'In the Place of Justice' is ex-prisoner's view of America's penal system

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On Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2005, Wilbert Rideau was released from prison, after 44 years behind bars in Louisiana. The "most rehabilitated prisoner in America," Rideau had, against overwhelming odds, found meaning and purpose in his life as editor of the prison newsmagazine (The Angolite), NPR correspondent and producer of documentary films.

"In the Place of Justice" tells his story. Searing, suspenseful, stomach-churning and soul-stirring, the memoir is a sobering indictment of the criminal justice and penal systems in Louisiana over the past half century — and testimony to the triumph of the human spirit.

Rideau begins with his crime, a botched bank robbery that ended with the death of teller Julia Ferguson. He maintains, straining credulity, that his purchase of a gun and a knife that very day is not evidence of premeditation. But in all other respects Rideau takes responsibility for his actions. Equally important, he demonstrates, was that he did not receive a fair trial in Calcasieu Parish.

Prospective jurors who admitted to membership in the White Citizens Council, the "genteel" counterpart of the Ku Klux Klan, were not disqualified. Among those seated was a cousin of the victim. And the judge decreed that the state was not required to provide a verbatim transcript of the proceeding (which was essential for an appeal) unless the defendant paid for it.

Convicted, Rideau entered "the chamber of horrors," spending years on death row and in solitary confinement, visited only by his mother. He learned how to make his way in the Angola prison, which housed men who wouldn't hesitate to rape or kill each other. In a "world defined by deprivation," he tells us, a Snickers and a Butter-Nut, "contraband as hell," were treasures "worth their weight in blood."

In a world defined by boredom, where inmates built their day-to-day existence in a vacuum, reading "obscured a dismal future." Burying himself in books Rideau emerged from his "cocoon of self-centeredness to appreciate the humanness of others" and "the enormity" of what he had done.

Rideau doesn't really explain how he obtained and kept the trust of bureaucrats and hardened criminals. And escaped the wrath of the cynical, the corrupt and the pathological. But it's clear that he did.

"You don't belong here," a warden told Rideau in the 1970s. Thirty years later, a jury agreed, reducing his sentence to manslaughter — and time already served.

Rideau left a world "almost totally devoid of love or beauty," where the "impulse to trust makes treachery nearly inevitable." He entered one far less racist than the one he left behind, in which he could "watch the sun rise on the face of a woman" he's loved for 20 years.

He hasn't forgotten, however, that our jails continue to brutalize and we continue to spend as much as 10 times more money to incarcerate a kid who stole a TV set as we do to educate him. And neither should we.

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Associate Images:
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