

Walk In Those Shoes

December 2023 Newsletter – ISSUE 5

How The Grinch Made Christmas



By José Rodriguez-Basquez

There are moments that stick with a person – being covered in green paint and trying to sing *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* in front of an audience of wardens and inmates is one of those moments. At the time, I was an awkward, nerdy, 25-year-old who had hurt everyone he had ever loved before giving his life to Jesus in an effort to find some redemption. After a gnarly four years in prison, I had gotten into the seminary program at Nash, and that Christmas I would have one of the most blessed and scariest moments of my life.

“Alright, we have a Christmas decorating contest for the Block. Any ideas?” Ant asked. Anthony, better known as Ant, was one of the 80 men of B-Block and the organizer for our Christmas Decorating Committee. The situation was pretty dire. Ant explained that of the eight blocks participating in the contest, some had access to factory tools and had built actual tiny houses with Christmas songs playing inside. One block even had snowflakes on the ceiling. The judges, made up of the Nash staff, would be visiting each block to make their call.

“So, what are we going to do?” I asked.

Ant smiled, then said, like it was the most natural thing for us to do, “We put on a show.” We were dumbfounded at the idea. He virtually wanted all of our block to put on an organized performance, complete with a choir song, a stuffed piñata, and cardboard decorations. The idea was audacious, if only because Christmas in prison is the most depressing event here. Locked away from our families, Christmas becomes a reminder of all the horrible things we did to get here, complete with the aching sadness of failing our loved ones by being incarcerated. In short, the holidays suck. But, if we could find a way to beat back that sadness, if only for a day, then there had to be some redemption in that.

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Change That Is Working In Maine Prisons

Maine is changing the way prisons work & look and have created a model that can be replicated by other states.

“The Maine Model of Corrections is founded in the principles of normalization and humanization, with emphasis on destigmatization and respect.”

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See, Share & Find Out More At:

<https://youtu.be/TCyzyATC5JE>



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

The problem was, I didn't really know what I could contribute. My singing was garbage, and my dance moves were touchdown shimmies by the sports TV. Then, someone threw out, "What if we got someone to do the Grinch?" Something inside me clicked, and I turned, looked at Ant, and said, "That's me. I can do it." I remember them all nodding their heads, and Ant saying, "No, that's it! That'll work!" And the idea grew face-paint, a costume, and a game-plan.

Two weeks later, I got woken up early, thrown into a chair, and painted green. I can remember a bunch of inmates and C/O's coming up, seeing me for the first time, and collectively freaking out. But mostly, people would smile, laugh and wish me luck. I was fitted with a green, plastic tablecloth turned into a poncho and told to wait for the judges. I couldn't quite place the feeling, but people looked nervously excited.

Then we saw the judges swarm into the block next-door. They had a beautiful nativity scene, which meant we had time to scramble into position. I would be sitting in the sleigh, mean-mugging the judges when they arrived. The lights were turned off, leaving only our Christmas tree lights and fireplace aglow. I remember hearing our door pop open via the control booth and watching the crowd stream in before they stopped and started pulling out phones. Ant took over.

"Ladies and gentleman, welcome to B-Block!" A choir from both sides of the second floor sang out, "*Joy to the World*" while a piñata dangled from the railing. The scene was beautiful, electric, and joyful – then Ant said, "Now, the Grinch has a special message for you," and my heart died within me. I remember getting up, swaying with a beat and song playing only in my head, and in the moment, I lost myself. The kid who had failed in life was left behind in the sleigh – I became the Grinch.

"You're a mean one... Mr. Grinch!" I sang, moving back and forth in front of the assembled crowds of judges and phones. I pointed at an unfortunate onlooker and sang, "You really are a heeeel. You're as cuddly as a cactus... But as charming as an eel, Mr. Griiinch!"

People started laughing, and I thought it would all work out. I swayed into the next stanza, green tablecloth swishing and my fingers pointing at people in the crowd.

