PDF | God of the Rodeo: The Quest for Redemption in Louisiana's Angola Prison

by Daniel Bergner
Never before had Daniel Bergner seen a spectacle as bizarre as the one he had come to watch that Sunday in October. Murderers, rapists, and armed robbers were competing in the annual rodeo at Angola, the grim maximum-security penitentiary in Louisiana. The convicts, sentenced to life without parole, were thrown, trampled, and gored by bucking bulls and broncos before thousands of cheering spectators. But amid the brutality of this gladiatorial spectacle Bergner caught surprising glimpses of exaltation, hints of triumphant skill.

The incongruity of seeing hope where one would expect only hopelessness, self-control in men who were there because they'd had none, sparked an urgent quest in him. Having gained unlimited and unmonitored access, Bergner spent an unflinching year inside the harsh world of Angola. He forged relationships with seven prisoners who left an indelible impression on him. There's Johnny Brooks, seemingly a latter-day Stepin Fetchit, who, while washing the warden's car, longs to be a cowboy and to marry a woman he meets on the rodeo grounds. Then there's Danny Fabre, locked up for viciously beating a woman to death, now struggling to bring his reading skills up to a sixth-grade level. And Terry Hawkins, haunted nightly by the ghost of his victim, a ghost he tries in vain to exorcise in a prison church that echoes with the cries of convicts talking in tongues.

Looming front and center is Warden Burl Cain, the larger-than-life ruler of Angola who quotes both Jesus and Attila the Hun, declares himself a prophet, and declaims that redemption is possible for even the most depraved criminal. Cain welcomes Bergner in, and so begins a journey that takes the author deep into a forgotten world and forces him to question his most closely held beliefs. The climax of his story is as unexpected as it is wrenching.
Rendered in luminous prose, *God of the Rodeo* is an exploration of the human spirit, yielding in the process a searing portrait of a place that will be impossible to forget and a group of men, guilty of unimaginable crimes, desperately seeking a moment of grace.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

**Amazon.com Review**

Not since Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* has a writer so humanely evoked the complicated, harrowing lives of violent convicts. At turns haunting and inspiring, *God of the Rodeo* is novelist-journalist Daniel Bergner's riveting account of a year spent visiting the maximum-security prison at Angola, Louisiana, also known as "the last slave plantation." Initially there to report on the prison's annual four-weekend rodeo in October 1996 for *Harper's*, he was able to extend his stay for a full year when he was granted complete, unsupervised access to the seven prisoners with whom he became most closely acquainted.

In *God of the Rodeo* he introduces readers to rodeo champion Johnny Brooks, a 41-year-old 'lifer' incarcerated for a murder he committed at the age of 18, who is engaged to marry a civilian woman he met at the rodeo. He's also the most promising candidate for parole. There's Terry Hawkins, a man who tries to seek salvation for the violent murder of his boss, the grotesque details of which haunt him, and Danny Fabre, plagued with comically large ears he desperately wants corrected by plastic surgery almost as much as he wishes to learn to read past the 6th-grade level. Perhaps the most striking figure is the stern, spiritual warden, Burl Cain, a self-proclaimed prophet who genuinely believes in redemption for even the most violent offenders.

Written with the eloquence of a poet and the perceptive eyes of a painter, Bergner's extremely well wrought, unforgettable book offers a rare glimpse into the hearts and souls of men who commit violence, finding hope and courage where few dare to look, without ever losing sight of the horrific crimes that landed them in America's most isolated prison. --Kera Bolonik

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