

## Verdict: The death penalty can never be just

by Katherine R. Notley

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### **Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars**

by Wilbert Rideau and Ron Wikberg  
Random House, New York, 1992  
342 pages, paperbound, \$15

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### **Crossed Over: A Murder/A Memoir**

by Beverly Lowry  
Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1992  
245 pages, hardbound, \$22

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In spite of the sensationalist subtitle, *Life Sentences* is anything but sensationalist. A collection of articles from 1978 to 1991 that originally appeared in *The Angolite: The Prison Newsmagazine* of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, La., the authors and editors do an impressive job at accomplishing what their book's dedication intends: "fostering a public understanding of criminal justice." Both editors have murder convictions: Rideau was convicted of murder in 1961, and spent 11 years on death row. Although he left school at eighth grade, he taught himself to write in prison, and has been editor-in-chief of the *Angolite* since 1975; Wikberg, who was convicted in 1969, began writing for the *Angolite* in 1971, and joined the staff in 1987. He was paroled in 1992. Many of the articles, including those appearing in the book, have received awards—deservedly so.

The book deals mainly with three interconnected areas: how to improve the prison system, especially through expanded and proper use of probation and parole; profiles of men serving life sentences, who lacked the resources to effectively seek parole status, and hence have remained in prison for 20, 30, 40 years or more; and the death penalty.

Interestingly, the first two areas—that is, the lack of justice in both our justice system and penal system—make up a ringing indictment of imposing death as a sentence. The authors' fact-based approach to the death penalty renders an inescapable verdict: This vengeance must stop.

### **Convicts reform the penal system**

In discussing the needed reforms of the penal system—as in every subject they raise—the authors use reportorial understatement to great effect. Easily the most potentially heated subject comes under the chapter "The Sexual Jungle." With matter-of-fact persistence, Editor Rideau describes the phenomenon of prison rape (i.e., new prisoners were raped to "claim" them as slaves to dominant inmates, and used both for personal sexual gratification and as prostitutes by the more "enterprising"); the fact that prison authorities allowed it to go on because it kept the more aggressive prisoners from becoming unmanageably violent; and, ironically, the fact that *bona fide* homosexuals (as opposed to the rapists, who would not otherwise seek homosexual relationships) were segregated from the general inmate population. While he does not shy away from brutal descriptions, neither does he allow them ever to descend to the voyeuristic.

Clearly, the purpose of incarcerating criminals is not, and never has been, to subject them to this horror. Yet the

same vindictive turn of mind that sentences a man or woman to death, turns a deaf ear to these sorts of abuses.

The book does not credit only prison inmates with the efforts to reform the prison system in which many of them live out their adult lives. In addition to the many prison and government officials who encouraged projects such as the establishment of the *Angolite* or the "Lost Man Committee," the authors credit just plain citizens.

One such family, the Farrars, were the sole voice against taking the life of the man who murdered their brother and son. Wrote the victim's father, Edgar Farrar, Sr. in November 1912: "This man [the murderer] is in no condition of mind to be sent into the next world. We hope and pray that time and reflection will bring repentance and that his soul may be received." Ten years later, the victim's sister, arguing for his release, wrote: "Canton has been imprisoned for more than 10 years and I believe he has had a stiff punishment. Perhaps he will lead a better life from now on." Canton was released, and died of tuberculosis within a year and a half.

Among the most heartbreaking descriptions (and one to think about very hard the next time you hear the phrase "lock 'em up and throw away the key") is that of the "lost men." The typical "lost man" was an inmate with a life sentence—some having pleaded guilty to avoid a death sentence. In 1926, Louisiana began to automatically review life sentences after ten years and six months had been served, allowing an inmate to apply for a reduction in sentence, which would make him eligible for parole. In the intervening 10 years, however, he might have racked up more prison time for getting into fights—as often as not fending off would-be rapists in the early years of his term—or the law changed, abolishing the "ten-six" rule, in favor of standardized guidelines of which the inmate was never apprised. He had little schooling, no attorney, no knowledge of the law, and neither the inmate nor his family would have money to hire an attorney. His family would be too poor and/or too distant to visit; they might have as little schooling or less than the inmate, and letters would be infrequent, at best.

After the editors of the *Angolite* investigated some of these inmates who had served up to four decades, the state corrections authorities and government established a "Lost Man Committee" to ferret out these men and, if possible, obtain their release.

### The death house

The last four chapters, all on the death penalty, gathered together as Book Three, are relentless: Small facts characterize the brutality of state-imposed hopelessness that strips a man or woman of all humanity long before he or she is formally executed. In "House of the Damned," author Tommy Mason describes men on death row who refused to leave after the 1972 Supreme Court decision overturning the death penalty had commuted their sentences. Their families had died or abandoned them, or could not travel the distance, and

many had received no visits in years, and only scant few letters. Segregated in maximum security for so long, they had lost even the ability to interact with other inmates.

