

BOOK REVIEWS

***Escape Artist: Memoir of a Visionary Artist
on Death Row* by William A. Noguera
Toronto: Seven Stories Press (2018) 447pp.
*Reviewed by Lucas Ridgeway***

In the vein of all great living funerals, American prisoner William A. Noguera retraces the genesis of his decisions, which forged the path before him that ultimately led to murder within his vivid autobiography. *Escape Artist* is a non-linear rendition of the crime cycle that brought its author into the breach, as it begins with the death sentence being imposed upon him. We travel from childhood to adolescence and adulthood to incarceration as Noguera provides a first-hand account for survival on death row inside San Quentin. During this recounting, he always allows the reader to render the final synopsis by handing over the responsibilities of reality checking his activities of reconciliation and rehabilitation. Nonetheless, this hefty tome invokes a confrontational mind state that switches on the brain within a heartbeat.

In this raw and visceral yet highly crafted and finely detailed account, everything is a memory. Via his memoir, Noguera is reaching out to the world at large through his truth to substantiate his identity and maintain visibility without vanity. We become purposely indoctrinated into the lifestyle of a convict who is not focussed on justifying his behaviours or fabricating reasons for hopeful redemption. However, the author is aware of the potential, yet unintentional, hurt that may result from this publication, henceforth some names or places have been changed to respect the privacy and safety of those mentioned. Moreover, Noguera strives for authenticity and succeeds in remaining genuine to the verity of his own personal experiences. In fact, for those serious about getting the most out of this volume, I strongly suggest reading the glossary before you begin as prison vernacular varies distinctly between geographic region and demographic group.

William Noguera is a brilliantly talented visual artist with a keen eye for hyper-realistic detail, making his narratives bona fide play-by-play retellings. Outstanding, especially considering that he was not even allowed to make a phone call during his first seven months on death row. Allowing his eloquent words to find life in an elegantly illustrated hardcover will remain as a testament to the transformative imperative of his journey. If

you were an actor and wanted to study a single character who accurately portrayed jailhouse politics, gang-violence, criminal sub-culture, and the general morality of the prison class over the past thirty years, William Noguera would be a prime case study.

All through the various correctional facilities leading up to his life on death row, William Noguera issues an intense diatribe tackling the mental anguish experienced by prisoners worldwide. Furthermore, he has used that progression to uncover the core psychological issues that led to his captivity and impending execution. He identifies his maladaptive means of coping with the turmoil of his formative years by compartmentalizing his inner child into two halves where one-half dealt aggressively with historic abuse, while the other half was both sensitive and caring. Most readers will observe that the author is still holding onto these contrasting personality traits. This may appear to be outwardly hypocritical because he makes no excuses when describing his rigid expectations and personal code of ethics post-murder. The unresolved resentments from his childhood onward did culminate into the series of connections and events when his unrelenting rage cost another person their life. Of note, you can absolutely see how passive-aggressive vindication can turn into life-altering violence.

In adolescence, the power struggles of racism and classism caused the author to self-describe as an outsider with all the privileges of a typical middle-class lifestyle who experienced an angst filled coming of age in Los Angeles during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The cycles of abuse and blaming others progressed until he became a walking time bomb with a hair-trigger temper and mood swings that could suddenly turn violent when he would see red and blackout. He would strike when a situation would open up emotional wounds that brought back memories of when he was made to be a victim himself. Innate rage would pump a seemingly addictive adrenaline rush through his veins, which was augmented by his involvement in stealing cars and extreme underground fighting, seeking it out as if it were a drug. As a benefit to the reader, his depictions are concise and he allows his audience, if they are so inclined, to connect the dots themselves. An alert mind will notice that the severe consequences of a single decision made a decade prior to the capital crime resonated well into adulthood.