"You're a vile one... Mr. Grinch!" *Stomp*. "You have termites... in your smiiile!" *Stomp*. I had my finger set on our associate warden, her giggles fuel for me to go on. "You have all the charming sweetness of a seasick crocodile, Mr. Griiinch!" And then my hand grabbed the warden of Nash Correctional by the shoulder. The energy in the room changed, and the song playing in my head screeched to a stop. Up until then I had been completely in character. Then a panicked, terrified voice from inside my head said, '*Oh, God. I just grabbed the warden...*'

I immediately let go and kept singing with everything mean and nasty left in me. I knew I was supposed to be locked up right then, but that day, the crowd of harried prison officials and hurting prisoners became one big, happy audience. At any other time, I would have been beaten by a gang of guards and thrown into seg – but by then, it was too late. We had all become human beings again.

In that one moment, I, José Rodriguez-Basquez, inmate at Nash Correctional, became the Grinch, a performer bringing Christmas to life. Collectively, we found our humanity and joy like a bright red, bow-wrapped box under the tree. In that moment, people within the block forgot they were in prison and remembered that no matter what, God could redeem the worst moments in life and make them something beautiful. Somehow, we won the contest, but more importantly, we had found our humanity and joy. God gave us that. I've been doing the Grinch for Christmas ever since.

ARIZONA BOOK CLUB REVIEW

The *Girl With All The Gifts* by M.R. Carey was the Arizona Book Club's most recent selection. If you are looking for a longer read, this is one, the paperback coming in at 403 pages.

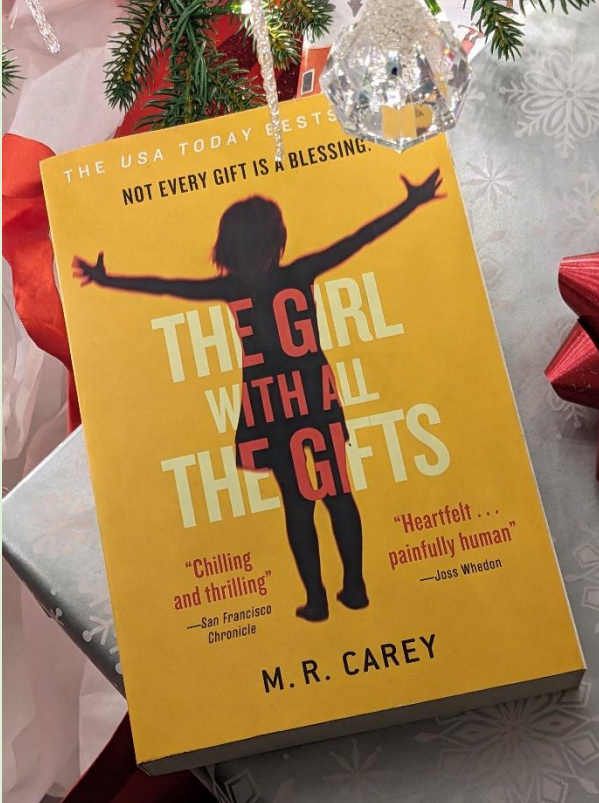
Though it was listed on the Amazon Editor's Pick list for Best Science Fiction & Fantasy for December, with a 4.3 rating, the book itself had mixed reviews from our club, with an average of 3.4 stars.

The ending seems to have caught all the readers off guard, with Carlos Sigala calling it "unpredictable" and Victor McKaney saying he "didn't fathom it at all". Only one reader indicated that they would not read any more work by this author, but the others felt differently, each saying they would read works by M.R. Carey again.

"I enjoyed the writing and the book as a whole. I would read more books by this author because I like her story telling." - Isaac Molina

"I enjoyed the style, I couldn't put the book down." - Carlos Sigala

"I won't read any of this author's future books." - Victor McKaney



FINDHELP

If you or someone you know has or will be returning home, [findhelp.org](https://www.findhelp.org/) is an easy way to find practical resources near your location. Simply go to <https://www.findhelp.org/> and insert the zip code where you are located.

Categories of available help include food, housing, transit, healthcare, education and work. Oftentimes, there are resources available that individuals are simply unaware of.

It is also important to note that the social workers and caregivers that have chosen those roles are often aware of additional resources if you contact them. Social workers are brokers of services, connecting those *in need* with the *things they need*.

