

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/05/06/voices-from-solitary-new-memoir-by-wilbert-rideau/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | May 6, 2010



Many readers of Solitary Watch will already know something about the remarkable life of Wilbert Rideau: In 1961, at the age of 19, he was convicted of murder by an all-white, all-male jury, after killing a bank teller in the aftermath of a botched robbery. Ten years later, his death sentence was commuted to life in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Rideau became editor of the *Angolite*, and was instrumental in transforming it into the best prison publication in the country, publishing exposes on prison violence, segregation, and sexual slavery. (For an example of his work, read [Why Prisons Dont Work](#), published by *Time* in 1994.) He won journalism awards, published a book called *Life Sentences*, and collaborated on a film about Angola, *The Farm*. He was finally retried, convicted of manslaughter, and released on time served in 2005, after 44 years in prison.

Rideau's story is receiving renewed attention because of his new memoir, *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance*. (Rideau talks about the book in a [recent interview](#) with *Mother Jones*, and another on public radio's [Fresh Air](#).) The excerpt that's been made public by the publisher is a powerful chapter called Solitary. Rideau spent more than three years in solitary confinement, as well as eight more in a one-man cell on death row. What follows is a small sample, but you can read the full chapter [here](#) (and buy the book [here](#)).

This is my reality. Solitude. Four walls, graygreen, drab, and foreboding. Three of steel and one of bars, held together by 358 rivets. Seven feet wide, nine feet long. About the size of an average bathroom or and my mind leaps at this the size of four tombs, only taller. I, the living dead, have need of a few essentials that the physically dead no longer require: commode, shower, face bowl, bunk. A sleazy old mattress, worn to thinness. On the floor in a corner, a cardboard box that contains all my worldly possessions: a writing tablet, a pen, and two changes of underwear. The mattress, the box, and I are the only things not bolted down, except the cockroaches that come and go from the drain in the floor and scurry around in the shower. This is my life, every minute of the year. I'm buried alive. But I'm the only person for whom that fact has meaning, who feels it, so it's immaterial.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . turn. One . . . two . . . three . . . Its not right to make a man live like this, alone. But I can take it. I can whip this motherfucker. I am stronger than anything they can do to me. The more they do, the stronger they make me. I actually smile. Haven't I endured and risen above an experience that would crush most men?

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . turn. Yeah, I've seen men broken, destroyed by solitary. Some have come to fear every shadow. Others have committed suicide. Some men would do anything to escape this cell. Some feigned insanity so they could go to a mental institution. Even more cut themselves, over and over, until the Man, fearing a suicide on his watch, moved them out of solitary. Others stayed doped up, whenever they could get the dope. Engaging in such tricks, though, is beneath my dignity; it's unmanly. I am stronger than the punishment. The only way to beat it, to rise above it, is to regard the punishment as a challenge and see my ability to endure it while others cannot as a victory. Whenever another man falls under the pressure, it's a triumph for me. Callous, some would call me. A man falls, broken, insane, or dead, and I feel nothing except triumph. But this is no place for pity not for the next man, nor for myself. It would break me. The hard truth about solitary is that each man must struggle and suffer alone.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

Thought this article should be here too.

http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/07/by_wilbert_rideau_people_come.html

Do journalists reviewing books have a responsibility to (1) read the books they review, (2) and, if so, report significant factual errors in the books, and (3) to truly analyze what the book author says in relation to fact and experience?

Wilbert Rideau, the famed prison journalist, recently published his memoir, In The Place of Justice (Random House 2010). The memoir is littered with serious factual errors and factual contradictions.

The memoir has been reviewed by The New York Times, Associated Press, and Rideau has been featured on CBS Sunday Morning, NPRs Fresh Air, and the Tom Joyner Morning Show to promote the memoir.

Not one journalist has either recognized the factual errors/contradictions or elected to report about them if they did.

I have recorded these factual errors and factual contradictions at <http://www.wilbertrideau-realstory.com> they are reported here, and here, and here, and here, and here.

The Rideau memoir raises serious ethical concerns for the nations media. The New York Times and other national media outlets devoted a great of coverage to transform Rideau from a convicted murderer into a celebrated convict editor during his incarceration in the Louisiana prison system. The famed prison journalist is now a free journalist who has published his prison memoir with a \$75,000 grant from The Open Society Institute of the George Soros Foundation as a visionary in criminal justice. Ted Koppel endorsed In The Place of Justice as an extraordinary book. But in the face of so many blatant errors and misrepresentations, is the memoir truly extraordinary? And Is Wilbert Rideau really the visionary in criminal justice The Open Society Institute said he is?

Media publications like should, I believe, be aware of these questions about Rideaus memoir. Having read and dissected the memoir in ways that free world journalist cannot, I have raised ethical issues about the memoir that should be in the public forum and subject to free debate. The issue is whether the national media are giving In The Place of Justice a free pass because they are the ones who created the famed prison journalist. In any event, the public should at least be aware of the ethical issues surrounding Wilbert Rideaus memoir.

I couldnt help but notice the authors healthy awareness of his blackness, the significance of the symbolism outside the Baton Rouge court house, his dislike of Old Asshole and the color of this tormentors eyes. All of this helps explain to the public what drives the inter-racial violence within prison.

I know first hand of what he writes. I was in the segregated Baton Rouge parish jail in 1969-70. Although I am white I was not a southerner and thus was astonished by what I witnessed while living even for a short time in Baton Rouge. Like most inmates I encountered a guard just like Old Asshole from his memoir at the Baton Rouge Parrish Jail.

I particularly liked this paragraph after reading the many comments of the public on Tommy Silversteins site after the CNN article.

Its strange, even to me, that men who wouldnt hesitate to rape or kill each other band together to help me, just because Ive been locked down in solitary for so long. Most of them dont even know me. But my tormentors have made me a living legend in this jail: the one they cant break. The irony is not lost on me that its the professed Christians who are so cruel and unmerciful, while its the criminal misfits and social dregs who try to help me, usually without my even asking.

I believe most inmates would agree with him especially his peer Tommy Silverstein.

Good work Mr. Rideau, you vividly took me back to this distant memory. I enjoyed the chapter very much and I recall the pacing back and forth just like it was yesterday.

his state of mind was like mine that yes it takes something from you but to make it out sane still is a win to see it as a war and the only way to win is making it out sane he is right on this i know first hand what he means glad to see him still standing with the few proud solitary survivors

Only 3-1/2 years in a solitary 7 x 9 cell? Gee, thats a walk in the park!

Mr. Rideaus story is quite amazing, an experience which crushes the average man and he not only survives it, but rises up to actually make a difference through his literary achievements.

I am Wilberts wife, and he would like to point out that he spent only 3-1/2 years in actual Solitary Confinement, during which time Chapter 3 (the excerpt you quote) was written. The remaining 8 years were spent in single man cells on Death Row or in the East Baton Rouge Parish jail, as the book makes clear.

By the way, he very much admires your work, Mr. Ridgeway. He reads it all, especially that on Woodfox and Wallace. Keep up the good work.

Thank you for the correction, which is now reflected in our introduction. Im a longtime admirer of Mr. Rideaus work, as well, and appreciate the compliment from a colleague whos seen far more than I ever will. Jim

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News