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In the Place of Justice Reading Guide

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In the Place of Justice Reading Guide

Introduction

What happens to a man when he is stripped of his freedom? What happens to a person when they are told they aren't deserving of a fair chance? These are questions that, thankfully, very few people ever have to answer. Most are lucky to be born into a world where they are treated equally by those around them. Wilbert Rideau was not so lucky; he was born into a world that said he didn't matter. Trapped inside Jim Crow society with very few opportunities, Rideau would eventually make the choice to commit a terrible crime. In the aftermath of his actions, he would go on to spend forty-four years in one of the most violent prisons in America. During those years he would face and overcome challenges that no person should ever be faced with. During his time in prison, Rideau experienced pain, despair, rejuvenation, and redemption amongst other hardships within the American Justice System. He also grew into an eloquent advocate for prisoners, prison reform and prisoners' civil rights as well as into a thoughtful journalist and memoirist.

In The Place of Justice, Rideau's account of the years he spent in Angola Prison, gives readers some insight into the racial tensions in America and the corruption of the American justice system in Louisiana during his incarceration in the 1960's-2000's. Rideau uses his finely tuned writing style to embed the feelings and tensions of the racial divide of the time without it ever taking control of his main focus. Rideau's honesty as well, concerning his attitude toward white men during his early years in prison, is extremely refreshing and captivating. Without Rideau's consistent presence in tying all of his elements together, a reader may easily become lost in the labyrinth of issues and historical injustices faced during his time in prison. His memoir, among his other works (such as those featured in the award-winning prison newspaper, *The Angolite* which he wrote for and edited while incarcerated), has been highly acclaimed, and was the winner of the 2011 Dayton Literary Peace Prize for Nonfiction.

But even with Rideau's reformation and eventual success as a writer, can his story be considered a true tale of peace? Angola Prison was long considered to be one of the most violent prisons in America. Wilbert Rideau was witness to murder, mutilation, deprivation, starvation, and even sexual slavery there. One should wonder how such a setting could be the backdrop to the promotion of peace.

Rideau gives us a vivid and all-encompassing window into the realities of prison life. The dehumanizing conditions that prisoners at Angola endured is enough for many to table any ideas of peace within *In The Place of Justice*. However, if readers attend to what Rideau is communicating with his work, then they will understand that peace can arrive in many different forms. Rideau would come to understand the mysterious forces that can dictate a life as he came to realize how miraculous his life really was against his ever-more bitter tasting surroundings. This is a man who would have his life saved being sentenced to die. Even with his unfortunate circumstances, Rideau was able to find a sense of meaning in his life. Even in his most desperate circumstances, he was able to find a sense of inner peace and contentment. He is one of the few who can see a silver lining highlighted against the crimson demeanor of most existence. Whether

it be death looming down a hallway to his right, a new warden crushing the integrity he had worked to achieve with *The Angolite*, or even a fire meant to baptize him in the hatred of his surroundings, Rideau never stopped believing that he would one day walk out of Angola Prison a free man. Whether a reader will accept with Rideau's account of his motivations for his crime or not is beyond the scope of his words. What matters, and what *In The Place of Justice* is ultimately about, is that fight, that unwavering determination not to die, not to be forgotten. The burning passion to fix what is wrong. That is what Wilbert Rideau found in the place of Justice.

It's important for the reader to consider Wilbert Rideau's trapped perspective in terms of his lifetime. Readers can follow Rideau's journey from *Ruination* to *Heaven*, as Rideau's chapter titles frame his journey. The progression of his memoir shows readers that the peace he came to find was a process. It also shows us that Rideau views his own book as a "peace book."

In The Place of Justice is more than just a retelling of tragic events. Wilbert Rideau's account of time in prison is not simply an account of a painful series of events. It is rather the account of one pilgrim's progress from nihilism and despair to humanism and hope; as such it has the power to show every reader that peace is achievable no matter what the circumstances.

Discussion Questions

Peace

1. The Dayton Literary Peace Prize recognizes works that, among other things, characterize peace as ending or seeking to end conflict--personal, national or international--establishing concord between and among people, and/or showing the consequences of persons, nations, or institutions that recklessly disrupt personal harmony or universal accord. What do you think qualifies this book for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize?
2. Rideau's account starts off in a time of extreme racism during the 1960's when African Americans were treated as second class citizens. As the story progresses people of different races come together and help fight for his freedom. Can a fight for the same cause destroy stereotypes and prejudices to create peace between those who have never found it on their own? What do you think it is that helps people get along?
3. It is evident even through the actions of the prisoners that opposition without violence can lead to the results you are looking for. In chapter 2, the prisoners boycotted eating in order to better their conditions in the prison. What do you think this illustrates about non-violent ways of resolving problems?