WITS tries to communicate issues in a way that lends itself to producing positive change and revealing the limitless potential behind bars.

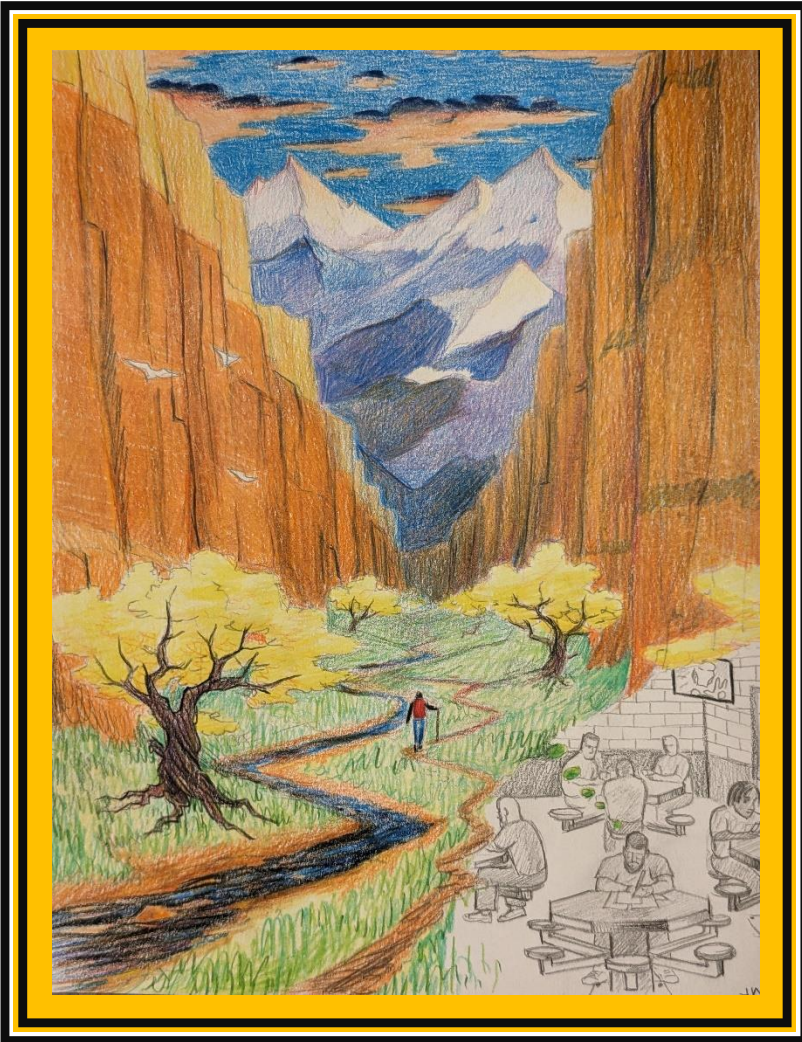
If you would like to submit your writing for consideration on our website at www.walkinthoseshoes.com or for inclusion in upcoming newsletters, please submit only unpublished work to:

Walk In Those Shoes
P.O. Box 70092
Henrico, VA 23255

Unfortunately, we do not pay for general submissions, although we have frequent contests and also currently pay \$25 for featured newsletter essays only.

We consider a submission permission to edit and post. Length is flexible, although 1,500 words or less is a typical post. Poetry is considered.

The Gallery



'Getting Out' – Jordan Williams

Getting Out by Jordan Williams

I'm not a fan of 'prison art' because I don't like thinking about being here. I try to stay positive and keep my thoughts productive and focused on my time after all this. I miss the feeling of the wide open world, where I spent a lot of my free time. Keeping it in my mind helps this experience not feel so dreary.

I am an artist, writer and adventure guide; and I have lived in New England, the mountains of North Carolina and coastal Alaska. I have been to 49 states and three countries by foot, bike, car, plane and boat, always seeking the beauty and joy this world has to offer.

If you would like to donate art for use in *The Gallery*, please mail to P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, VA 23255 for consideration & include a brief narrative about what inspired the piece.

WITS Veteran Writer Tip of the Day:

"I never title a piece before it is written. A title would contain the piece. I read over a piece two or three times once it is written before a title comes out. Sometimes more than one title will come out, and then it is a process of elimination."

