

Review of *God of the Rodeo: The Search for Hope, Faith, and a Six-Second Ride in Louisiana's Angola Prison*

Author: Daniel Bergner
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Brooklyn-based writer Daniel Bergner went searching for stories of hope, faith and redemption, and he found them in a snake-infested swamp pit along the Mississippi River in Louisiana. That is where the Angola State Penitentiary is located. Home to some five thousand murderers, rapists, and armed robbers, this is one of the meanest prisons in America, and the men who have run it have a long and notorious record of callousness and brutality. But the prison's ugly pattern of past abuses is only a backdrop for Bergner's stories. He first traveled to Angola to witness the rodeo staged each year on the first four Sundays in October. When he got there, he found himself among a horde of people buying bargain-rate prison-made belts and bird houses and lustily watching cowboys -- mostly African American convicts the rest of the year, and for most, the rest of their lives -- dressed in almost comical stripped shirts, and without protection, battle against 1,600 pound bulls. Few stayed atop the bucking, jerking, angry animals for more than a split second or two. Largely white crowds of thrill-seekers hooted and gasped at the untrained, inexperienced riders risk life and limb for their enjoyment. It is, Bergner confesses, at once a gripping and disturbing spectacle. One of the games is called "Convict Poker." In this dare devil event, four prisoners sit at a mock card table in the middle of the ring. A bull is unleashed. The last man sitting wins a \$100 prize. No matter how gruesome and bizarre it seemed, Bergner learned during his year of research at Angola that the rodeo did offer some prisoners a moment of hope and glory, even dignity.

Bergner's account is not some sensational exposé on what goes on behind prison walls tailor-made for Geraldo or the producers of *20-20*. This book has more humanity and subtlety to it than that. Bergner builds a usually fascinating, but sometimes frustrating, chronicle around the lives of six cowboy prisoners. There is, for instance, forty-one year-old Johnny Brooks, who is serving a life sentence for the murder of a convenience store clerk. The rodeo helped him get a cushy prison job and meet his future wife, and provided him with the hope -- probably a false hope -

-- that if he says "yessuh" enough in just such a way to enough of the right people, he will earn a pardon from the governor. Then there is Danny Fabre, who seems more like a character from one of Erskine Caldwell's tragic-comic novels than a real-life figure. Fabre looks at the rodeo as the smoothest path to his dream of self-esteem and plastic surgery to fix his sharply protruding ears. And then there is Litrell Harris; Bergner's most compelling, philosophical, and insightful character. In one of the book's opening scenes, Harris, a convicted murderer, is concocting a disgusting "feces cocktail" to hurl at another inmate. By the end of the book, he is out of prison and driving a truck, desperately trying not to run afoul of the law.

Going backwards and forwards, Bergner's portraits of Brooks, Fabre, Harris, and the others are rich in detail. His stories mock the stereotypes of criminals and prisons created in Hollywood and on Madison Avenue. He offers no apologies for these men and their hideous acts, but he also knows that there are a lot of factors, many of them too hard to understand, that put a gun or a knife in a man's hands.

The book's other main character is Warden Burl Cain. Part paternalist, part preacher, and part con man, Cain dominates the middle third of the book. At first, Bergner thought he had found himself a real hero in the Dr. Pepper swigging warden. He saw the glowing reports on ABC and the Discovery Channel about Cain reforming the prison, selflessly dedicating himself to the lives of the least fortunate, and offering salvation to the damned, even to those on death row. But these virtues turned out to be little more than a cloak for petty corruption. Cain demanded money from Bergner in exchange for access to the prison. This was not his first shakedown, as Bergner discovered. It turns out that Cain seems to have had a long history of demanding kickbacks from prison contracts and orchestrating other less than scrupulous business deals. Bergner was stung by the revelations; his hero was no hero, just another in a long line of corrupt prison administrators.

Bergner's unmasking of Cain shifts the story from a tale of hope in a hopeless world to a narrative about justice. In this drama, there are clear winners and losers. Bergner takes Cain to court and wins, and is permitted to return to the prison, finish his interviews, and complete his book. Cain is also a winner. Although publicly embarrassed, he retains his post as warden. Angola prisoners, however, are once again losers. Before Cain arrived

at the penitentiary, conditions were so bad at Angola that the federal government appointed a team of investigators to look into abuses and assigned a judge to oversee the prison. A misnamed law, the Prison Litigation Reform Act, did away with this judicial oversight, and left Cain free to run Angola with little interference.

Toward the end of *God of Rodeo*, the flow of the book shifts directions one last time. It increasingly becomes a book about the author. Of course, all books are, at some level, autobiographical, but this one is explicitly so. Turning to the first person voice, Bergner writes -- in an almost confessional tone -- about how his experiences at Angola have changed him, especially his experiences with Cain. Still his disillusion with the warden and disgust over the new non-system of oversight is tempered by his faith in Harris's future. Perhaps there is a note of redemption here after all. Bergner's book ends with echoes of the hopeful words of Bruce Springsteen who sings in the last lines of *Nebraska*, his stark collection of songs about killers and losers, "At the end of a hard earned day people find some reason to believe."

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