

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Betts, D. R. (2009) *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison*, New York: Penguin Group, 240 pages.**

*Reviewed by Jason M. Williams*

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*A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison* is perhaps the quintessential prison memoir of the modern age. Betts was arrested for committing the crime of carjacking as a sixteen-year-old youth. As a result, he was sent to prison for eight years as a juvenile in the state of Virginia. He presents to his readers a vivid and all too familiar story, unfortunately, of his life as a young African-American adolescent and his eventual plight through the American prison system.

At the beginning of the book, he provides a complex introduction to his intersectional reality. He uses his life story as a framework through which to understand his story, while sometimes offering macro level analysis as well. Betts grew up in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood, raised by a single mother, had a tumultuous relationship with his absent father, and had never been in trouble before his carjacking conviction. From the beginning chapters, one ascertains that Betts was a good kid who got caught up in criminal activity. Cliché, yes, but true for Betts.

While Betts does not shy away from guilt, he rarely delves into the social context that made him ripe for committing the carjacking in the first place. It is important to understand and admit one's guilt, but Betts leaves a significant gap that needs to be contextualized. His inability to see beyond his micro-context, to some extent, signifies the degree to which people in society (including prisoners) are indoctrinated to believe in rational choice ideology — the idea that committing a crime is solely the choice of the individual. His failure to delve into this territory could also be due to his age and state of intellectual adventurism during the period of writing the book. The social context of the book is one that is all too familiar with many who live marginalized lives.

For instance, he also mentioned how he lacked an adult Black male role model. He states that his father was not around because he too was incarcerated. Sadly, this part of Betts story is predictable and predetermined like many other young Black males who end up in similar situations. He was brought up in a single home likely because of the social structure that induced his father into a criminal lifestyle as it has done for generations of Black males. This cycle of hopelessness inevitably predetermined Betts'

future. Like his father, he found himself incarcerated and damned further beyond the margins of society.

The best parts of the book are his memories of being in prison. He explains that the prison was the most diverse place he had ever been, but that it was flooded with marginalized bodies. It is clear that while behind bars his surroundings were much too complex for his young mind to understand, but he developed the ability to blend in and learn more about his surroundings and fellow prisoners. He eventually earned his high school diploma and even taught himself Spanish. He also illuminates the extent to which the prison is a microcosm of already existing racial power dynamics. He spends a great deal talking about racial identity and life within the prison, and how he was able to learn from these complex, intersecting experiences.

After being released from prison, Betts sought redemption. He attended Prince George's County Community College where he got involved in a lot of extracurricular activity. For the most part, things appeared to be going well for him. However, a moment of departure in his academic pursuits came when Howard University rejected him, a historically Black University on a scholarship which would have guaranteed him a full-ride had he been accepted. This incident was perhaps a profound moment of betrayal for Betts — being rejected by a Black school, of all possibilities. Nevertheless, this incident shows the extent to which society has indeed become hyper-punitive, even those venues that were traditionally designed to give marginalized people hope. Fortunately, he was subsequently offered a full scholarship to attend the University of Maryland.

Betts' story encapsulates the meaning of what it means to be a Black adolescent male ascending to adulthood in the margins of America. The social structure that compounds his reality, however, is what is missing throughout his memoir, which is perhaps to be expected given the non-academic style of memoirs. Nevertheless, he highlights the extent to which the state has increasingly become, via brute force, the sole parental entity over scores of Black adolescent males, a phenomenon that Rios (2011) calls the youth industrialization complex. Incidentally, many parents of colour have found themselves in losing battles against the state, as their children are ripped away from them for crimes that are preventable if social structures (root causes of crime) were only acknowledged and changed.

Unlike Betts, the vast majority of similarly situated young men are less likely to receive the second chance that he has deservingly received. Betts

has gone on to earn additional academic accolades, and is on track toward becoming a lawyer. Thus, his post-release experiences vary tremendously from others who will not be able to escape the criminal label and its post-prison collateral consequences. Yet his story is crucial because it shows the real cruelty of the system, and how it has increasingly targeted youth of colour. While some may capitulate to the logics behind adult targeting, the fact that the system now targets youth is more troubling given the long-term effects (socially, psychologically, and economically) that mass incarceration has on those who come into the system at early ages. As a result, these youth reach adulthood while behind bars and are essentially dumped back into a society where resources to remain productive are scarce. Now as adults, they are socially demoted to a second caste status (Alexander, 2010) at relatively early ages, having a great many years still ahead where they are unlikely ever to become successful because of structural *de jure* and *de facto* barriers.

Lastly, Betts' memoir forces readers to reconsider the extent to which the state *has* assumed parental control over a disproportionate amount of adolescents from the middle and poor classes. Racial disparities among youth continue to exist even among similarly situated youth of different ethnic-racial backgrounds, a topic spoken about in the memoir. While Betts' memoir is a perfect tale of redemption, many who find themselves in similarly situated paths will never be able to experience a restoration like Betts. Therefore, readers should feel compelled to question the highly punitive atmosphere within which youth are adjudicated today and work toward an abolition platform that will deconstruct prisons as the antidote for troubled youth. Moreover, readers should focus on the precarious use of the prison as a parental figure for decidedly disposable youth, predominantly derived from the middle and lower classes of society.

## REFERENCES

Alexander, Michele (2010) *The New Jim Crow. Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York: The New Press.

## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

*Jason M. Williams, PhD* is a graduate of New Jersey City University (NJCU), Jersey City, New Jersey with a Bachelor's and Master's degree in

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