Writer Prompt of the Day:

Write about a memorable failure and what you learned from it.



ASSIGNING MERIT: The Crisis Behind Prison Walls

By Terry Robinson

True. Crimes warrant penalties. The harsher the crime, the harsher the punishment, a systematic inner working that most, not even prison advocates, would dispute. The laws were created to invoke a sense of security in the minds of everyday society, and when someone violates that security, we turn to the Criminal Justice System. What we don't expect is the failure of that system by the setting aside of corrective principles to further an economic agenda; we don't expect a system that nurtures criminal behavior by handing down unfair sentences and maintaining an environment where violence thrives.

Such a system is not conducive to returning reformed citizens to society but is a conduit for repeat crimes. A failure is when it doesn't assign merit to all prisoners, only those with moderate and circumstantial crimes. Harsher criminals are seldom afforded merit, their suffering unrelenting. Those with LWOP and the death penalty are deterred from positive change and even in cases when that change occurs, it is without merit. Yet often it is after a person has done the worst possible act that they go on to live their most productive lives, possibly because sometimes no judge, juror, nor executioner can judge a person harsher than they judge themselves.

There is a bias that occurs behind prison walls that has created an unethical imbalance, as it is the duty of the Criminal Justice System to rehabilitate and reform, not abandon its correctional obligations. This bias happens when select prisoners are granted second chances while the good merit of others is dismissed, their humanity forever overshadowed by the nature of their crimes. Real justice is unbiased and grants every prisoner the right to reform, but with LWOP and the death penalty, the system is unwilling to forgive.

Such is the case for the Lady Lifers* of Muncy prison, PA - a diverse group of elderly women who displayed their hardships in the lyrical composition *This Is Not My Home*. Weary with age and matching prison browns, the women shuffled tentatively on their heels to the rhythm of a life-changing opportunity; their faces, hardened, broken by the decades, the battle-tested Lady Lifers geared up to harmonize about their struggles of serving life in prison. Emerging from the group was a leggy, dark-skinned woman with a wilting posture and curly bane who was delegated to deliver their message. Her voice was big and ripe for Broadway, the diction of someone well-learned, she commanded the audience's attention from the opening line. Her fists were kept balled as though clutched around something too precious to let go as she swayed with a building confidence inspired by the growing melody. She sang about the group's humanity, family, and spirit; also guilt and accountability. She declared their efforts to change despite the State's reluctance to commute their life sentences. Suddenly I realized I wasn't just watching a performance, but I was witnessing their woeful testimony as the Lady Lifers had moved beyond singing for mere entertainment - they were pleading for their lives. They scanned the audience with defiance aglow in their eyes as they belted out words filled with desperation; lyrics that foretold of their helplessness to be afforded a second chance.

"...I'm not saying that I'm not guilty,
I'm not saying that I shouldn't pay;
All I'm asking is for forgiveness
Gotta have hope I'd be free someday..."

Oh, how courageous I thought those women were to take center stage bearing nothing but their vulnerability in order to bring about their message of hope to a system that seemingly doesn't care. I, personally, know what it's like to feel helpless, to be a fragile existence in the world because the only concrete reality for a death row inmate is the likelihood to perish in prison. The Lady Lifers sang of that reality with a passion that shattered the concrete to pieces as their lead singer held clamped in her fists the one thing she had left after 29 years of incarceration - hope.

The Lady Lifers addressed a moral crisis that we face in the Criminal Justice System today, which is the unethical practice of dismissing the merit of prisoners. With sentences like LWOP and the death penalty, the courts have exceeded the punishment of criminal violations to instead put a person's humanity on trial. And while the Criminal Justice System is not designed for forgiveness but serves as a deterrent for further crimes, it can only achieve such a feat by also assigning good merit and through the practice of redeeming prisoners. For many, redemption is the product of rehabilitation. There can be no true justice without reform and true change, which often takes place when there is nothing to gain.

For the Lady Lifers and other prisoners around the nation who exhibit positive change, they should be given their due process, not deemed invaluable to society and left forgotten in a system that denies second chances.