

Live from Death Row: Political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal speaks from prison

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Live from Death Row by Mumia Abu-Jamal, Addison-Wesley, 1995, 241 pages, \$20.00; *Death Blossoms: Reflections from a Prisoner of Conscience* by Mumia Abu-Jamal, Plough Publishing, 1997, 185 pages, \$12.00

Currently on death row at the SCI Greene County "control unit" prison in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, Mumia Abu-Jamal, the former Black Panther Party member, opponent of police brutality and well-known radio journalist, has written two books, *Live from Death Row* and *Death Blossoms*.

In 1982 Mumia was falsely convicted for the murder of a Philadelphia policeman. During the trial, overseen by Judge Albert Sabo, a member of the Fraternal Order of Police, prosecutors condemned Mumia for being a member of the Black Panther Party, which they denounced as a hate group. The judge denied Mumia's court-appointed attorney the resources necessary to mount an adequate defense. After his conviction a number of witnesses recanted their testimony, saying they had been coerced into lying by the Philadelphia police.

In October 1998 the Pennsylvania Supreme Court refused to grant Abu-Jamal a new trial. His attorneys are now appealing the case to a federal court, but Abu-Jamal could face the death sentence in the next six or seven months. Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Ridge has already vowed to sign a new death warrant for his execution.

While in prison Abu-Jamal has written many essays and letters which have helped to focus attention on capital punishment in the US and the ever-harsher treatment of the nearly 2 million people languishing in the country's prisons and jails. His articulate essays and letters, many of which are included in these two books, shed light on the inhuman conditions facing hundreds of thousands whose voices are never heard.

One day after being served with a death warrant on June 2, 1995, Mumia was disciplined for the publication of his first book. The preface to *Death Blossoms* explains why. "My book, *Live from Death Row*," writes Mumia, "paints an uncomplimentary picture of a prison system that calls itself 'correctional' but does little more than corrupt human souls, a system that eats hundreds of millions of dollars a year to torture, maim, and mutilate tens of thousands of men and women; a system that teaches bitterness and hones hatred."

"Clearly, what the government wants is not just death, but silence. A 'correct' inmate is a silent one. One who speaks, writes, and exposes horror for what it is, is written up for 'misconduct.'"

Live from Death Row, a compilation of short essays, paints a chilling picture of the systematic physical and psychological torture facing those, the innocent along with the guilty, who find themselves behind bars.

Explaining what it is like for death row prisoners, Abu-Jamal says: "Life here oscillates between the banal and the bizarre. Unlike other prisoners, death row inmates are not 'doing time.' Freedom does not shine at the end of the tunnel. Rather, the end of the tunnel brings extinction. Thus, for many here, there is no hope."

There are even some on death row who have asked to be executed in order to end this torture. In a Florida case, cited by Mumia, a death row inmate wrote to then Governor Lawton Chiles who more than willingly obliged the man and put him to death. "A flight to death, then, is often a flight from the soul-killing conditions of death row," Mumia writes.

Death row inmates are denied even the right to have physical contact during visits. While Mumia was happy to see his young daughter during her first visit, he writes, the visit caused him considerable anguish and pain. Describing how her tiny fists banged against the glass separating them, the following words echoed in his consciousness for a long time, "'Why can't I hug him? Why can't we kiss? Why can't I sit in his lap? Why can't we touch? Why not?'"

"Non-contact visits" lead to the severing of ties between the inmates and their families, the writer notes. Abu-Jamal quotes the late psychiatrist Karl Menninger, who described non-contact visiting as "the most unpleasant and the most disturbing detail in the whole prison and a practice that constitutes a violation of ordinary principles of humanity.... It's such a painful sight that I don't stay but a minute or two as a rule. It's a painful thing.... I feel so sorry for them, so ashamed of myself that I get out of the room."

What visitors do not see is the humiliating and unnecessary body-cavity strip search inmates are subjected to before and after each visit. Once the prisoner is naked, every single part of the body is inspected. Inmates have lodged repeated protests of this practice, but to no avail.

An important essay in *Live from Death Row*, entitled "On Tilt," describes the combined impact of non-contact visits and solitary confinement. "Mix in solitary confinement, around-the-clock lock-in, no-contact visits, no prison jobs, no educational programs by which to grow, psychiatric 'treatment' facilities designed only to drug you into a coma; ladle in hostile, overtly racist prison guards and staff; add the weight of the falling away of family ties, and you have all the fixings for a stressful psychic stew designed to deteriorate, to erode one's humanity--designed, that is, by the state, with full knowledge of its effects."

The article explains that over a century ago, after a case was brought before the Supreme Court, solitary confinement was declared unconstitutional. When a similar case came before Chief Justice Rehnquist in 1986, he remarked, "Nobody promised them a rose garden."

This vindictive attitude dominates America's political establishment and media. Having abandoned the policy of social reform, the authorities now answer all the problems caused by growing social inequality and alienation with ever-longer prison terms and an increasing number of state executions.