Influences on the writing style could be compared to the Shaka Senghor autobiography with a temporal retracing of causality and response that is both engaging and interactive. The vignettes contained within range from

poor parenting to negative peer associations, bad guards to worse prisoners. You will see how his path crossed with everyone from Slick Rick to Charles Manson. You will understand why dental floss is not permitted in prisons and the distinction between a bone-crusher and a shank. The text offers a range of experiences, from hearing about locals-only surfing hotspots to sitting in a cell with only the ability to listen to the waves for the next thirty-plus years. As the author states, “You could live next door to a prison and still be light years away in terms of understanding the rules that govern prison society”.

In terms of escaping his interminable state, William Noguera has peeled back the layers of his intellectual onion to rediscover his radiant child, which he put to use in order to fulfill his desire to create art representing the inhumanity and filth that he encountered along the way. Artistically, he combines hyper-realistic pointillism with both abstract and neo-expressionism to produce viviparous pen and ink compositions. Imagine a convergence of Georges Seurat, Jackson Pollock, and Jean Michel-Basquait. His throne of inspiration has burgeoned into group and solo exhibits worldwide. Gracefully, he found he could be free of the prison walls during his creative moments, as when he was isolated by himself he could work towards salvation within the realms of expression and imagination. Art became an anchor to protect his true self from the world inside one of the most dangerous prisons in the United States and a means to support his stay by the sale of his work.

The author’s overriding compulsion to uphold his voice and sincere desire to be heard drove him incessantly forward and rendered his rehabilitation into a rebellion against the cage called his cell. He describes his rebellion as a survival tactic used to overcome his current circumstances and improve his worth. Specifically, to evade the suffocating embrace of the explosive forces within, his weapon of choice is his mind, where he alone can control them. Hitherto, his daily reality on death row is one where other prisoners need to know his potential for violence and, in fact, should expect it. In prison, peace of mind is priceless and restorative justice is rare. His art can be seen as part of a process to address his harm in a more productive and constructive manner.

Print journalists and filmmakers have both recognized William Noguera’s work while he has also been globally acclaimed as the “Cellular Seurat”. He has also served as a collegiate guest speaker via

video conferencing, lecturing to MBA candidates on professional ethics and corporate responsibilities. He purveys an insider's view of ethical erosion and the consequences that arise from grandiosity, greed, and corruption. He looks instead to holding pro-social values in common such as generosity and compassion to demonstrate how removal from society can be just as violent for the perpetrator as the victim. Another irony of his artistic success and his predicament is that the value of his art will only increase after his execution. Notwithstanding the fact that incarceration is an evidently violent process as the marginalization and segregation of prisoners inherently severs community relationships. Consequently, that removal redoubles the harm and provides no means of viable reconciliation, especially considering his arrested brain development at the time of the crime. Correspondingly, the odds of being killed on the exercise yard are far more likely than any other state-sanctioned procedure.

Ultimately, the author takes us on a journey throughout the avenues of his mind fueled by a constant and burning anger in a successful attempt to impart identity, agency, and citizenship. He interweaves his family of origin issues, personal interests and criminal behaviours from his formative years with a vision from prison inspired by his own personal code for survival. Nevertheless, it is his art that has given him his voice back and the reader should be equally compelled to rebel against any form of self-imposed construct that is typically associated with the battle between tyranny and freedom after the completion of this magnum opus. William Noguera, himself, is the *Escape Artist*, the artist-in-residence who can virtually escape his unnatural confines through deep mental concentration on his creative medium. The final irony is that the author's radiant contribution as a global citizen may be imminently extinguished as, according to California State Law, the prisoner himself will determine the exact method of the execution to be carried out against him. In empathetic terms, the enormity of this decision will drive a splinter into the mind of the audience at the very seat of consciousness. Whereas, the author's response to his readership is verified on page 266 as, "To do this we must become conscious that each of us holds the key to our own freedom".

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Lucas Ridgeway is a Canadian federal prisoner at Bath Institution. He can be reached at the following address:

Lucas Ridgeway
P.O. Box 1500
Bath, ON
KOH 1G0