Another chapter "The Horror Show," describes the history of the electric chair—a strange and uniquely American institution. Long believed to be a "humane" form of execution, post mortems and autopsies show that, even under the best circumstances, electrocution inflicts extreme pain on its victims. Until recently, many states had executions carried out in the county where the case was tried, meaning the state's electric chair was carted to each county jail. The care with which its operation was checked before each use thus varied considerably, leaving a great deal of room for botched executions.

The last chapter, "The Death Men (Continued)," written by both editors Wikberg and Rideau, gives a fascinating history of capital punishment, up to one of England's last hereditary executioners, Albert Pierrepoint. The editors quote the following from his autobiography, *Executioner Pierrepoint*:

"It is a fact which is no source of pride to me at all—it is simple history—that I have carried out the execution of more judicial sentences of death (outside the field of politics) than any executioner in any British record or archive. That fact is the measure of my experience. The fruit of my experience has this bitter aftertaste: that I do not now believe that any one of the hundreds of executions I carried out has in any way acted as a deterrent against future murder. Capital Punishment, in my view, achieved nothing except revenge. . . ."

Or: "As the executioner, it has fallen to me to make the last confrontation with all the condemned. It is I who had looked them in the eyes. . . . And it is at that moment, with their eyes on mine, and all the official witnesses huddled in a corner behind them, that I have known that any previous emotional involvement I may have had is to be regretted. There is only a final relationship which matters: in Christianity this is my brother or sister to whom something dreadful must be done, and I have tried always to be gentle with them, and to give them what dignity I could in their death."

Even England, whose social history is nothing to boast of, abolished the death penalty in 1964. The United States, where many of the gains of the civil rights movement were rolled back in a tidal wave of illegal drugs, is still debating the most "humane" way to carry it out.

### The drug issue

The authors of *Life Sentences* do not directly address the social inequities that landed many of Angola's inmates where they are, and have been—in the earlier years typified by Jim Crow racial policies, and, increasingly since the 1970s, the drug plague. As *EIR*'s book *Dope, Inc.* has proven, the illegal drug trade is not a "social" phenomenon, but a supranational policy by some of the highest level "citizens above suspicion." While particular reforms to upgrade prison exist-

tence—especially in the area of education—are urgently needed, unless we attack and root out the Dope, Inc. conglomerate itself, we are left with “troubleshooting” the effects of the drug trade, from the criminal substratum in America’s inner cities to poppy-growing peasants in Burma and Colombia.

In terms of law enforcement and penology, this means churning out increasingly ineffective laws and building prison upon prison—as the pro-drug-legalization apologists for Dope, Inc. rightly point out. Under such circumstances, we are left with the alternative taken by Colombia’s President César Gaviria, to negotiate with the narco-terrorists, and turn our government over to them, which is ultimately what the likes of the Drug Policy Foundation hope for, even more than for the legalization of mind-altering substances itself.

This does not mean that a person who commits a crime should not be punished or incarcerated. It does mean that the law’s ability to act as a deterrent to crime is limited. In the case of the war on drugs, which this country has not only not addressed, but actively obstructed in cases such as Peru, it means that the deterrent to crime is to take down the criminal superstructure itself, as Lyndon LaRouche proposed in *Dope, Inc.*’s appendix.

Insofar as an individual commission of a criminal act is concerned, the purpose of incarceration must be restricted to punishment (not revenge) and rehabilitation. That objective cannot be obtained so long as we have a death penalty.

## The case of Karla Faye Tucker

Karla Faye Tucker, the subject of *Crossed Over*, is almost the very personification of the effects of the war Dope, Inc. has waged on the United States. She sits on death row in Texas for her role in the 1983 murder of two people with a pickaxe. Tucker not only does not deny that she committed the murder for which she was convicted, but until this book—and since—she has refused to give interviews which might aid her fight for life, because the publicity would cause further anguish to the young son of one of her victims.

Her case is not unlike that of Joe Giarratano (see *EIR*, Feb. 8, 1991, page 64 and March 1, 1991, page 62), although there is evidence that he is innocent of the murder for which he was sentenced to die in Virginia. She was born in 1959, and, by the age of 10, was addicted to drugs. At 10, she began shooting up heroin and amphetamines. From that moment until her arrest in 1983, she was never not drugged. By her early teens, she was a prostitute. At 24, in the middle of a several-day drug and alcohol binge, she and her boyfriend killed two others to settle a petty grudge. Except that she is white and female, the wreck of her life sounds very much like the life American society has consigned most black, urban males between the ages of 16 and 25.

Tucker, like former death row inmates Wilbert Rideau (Louisiana) and Joe Giarratano (Virginia), has reformed. Much of her reform took place simply because she was away from drugs for so long, she was able to act normal. She

## Retarded Alabama man slated for execution

Cornelius Singleton, a severely retarded 36-year-old black man, was scheduled to be executed at 12:01 a.m. on Nov. 20 in Alabama. Singleton, whose IQ is between 57-63, signed a confession, with an “X,” that he murdered Sister Ann Hogan. Singleton, who could not read, said that he believed he was signing a confession for stealing sheets. Prosecutor Charles Graddick claimed that Singleton “read the confession and understood his rights,” despite the fact he signed it with an “X.” Several witnesses told police that they overheard two people discussing the murder of Sister Hogan five hours prior to the discovery of her body, but the police turned them away, stating they already had their man. Still other witnesses later claimed that Sister Hogan was murdered professionally, because she stumbled onto a drug ring.

