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Book Reviews

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Killing Time by John Holloway and Ronald M. Gauthier

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Review by Allen Mendenhall

John Holloway and Ronald M. Gauthier have written a thriller. Unlike other thrillers, *Killing Time: An 18-Year Odyssey from Death Row to Freedom* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2010) is not fiction. It is, in the authors' words, "a true story" told in "narrative style." There's an old saying: reality is stranger than fiction. Here's a book that proves reality is not only stranger than fiction but also, in some cases, more terrifying.

The plot is as chilling as it is plain. Or perhaps it is chilling because it *seems* plain. An unknown man murders an Italian-American hotelier named Ray Liuzza. Police, witnesses, and prosecutors mistake the killer for an innocent man: John Thompson, a twenty-two-year-old African American. The crime occurs outside Ray's apartment. The year is 1984. The city is New Orleans. What follows is the bulk of the book: a police investigation, arrest, trial, sentencing, conviction, appeal, and so forth.

Using court transcripts, depositions, media reports, interviews, letters, and other records, Holloway and Gauthier piece together a stunning story of power, law, race, and justice. The result is a book that increasingly calls into question the instrumentalities of our criminal justice system, redeemed, at last, by two Philadelphia lawyers, Michael Banks and Gordon Cooney, who undertake Thompson's case *pro bono* and who spend millions of dollars in foregone legal fees.

Without the intervention of these two men, Thompson, who was wrongly convicted and sentenced to death, might not be alive today. Released from prison after his exoneration, Thompson resides in Louisiana, where he is involved with [Resurrection After Exoneration](#) (REA), an organization he founded.

Holloway and Gauthier recount Thompson's story using timeline formatting. Their attention to chronology is so precise that they date events right down to the minute. Now and then Holloway and Gauthier play with event sequence by describing simultaneous moments from the perspective of multiple characters, thus allowing readers to float outside space and time and to imagine a single instant in episodic limbo. A similar narrative omniscience situates readers within characters' minds and grants readers access to characters' interior monologues. The effect of this transposed knowledge is defamiliarization, a blurring of fact and fantasy.

The book may overuse clichés—"defense lawyers ate that kind of thing for breakfast," "it had the potential to be a first-rate

shit show,” “he hadn’t exactly set the world on fire as a law student”—but that’s not necessarily bad. Cliché is a semantic of the thriller genre. Some contemporary masters of thriller—Scott Turow, John Grisham, and Stephen King to name a few—employ cliché with regularity. It appears that on this score Holloway and Gauthier are in good company. The point of cliché is to lend the narrator—or narrators—an air of believability. (Does this speaker sound like a real person?) Holloway and Gauthier achieve this believability, which is weightier in narratives involving real men suffering real hardships.

The authors’ shocking and colorful—if at times finicky—account will upset those with a sense of justice. It will raise troubling doubts about wrongful convictions and capital punishment and perhaps even punishment generally. How, for example, do we decide guilt or innocence? What is truth in the courtroom? Is it, as one character declares, whatever the jury says? Why do we inflict pain on those convicted of crimes? How much pain is too much? Who or what inflicts the pain? And with what authority?

Killing Time is, in a word, suspenseful. But it’s more than that: it’s a profoundly intelligent and emotional rendering of one man’s lost adulthood, a coming-to-terms with a mechanistic and impersonal legal system harnessed by those who make a living off other people’s miseries and angst. Thankfully there are men like Banks and Cooney who view the law as something more than protocol.

In the past two decades, true-crime and legal thrillers have burgeoned into an industry unto themselves; and although loads of such books will appear this year and the next and the next, *Killing Time* deserves and invites sustained reflection. It is a searching critique of human institutions and a compelling portrait of human compassion.



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