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## Book Review

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# On Death Row in Texas: A View from France

by Christine Bierre

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### **La machine tuer**

by Colette Berthès with Bernard Fillaire  
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*La machine tuer* (“The Killing Machine”) is a book about the author’s fight to save the life of Odell Barnes, a man condemned to death in Texas. With great simplicity, and the moving spirit that characterizes any selfless struggle to bring about justice, Colette Berthès presents us with the case of Odell Barnes, which is both common and very special.

It is the story of a black child born in the ghetto of Wichita Falls, a run-down city in Texas where Afro-American children have no chance to survive. His father was an alcoholic who beat his wife. Then there was the street, “a garbage heap into which all vices were thrown” and welfare was non-existent. Dealers and drug users were all over the place, and every family, at one point or another, had at least one member in jail.

Barnes was not spared this fate: alcohol, misdemeanors, crack, women . . . he went through it all. Then came a rapid escalation. He was first sentenced to ten years in prison in 1987 for several holdups. Twenty-two months later, he was released on parole, even though he had asked to remain in prison until he could finish a vocational education with skills that would allow him to get and hold down a job.

On the outside, unable to find work, he fell back into his old ways, taking up with his buddies — Johnny Ray Humphrey and Pat Williams, the main local dealer — and petty crimes. Then, he made a major mistake, stealing \$3,000 from one of Williams’s thugs, who promised a reward to anyone who would help him take revenge. Barnes was later accused, wrongfully, of killing one of his lovers, Helen Bass.

The author depicts the corruption in Texas, whose climate Barnes characterized as “just as vicious as the justice system,” hot in Summer, very cold in Winter, and no flowers in Spring. A state in which Gov. George W. Bush, who okayed the executions of over 100 death row prisoners, ruled the roost.

The investigators and lawyers whom Barnes was finally able to hire, thanks in part to money raised by the French

association “Lutte pour la Justice” (Fight for Justice), managed to uncover a whole system of corruption. At the bottom of the ladder were overzealous policemen, ready, in order to keep their jobs, to falsify evidence and to produce cooperative witnesses. At the top, corrupt prosecuting attorneys and judges, ready, in order to get reelected, to demand capital punishment.

Then you have a perfectly unjust system of defense, whose efficiency depends on money, wherein it is up to the defendant’s lawyer to conduct a counter-investigation proving his client’s innocence. Many death row prisoners are there because their lawyers were court-appointed, unmotivated, all too often incompetent, and/or without the financial means to defend their clients.

Berthès also reveals to us a vicious system where nothing can stop the legal machine, once it has pronounced the death sentence. Although the counter-investigation led by Barnes’s friends proved his innocence beyond the shadow of a doubt, and uncovered a conspiracy against him, involving attorney Barry Macha and killers Pat Williams and Johnny Ray Humphrey, no appeals court, not even the U.S. Supreme Court, found a way to stop the death machine!

Although the conditions leading to Barnes’s execution are relatively commonplace in the United States, Berthès also shows us a very special quality in Barnes which allowed him, while looking death in the face, to spark a powerful international movement against the death penalty, bringing tens of thousands of people to fight for a cause, which made them better people.

As a young child, he was said to be curious about everything, blessed with a magical smile, a kind of Robin Hood of the ghetto. According to the author, in prison, Barnes painted a lot: “One painting showed a brightly colored butterfly, with folded wings, coming out of the pupa. Every time I look at this painting, I think of the transformation of Barnes. The petty delinquent from the Wichita Falls ghetto became, in this gray, inhuman place on death row, a generous man, filled with compassion, enjoying every tiny crumb of happiness, be it his own or others.”

There was also something very special in the movement that developed in France and elsewhere, to save him. “I entered into his life by chance, or perhaps, as Jim Morrisson says, because ‘we tend towards a goal that has chosen us already,’ ” reports Berthès.

A long-time militant for various humanitarian causes, Berthès began on a small scale, mobilizing acquaintances, contacting newspapers, translating a leaflet. Little by little, a powerful movement for Odell Barnes was built. Within a few months, more than 400 people had joined Lutte pour la Justice and tens of thousands of francs had been raised to pay for investigators, DNA and other forensic laboratory tests, as well as lawyers. From the schoolchildren holding bake sales, to the artists who donated their time, a true citizens’ movement shook up France, even drawing the attention of bigwigs such as Minister of Education Jack Lang and André Vallini.