Singleton’s first conviction was thrown out and he was given a new trial. In his second trial, Singleton’s mental retardation and illiteracy were never brought, and after

the trial, his attorney was suspended from the law practice for his incompetence.

On Nov. 18, Gov. Hunt, who has never granted clemency, was to hold a clemency hearing. The Catholic Diocese of Mobile, as well as the Sisters of Charity, the religious order of Sister Ann Hogan, are urging clemency. Others, such as the Alabama Investigators Association and the Alabama Prison Project, are demanding a full investigation of the entire case, and warned that the results will be explosive if Singleton is executed and later proven innocent.

From his prison cell in Rochester, Minnesota, former presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche issued the following statement on Nov. 17: “This rush to execution in the case of Cornelius Singleton is an abomination. The overhanging questions of innocence in this case scream for thorough investigation. I lend my support, for what it can accomplish, to every possible effort to delay this execution and get to the bottom of this scandalous matter, of what looks very much like a railroad of a highly vulnerable and probably innocent individual, as a ritual act of human sacrifice, something worthy of an Aztec priest.”

—Katherine R. Notley

has applied herself educationally, and has sought and found solace in religion.

What particularly impresses this author, however, is that she is both repentant for her crime and seeks forgiveness. She does not flinch from what she did, and freely refers to those she killed as “my victims.” All the more reason why she cannot be killed unless the state abrogates justice in order to arrogate to itself revenge.

### Post script

Although Karla Faye Tucker’s case is a highly compelling argument for abolishing the death penalty, I cannot recommend reading *Crossed Over*. The author, Beverly Lowry, is a novelist, a middle-class Texan, whose son became embroiled in drugs and died in a hit-and-run accident. In her grief, she somehow found Tucker, befriended her, and decided to tell both Tucker’s story and her own. Unfortunately, her book is poorly written, sensationalist to the point of being silly. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that she has brought Tucker’s story to the fore.

I hope she has helped save Tucker’s life.

## A pioneer in poetry for the very young

by Richard and Susan Welsh

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### **Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon**

by Leonard S. Marcus  
Beacon Press, Boston, 1992  
337 pages, hardbound, \$25

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### **The Fish with the Deep Sea Smile: Stories and Poems for Reading to Young Children**

by Margaret Wise Brown  
Linnet Books, The Shoe String Press, Inc.,  
Hamden, Conn., 1988 (reprint of 1938 ed.)  
128 pages, hardbound, \$18

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### **The Log of Christopher Columbus’ First Voyage to America in the Year 1492, as copied out in brief by Bartholomew Las Casas**

edited by Margaret Wise Brown  
Linnet Books, The Shoe String Press, Inc.,  
Hamden, Conn., 1989 (reprint of 1938 ed.)  
Ages 8-12, 84 pages, hardbound, \$17

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### **Homes in the Wilderness: A Pilgrim’s Journal of Plymouth Plantation in 1629**

by William Bradford et al.  
edited by Margaret Wise Brown  
Linnet Books, The Shoe String Press, Inc.,  
Hamden, Conn., 1988 (reprint of 1939 ed.)  
Ages 12 and up, 76 pages, hardbound, \$16;  
paperbound \$8.95

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Literature for children, as for adults, is created by small groups of opinion-shapers. These operate through publishing houses, and mass-media and mass-advertising dicta of what to read and what to ignore. Children’s literature today is as much a reflection of 20th-century cultural decay as its adult counterpart, and for the same reasons. Yet there is something even more disturbing about bad books for children. While no person should be subjected to cultural degradation, when that person is a child, it is a mind and morality not yet formed that is being perverted; it is mankind’s future.

Leonard Marcus’s biography of Margaret Wise Brown, one of the 20th century’s most creative and prolific writers for young children, provides a fascinating and informative look at some of these influences as they operated in the crucial period of the 1920s through the immediate postwar years. The irony, which Marcus identifies (though not sharing the reviewers’ evaluation of its historic and moral significance), is that this century’s cultural warfare agency *par excellence*—the “Progressive movement” of John Dewey, et al.—managed to launch in Miss Brown one of the most subtly effective saboteurs of its cultural gameplan. It is probably for this reason that most readers will not even recognize her name, or at least not consider her of the same historical significance to small children’s literature as her contemporaries Theodore Geisel (“Dr. Seuss”), H.A. Rey (*Curious George*), Ludwig Bemelmans (*Madeline*), or Jean de Brunhoff (*Babar*).

Margaret Wise Brown died in 1952, at the age of 42. Including some 20-odd titles published posthumously, she authored over 100 books for small children, about 40 of which are still or again in print. As editor for the new “pro-