inmate.

The guy is undeniably brilliant.

This doesn't mitigate his guilt one iota but it does make him an intriguing individual.

It's difficult to imagine anything that could render a situation such as the Whitaker murders more tragic than it already was, but the fact that the heinous killer at the center of it all is ostensibly a world class intellect makes it all the more tragic and surreal.

I think it's rather obscene that he's out whinging about the conditions he's in due to his own actions. He killed his family, he's going to get what he deserves (the death penalty is absolutely necessary for a sane and just justice system), and what he has to say is irrelevant. He's a dead man whining. In an ideal world, he wouldn't be allowed to publish his nonsense on the internet for people to read and develop sympathy for him.

As I've already pointed out, much of his most compelling writing has nothing to do with himself or his punishment.

That's not important. It's the fact that we're reading his writing at all that is obscene. We know what he did, we know where he is and why he's there. All I ever want to hear from him is the last words posted on the TDCJ website under executed offenders. I don't care what else he has to say. The man is a monster.

It's real simple. If you think it's obscene to read his writing, don't read his writing.

Perhaps we all need to examine our own humanity, for example what is ethically and morally OK and not OK to do to others. When a man dies evidently begging for medical help for a long-standing condition after 7 yrs in solitary, is that OK? + when you hear he ended a life, does that make it OK, or does he have to end a number of lives for that to sit comfortably with your own sense of humanity? When men and women are systematically bombed and tortured I cannot relax while humanity is failing. THANKYOU for your comment sir/madam.

Thomas is an amazing writer, even though he will never believe it. We've been corresponding for almost three years, and I continue to be amazed that he remains productive and creative in spite of the pressures of Polunsky's solitary regime.

He is indeed a good writer. He's also a sociopathic murderer.

You act like somebody forgot about that. Nobody did, but we still treat humans as human. Go get a hobby, or crawl back into your box of justice. The world and humanity should fit right down there with you and your narrow views.

You're contributing to the same problem you think you're fighting. You just assumed he thought everyone forgot about that. But he's right. It's an important note to keep in mind. Whether or not you forgot. And who are you to determine whether or not Catana DID forget? Maybe you should crawl back into YOUR box of justice. It's certainly not the kind of justice I want to take part in.

I was not replying to Catana, I was replying to you.

I think you misunderstood two things here. 1. I'm not the original guy you replied to. 2. We know you weren't replying to Catana. You were replying to Disqus_qsavOWssMI.

I was the only misunderstanding. I don't think you understand 2 at all.

And who are you to determine whether or not Catana DID forget otherwise this statement makes no sense.

It does make sense. You assumed Disqus was in the wrong for allegedly assuming Catana forgot. Get it now? Or do I need to explain this like you're five? I can do either.

You need to stop reading like you're five. My reply had nothing to do with Catana. Nothing, not about him forgetting, not about his comment at all.

Okay, its obvious your comprehension here is severely lacking. Okay, so you know your first reply to Disqus? That was you defending Catana, assuming he/she didnt forget that this guy is a killer. Correct? That was your point in typing the first message you replied with. So that would mean you took it upon yourself to assume Catana didnt forget, then went out of your way to insult Disqus. Understand now?

And by the way, I never said your reply had to do with Catana. Learn to read, thanks.

Let me stop you right there, I see where you arent getting it. My first comment was a reply to the person under Catana saying they assumed people forgot OP was a murderer. No more replies from me because youre not getting this.

Lol. Okay. Its obvious you wont get this anytime soon anyway. Ill give in and leave this conversation. You might wanna take some reading comprehension classes while youre away, yeah?

Your element is Reddit, seriously, go back there and stay. On this site the person I replied to is everywhere taking about how OP killed his entire family. They are wrong there, but thats another issue. It had nothing to do with what the original commenter believes. Seriously, stay on Reddit or consider staying offline. Youre not as brilliant as that site has lead you to believe.

See, now youre assuming Im from Reddit. Am I not capable of finding this site on my own? Fuck off with your bullshit. You didnt understand my first rebuttal to you, and you still have yet to understand. Clearly your credibility is close to 0 when it comes to sending someone on their way. Oh, and what happened to no more replies from me? Did I upset you too bad? Are you not mature enough to hold your tongue? Ill continue replying because I know you misunderstood me, so Ill stick here. But you, your first choice to leave was in the right. The only sensible decision youve made in this thread. Either abandon the thread, admit defeat, or continue digging yourself in this hole. It will only be more entertaining for me if you stay. So please, keep fighting.

Oh, youre from Reddit. I know it and you know it.

Lol k. Continue telling yourself that. Youre only using that assumption to escape the conversation in which you were obviously wrong. Say, I wonder how many times I can make you reply out of anger?

Dont flatter yourself, youre not pushing any of my buttons. See you on Reddit.

Ta.

Oh, another one. Nice. Ill add that to the tallies. Keep it going. Maybe we can hit a record!

Just because Im nice: Ill tell you ahead of time, if you reply, it obviously shows Im pushing your buttons. And Im pushing them pretty hard right now. So if you wanna save face, leave the conversation. I dont normally tell people I oppose this, but Im feeling nice today. So Just something to consider. ;)

Horrible language lets us down my friends

Both yourself and the person/people you are corresponding might benefit from a pause, a deep breath and some self-awareness, as you are pushing real issues to one side, no offence meant. With love.

Crawl tf back over to your hiding hole on Reddit and leave the grown ups to converse.

Salty, are we? Set aside your closed-minded pos mentality and read my reply to you before you jump to the conclusion that youre understanding. I had to spell it out to you like youre five. Deal with the fact that youre in the wrong and stfu.

Were all people, sociopaths or not. Id advise you to not take your friendship for granted. Im grieving for mine, his out-of-blue + suspicious passing hit me like thisPow! Its time now to find someone else who is reaching out for a hand in friendship. If you both enjoy your correspondence, get going+keep going with the pen/paper .with love

Much applause for Thomas, getting stuck into education..my friend used to say I wont lie, I only read fantasy novels cause it takes me out of this place sci fi and stuff I like too. Both are attempts at coping with the loneliness+devastation, controlled oppressive environment. Letters of support or a card can do that too.much love.

to remind you he murdered his whole family. Theyre dead and never coming back.

Hi thanks for your comment. Anything that engages the brains of people, even those opposed to one another, makes for debate. I have replied to you but I did it on the page instead of pressing reply-my mistake.

When politically sensitive issues are debated it can lead to an argument that slides away from the original issue. It can become a personal argument which some see as boring, some as childish, some as just unworthy of attention, or all of these. All of us should be mindful of this. With love.

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