

Where I'm Writing From:
Essays from Pennsylvania's Death Row
By Reginald Sinclair Lewis
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Reviewed by Justin Piché

Prisoners on death row are among the most vilified individuals in the United States. Portrayed as guilty, remorseless and sadistic killers by Fox News and the mainstream media, the picture painted is black and white. *Where I'm Writing From: Essays From Pennsylvania's Death Row* by Reginald Sinclair Lewis is a collection of 28 entries that paints a much different picture. With a pen and paper in hand, his words and ideas cover once blank tapestry, capturing the shades of grey and colours of criminal justice in America made unintelligible in mainstream accounts.

Literary, stylistic and real. Lewis' work makes visible the corrupt, racist and thuggish orientation of law enforcement, courts and corrections in the United States. In "The Auschwitz Factory", he extends his critique of the criminal justice system by comparing the process in which those accused of having committed crimes are dehumanized much in the same way that those of Middle Eastern decent are depicted today in order to justify the implementation of policies and practices that strip one's right to freedom and life. Lewis also explores the dynamics of living under constant surveillance in the United States in "These Are Not God's Eyes", serving as a critique of those who support imprisonment while also admonishing countries governed by similar draconian rules such as Iran.

In keeping with the title of the book, each of the pieces written by Lewis allows the reader to connect with the moments that have shaped the man he has become and where he finds himself today. The opening salvo, "Sweeter Than Sugar", explores scenes and characters from his childhood in North Philadelphia. "Good Night, Boo Baby" describes the author's thoughts on his exchanges with a dying aunt through letters and coping with her loss behind bars. "Prison Father Sessions" introduces the reader to the difficult task of helping to raise a daughter from death row. In "The Evidence of Things Unseen", we learn of the circumstances that led to the 1983 conviction of Lewis for murder, a crime he attests he did not commit. This anthology is an artifact of a life. It is a reminder that prisoners are human beings and that the pains they experience inside transcend prison walls, impacting their loved ones.

Writing in prisons is not without its challenges. For instance, being in prison means that one is stripped of many of the resources needed to express one's ideas intelligibly. This is made visible in Lewis' chapter, "A Very Cold Place", where he describes having what little materials he had access to, including books and his own manuscripts, confiscated during an institution-wide raid. Even in cases where he evaded these forms of censorship, his essay, "Where I'm Writing From", provides examples of difficulties he faced in finding publishers and an audience for his work. Beyond barriers to knowledge production and dissemination, Lewis has also encountered reprisals for his publications, including harassment from fellow prisoners and guards. The author has also drawn the scorn of politicians, including former Governor Tom Ridge, who signed his death warrant in 1997 following the release of his article, "The Shame of Philadelphia Blue", which criticized the corrupt and racist culture of the police force in the city. This was done despite the fact that Lewis' case was scheduled for an appeal, shedding light on the cruel and unusual politics of criminal justice in the United States.

While prisons are not conducive environments for writing, Lewis and his contemporaries allow these experiences to inform and motivate their unique sense of the world and the spaces in which they are caged. Throughout the collection, it is made clear by the author that writing is resistance, a means of connecting to the outside to make a contribution to society and to transcend the deprivation of liberty. As illustrated in "Say Hello to My Little Friends", writing is transformative. In the piece, Lewis outlines his exchanges with a group of school children who began corresponding with him in 1995 after having read his work. In 1997, the youth organized a march to the Pennsylvania State Capitol to oppose his death sentence, prompting a stay of his execution.

An award winning author and a master of his craft, this collection of essays written by Reginald Sinclair Lewis is a must read, particularly for those who blindly support a corrupt criminal justice system and are quick to call for the harsh treatment of the incarcerated. Students of the carceral would also be well advised to pay attention to this compilation as it provides a grounded account of the ongoing brutalities of incarceration, a rarity amongst texts on imprisonment circulating today.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Justin Piché is a doctoral candidate studying sociology at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. His doctoral research examines where prisons are built and why, drawing on both governmentality and political-economic perspectives. The study also examines the impact of prison location on prisoners and their loved ones. In 2007, Justin co-published articles in the *International Journal of Restorative Justice* with Véronique Strimelle and the *York Centre for International Security Studies Working Paper Series* with Mike Larsen. His MA thesis, entitled “Restorative Prisons?” was awarded the Commission on Graduate Studies in Humanities Prize from the University of Ottawa. He is currently Organizational Planning Coordinator of the JPP.