"There is a quickening on the nation's death rows of late--a picking up of the pace of the march toward death," writes Mumia. "The political prod is sparking movement, and judges in death cases are beginning to find themselves under increasing pressure to make the final judgment.

"Both politicians and judges continue to ride that tide that washes toward the execution chamber's door. No matter that of the ten states with the highest murder rate, eight lead the country in executions that supposedly deter; no matter that of the ten states with the lowest rate, only one (Utah) has executed anyone since 1976. No matter that the effectiveness of the death penalty is not really debated; no matter that the contention that the death penalty makes citizens safer is no longer seriously argued.

"States that have not slain in a generation now ready their machinery: generators whine, poison liquids are mixed, gases are measured and readied, silent chambers await the order to smother life. Increasingly, America's northern states now join the rushing pack."

In the essay "Human Waste Camps," from *Live from Death Row*, Abu-Jamal begins: "A dark, repressive trend in the business field known as 'corrections' is sweeping the United States, and it bodes ill both for the captives and for the communities from which they were captured."

Mumia relates the experiences of a youth who was forced to grow up in prison. "Rabbani" was placed in an adult prison at the age of 15 after being convicted for an alleged robbery with an air pistol. Because of several altercations with prison guards, Rabbani grew into adulthood in shackles. After repeatedly being told that his legal appeals were denied, he became very bitter and deeply cynical. He never knew what it was like to grow up outside the world of repression and violence.

"When I hear easy, catchy, mindless slogans like 'three strikes, you're out,' I think of men like Rabbani who had one strike (if not one foul) and are, for all intents and purposes, already outside of any game worth playing."

Two other articles in *Live from Death Row* describe the barbaric treatment meted out to inmates at the Pennsylvania facilities where Mumia has been imprisoned. In September 1992 a prisoner named Bobby Brightwell testified against prison guards as a defendant at his own trial. During his imprisonment guards developed a hatred toward him because he filed several complaints. In April 1992, after returning from the prison exercise yard, he was escorted by four guards armed with batons.

Warning him to mind his own business, they called him "nigger" and beat him in the head and neck. When he was finally placed back in his cell, the guard deliberately slammed the metal door onto his back. After a period of vomiting and defecating blood, he was placed in a psychiatric observation unit on a mattress drenched in urine with a hole in the floor for a toilet.

After a period of three days, the prison deputies ordered Brightwell back to the restricted housing unit, the site of the first assault, and ignored his pleas about his safety. Upon return, the guards placed him in a cell with a nonfunctional light, where he was beaten again to such an extent that he told the court, "I felt punches and pain everywhere."

Following his testimony, Brightwell was acquitted on charges of

assault. The prison guards never faced any charges for beating him.

Another inmate, Manny, came to prison as a lifelong epileptic. Prescription medication had controlled his seizures for 10 years before he arrived at Huntingdon prison. After being placed in a disciplinary unit, he began to experience a series of seizures so powerful that they left him in a coma. It was only when he demanded outside medical attention that he learned why this had happened. An outside physician told him that a number of drugs that actually caused seizures were being added to his daily medication. Manny's liver became swollen and to this day he suffers from constant pain as he battles the prison's medical bureaucracy.

Death Blossoms: Reflections from a Prisoner of Conscience, focuses more on Mumia's political evolution. In reading this volume, this author senses a definite political disorientation, compounded by 16 years of imprisonment and forced isolation, and the reactionary political environment in the United States.

A critical assessment of *Death Blossoms* and the political outlook of its author does not, however, detract from Mumia's courage nor his devotion to expose injustice and oppression. While the *World Socialist Web Site* has sharp political differences with MOVE, the spiritualist and black cultural nationalist group with which Mumia is affiliated, there is no question that he is a victim of state repression who has been targeted because of his long record of outspoken opposition to police repression and racism.

It was the conditions of poverty and police brutality in working class areas of Philadelphia that led to Mumia's political radicalization. As a teenager he joined the Black Panther Party during the turbulent years of the 1960s and became a minister of information, traveling around the country filing reports for the party's news journals.

Mumia outlines the role of the FBI in penetrating and breaking up the movement. He explains how state agencies sent in informers and provocateurs, murdered dozens of Black Panther members by 1974 and jailed an entire section of its leadership.

Mumia refers to his own FBI file, some 800 pages, which his lawyers obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. "How many people can brag--and I use that term with a little humor--about having an FBI file from the time they were fourteen?" writes Mumia. The files obtained from the government also exposed two previous attempts to frame him while in the Panthers, one for murder and the other for robbery.

Live from Death Row and *Death Blossoms* are the work of a talented journalist who documents, from his 16 years of experience behind bars, the brutality as well as the social consequences of capitalist "justice" in America. These books stand as an indictment of the profit system and should be read by all those concerned with the defense of democratic rights.



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