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[HOME](#)
[ABOUT](#)
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[CONTENTS](#)
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JULY 2, 2020

[BOOK REVIEWS](#)
[READ OF THE MONTH](#)
[AUTHOR PROFILES & INTERVIEWS](#)
[CONTRIBUTORS' BIOS](#)
[MISCELLANEOUS](#)
[NEWS & EVENTS](#)

You are here: [Home](#) / [Author Profiles & Interviews](#) / Allen Mendenhall Interviews Jodie Sinclair, Author of "Love Behind Bars"

ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS JODIE SINCLAIR, AUTHOR OF "LOVE BEHIND BARS"

 JUNE 30, 2020 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Jodie Sinclair

AM: Jodie, so glad to interview you about this important book and subject, and I'm happy that our mutual friend, Joyce Corrington, introduced us. Your new book is *Love Behind Bars*, bearing the subtitle "The True Story of An American Prisoner's Wife." This is a memoir about the criminal justice system and the fight to save your husband, Bill, from dying while incarcerated. You were a television reporter in Baton Rouge when you met Bill, who was paroled in 2006 and today works

as a paralegal.

I'll start by asking if, in your opinion, the corruption in Louisiana that you've so ably rendered in this book is rampant and widespread, or local and concentrated?

JS: Initially, I had a narrow focus. When you marry an inmate, you become an enemy of the system. The system I fought in Louisiana to free my husband masked corruption and incited public fear with disinformation. I wore a wire for the FBI as my husband and I exposed a pardons-for-sale scheme at Angola after he turned down a prison's official's request for \$15,000 to buy his way out of prison. It made him a "snitch" and put his life in danger. All those who paid the bribe were released. Law enforcement said my husband hadn't supplied enough evidence to be free. He served 20 more years after doing the right thing. Over the years, I realized inhumanity and cruelty infects too many prisons and the political system that supports it is an accepted way of life in the U.S.

AM: When you decided to begin reporting on issues related to the death penalty, how interested were other journalists and reporters in that subject?

JS: When I arrived at Angola on March 17, 1981 to start my 5-part TV series on the death penalty, only one other TV news crew was at the prison although news about Louisiana's first execution in 9 years was being covered in Louisiana newspapers. As soon as I learned that Angola was preparing to execute its first inmate since 1972, when the US Supreme Court overturned the death penalty and ordered states to rewrite their death penalty laws, I jumped at the chance to do the story.

AM: Do you think there's sufficient reporting about the death penalty in 2020?

JS: The death penalty is state sanctioned murder so it deserves extensive coverage. Currently, there are fewer executions, so there is less coverage. According to *The New York Times*, there were fewer than "30 executions" in 2019, compared to "1999 when there were nearly 100 executions." But stories about death row inmates, exonerated due to improvements in DNA testing and forensic science, do make headlines and get documentary coverage. The Innocence Project and Sister Helen Prejean, author of "Dead Man Walking," which inspired the blockbuster movie of the same name, have also made

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[Essays](#) (23)

[Excerpt](#) (1)

[General](#) (8)

[Grants and Contests](#) (17)

[News & Events](#) (83)

[Read of the Month](#) (136)

[Residencies](#) (5)

[Southern States](#) (1)

a big difference in the decline of public support for the death penalty. However, the threat continues with U.S. Attorney General William Barr's current petition to resume federal executions.

AM: What were your original intentions when you first settled to report on Louisiana State Penitentiary? Finding love was no doubt beyond the scope of your plan.

JS: When I got the assignment from the News Director at WAFB-TV in Baton Rouge in 1981, where I was a reporter, I was focused on all aspects of the death penalty. I interviewed two death row inmates, a murder victim's mother, a death row inmate's mother, a Catholic priest, a prosecutor, 2 inmates who formerly had death sentences and researched how the electric chair kills. Standing beside the chair, I interviewed Angola's warden about giving the signal to start the execution. The Death House was the last place I expected to find love and the extraordinary man I married.

AM: What are the most promising ways to reform the criminal justice system?