Rideau's [Acceptance Speech for the Peace Prize](#)

4. Wilbert Rideau said in his acceptance speech that through reading he realized that he was not alone in bearing personal struggles, and reading the accounts of others who overcame struggles allowed him to hope that he might overcome his own. How can reading about others' experiences help you deal with your own?
5. Why do you think Wilbert chose to forgive for years of his life lost?

Concepts

6. Stereotypes play a significant role in Wilbert Rideau's experiences with the justice system. He discovered that many of his supporters and helpers in prison turned out to be white, even though, having grown up in the segregated south and experienced racism on a daily basis, he had previously hated all white people on principle. How does an enemy taking your side impact the way you view them? What does it say about an "enemy" if they help or treat you decently?
7. Wilbert Rideau writes, "We only have as much power as people think we do." How does the power others give us compare to the power in ourselves? Is one more effective than the other?
8. How did the time Wilbert Rideau spent on Death Row have a hand in his eventual reformation?
9. "Be true to the best in yourself and they can never break you." However, how long can you take someone trying to break you before it changes what is the best of you?

Events

10. How many different ways can the book's title be understood? What do you think Rideau is suggesting about the relationship between the various elements of the U.S. criminal justice system and justice?
11. What do you think made Warden Maggio feel he could put so much trust in Wilbert? What has he done to prove himself to be trustful?
12. What do you think truly initiated Linda's interest in Wilbert's case?
13. Books clearly had a hand in Wilbert Rideau's redemption. How do you think the books redeemed him?
14. "Which is worse: death by execution or spending the rest of your life in prison?" Rideau asks. Which of these scenarios would you rather experience?
15. When Governor Roemer begins refusing clemency for any case that is recommended to him by the official pardons board, the prisoners in Angola begin to despair. "Hopelessness is contagious," Wilbert Rideau observes about this time period. Why is this? Not all of the prisoners were "lifers." Why does the despair of some of the prisoners bring down the morale of the whole prison?

Literary Mechanisms

16. Do any of the people Rideau encounters during his life parallel any predefined character roles? Can these real-life literary roles (protagonist, antagonist, etc.) be found in our own lives?
17. The events of this novel are true events, but how much artistic consideration do you think went in to the arrangement of details and side stories told?
18. What literary significance could the books that Rideau read while incarcerated have within the memoir?
19. How many of Rideau's actual responses and feelings to events of his life do you think he included in his memoir?

Rideau: Works and Media

A collection of interviews and articles written by Wilbert Rideau

[When Prisoners Protest](#) (July 17, 2013- eight years post-release)

This article discusses how prisoners who are in no position to fight the absolute, authoritative system they live in still manage to effect change within the prison system, with focus on prisoners' use of civil disobedience and compromise to better their lives.

[Wilbert Rideau Receives Polk Journalism Award For Exposing Sexual Violence Behind Angola Prison Bars](#) (April 2011- six years post-release)

Rideau gives an interview on Democracy Now! on the topic of his Polk award. He discusses the background of his journalism in prison as well as the specifics of the sexual violence he wrote about. As the interview comes to a close the interviewer asks Rideau about his "...assessment of the prison system today." He professes that it has become "an industrial complex" and elaborates on that assertion with the unique perspective of an ex-prisoner.

[AARP's Inside E Street](#) (July, 2010- five years post-release)

Rideau covers some of the misconceptions outsiders have about prison life as well and comments on the situations into which prisoners are released before segueing into the topic of older inmates, which are even more limited in their options when released.

[Inside Man: An Interview with Wilbert Rideau](#) (May 2010- five years post-release)

Dave Gilson interviews Wilbert Rideau and his wife Linda LaBranche at their house in Baton Rouge five years after his release from prison. Rideau discusses his life, his perception of society outside of prison, *The Angolite*, and the power of reading. He ends this interview with a thought-provoking insight on modern-day prisons and the power of hope, an idea he emphasizes in his book *In the Place of Justice*.

In an interview with NPR conducted on June 15th, 2011- five years after his release, Wilbert Rideau discusses his daily life as an inmate at one of the world's toughest prisons. ([On Reading In Prison](#)), Rideau discusses how reading and writing in prison changed his life, alluding to some of the novels he mentioned in his autobiography *In the Place of Justice*. In another part of the interview, Rideau gives insider detail on the dull and dreary daily life of a prisoner ([On the Routine of Prison Life](#)), and how *The Angolite* helped him escape from his miserable prison life. In the same clip, he is asked about the electric chair, and Rideau exposes some chilling insight to the man that controlled the switch at the Angola prison. In a final blurb from the interview, Rideau discusses the sexual violence in prison and the people it entails ([On Sexual Violence at Angola](#)). If you'd like to hear the entire interview conducted by NPR, you are invited to follow the link: [Doing Time, and Doing Good, in LA's Angola Prison](#).