JS: Criminal justice is public business yet the public knows little about it. Prison is the most expensive management tool with the lowest rate of return. It diverts federal and local funds from public schools educating the nation's poorest children so they don't turn to crime, the only "job opportunity" available in too many of our country's urban neighborhoods. That would significantly reduce the crime rate. In prison, rehabilitation should be the goal. Prisons should provide educational opportunities for inmates who want high school diplomas or college degrees. According to a [National Institute of Justice study](#) in 2017, the recidivism rate dropped to zero for prisoners who got masters degrees. In 2017, recidivism rates for inmates with vocational training [dropped approximately 30 percent](#).

AM: Do you think your book might drive important policy changes?

JS: Sister Helen Prejean wrote my book's Preface because she says my husband is a great example of why the death penalty should be abolished. At age 21, Billy Sinclair was sent to Death Row, convicted of killing a man in an accidental shooting. On death row, the 10th grade dropout became an avid reader and student of the law. When the U.S. Supreme Court vacated his death sentence in 1972, he was sentenced to life without parole. As the *Columbia University Journalism Review* put it in 1987, Billy and his co-editor of *The Angolite* had become the "Woodward and Bernstein of prison journalism." *The Angolite* was the only uncensored prison publication in the U.S. Their searing articles on rape, violence, and corruption behind bars won a "host of major prizes" from a Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award and an American Bar Association Silver Gavel to a George Polk Award. Billy went on to expose the pardons for sale scam, putting his own life at risk, and revealing other shocking facts about the Louisiana prison system and its officials.

AM: How did your marriage to a lifetime inmate affect your personal relationships with others?

JS: Almost no one knew about it except for my family and some close friends. Once I returned to Texas, after I had to give up my position as a reporter for Channel 9 in Baton Rouge because I had developed a relationship with a prisoner that created a conflict of interest, I never revealed anything about my marriage to employers. And they never asked. The people who knew were always very supportive. In the end, while I was working for a prominent state agency in Houston and my first book came out, I offered to resign rather than tarnish its reputation. The board refused to accept my resignation and wished me luck in my fight to free Billy.

AM: Without revealing too much of Billy's story—I want our readers to buy your book, after all—can you say what it reveals about the perverse incentives within the criminal justice system—from "snitching," cooperating with investigations, plea bargaining, and on down the line.

JS: In an article in 2001, *The Houston Chronicle* described me as a "child of privilege" from an upper class Republican family in Texas with lavish homes, foreign travel, and a private school education. Yet I had the opportunity over the 25 years I fought to free my husband to experience firsthand the brutality most inmate families and their loved ones endure.

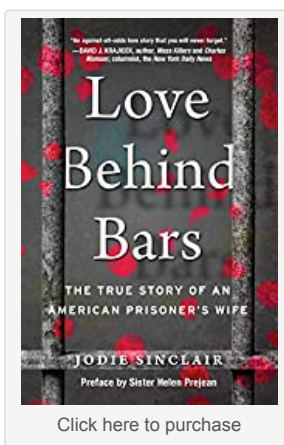
AM: If you could tell our readers anything—anything at all, about anything at all—what would it be?

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JS: I support murder victim’s families as they strive for justice for murdered loved ones. To do less would betray the victim. Selective enforcement cheats them. There are two prime examples in my book. A Shreveport doctor killed his sleeping wife with a sledge hammer and served 11 years in Louisiana. A Bossier Parish man, rebuffed by his girlfriend, went into a bar with a shotgun where she was sitting with his best friend, opened fire, and killed two people, injuring several others. He served 23 years.

My husband served 40 years for firing an unaimed bullet over his shoulder as he ran away from the store he tried to rob in the dark. It killed the clerk chasing him. The victim’s family in my husband’s case had powerful political connections in Louisiana so they could manipulate the system to get a much harsher punishment for my husband. The family of the doctor’s wife and the families of victims in the bar didn’t get the same level of “justice” for their loved ones. Selective enforcement makes the criminal justice system unjust. It isn’t fair and it isn’t unique. If you ask others to obey the law, you – the system – must obey the law.

AM: Thank you for the interview, Jodie. I know our readers will appreciate this book.

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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is associate dean at Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center. His books include Literature and Liberty (2014), Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Pragmatism, and the Jurisprudence of Agon (2017), The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington (2017) (editor), and Lines from a Southern Lawyer (2017). Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

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