

Penning a Novel as a Novice in Isolation

Jason Goudlock

As an African-American male who grew up in the 1980's in the inner city of Cleveland, Ohio, I never imagined I'd one day be incarcerated for nearly two decades for committing the senseless crimes of feloniously assaulting and robbing people. Back then, when basketball and rap music were my primary interests, I imagined I would one day become either a professional basketball player or the second coming of LL Cool J. Unfortunately, as a fatherless adolescent who lacked self-discipline and craved to be loved by my cocaine-addicted mother, I never realized my youthful ambitions.

While I never imagined I would become a convicted felon serving hard time, I also never imagined I would one day write a book.

After having my physical freedom taken away in 1993, living in prison without any moral or financial support, I realized the only way I was going to find support was to manufacture my own. I didn't have a clue until I found *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, an autobiography of a man who had lived as a slave, and I decided to write my own story. In the fall of 1999, I started writing a couple of pages per day, and in a few months I managed to churn out a couple of hundred rough, raw pages that made me feel proud. My hard work seemed to be amounting to something, and I began to feel like a writer. Then, out of nowhere, I got into a physical confrontation with another prisoner, and I was put in the hole. Two weeks later, when I was released, I learned my property had been lost while I was in the hole. I've never seen the manuscript of my autobiography-in-progress again.

That loss knocked the wind out of my sails. In a different world I would have bounced back and begun rewriting my life story with strengthened resolve to complete it. But I was still getting my mind around my six-to-25 year sentence plus a nine-year sentence of "actual incarceration" for gun specification sentencing enhancements. The anger I felt about losing my property took over my mind, and I parted ways with my writing aspirations.

After the start of the new millennium, frustrated by the fact that I was still in dire straits without anybody in my corner, confined like a dog in a kennel, I started getting into fights with other prisoners on a regular basis. I watched many seasons go by from inside the drab, solitary confines of a cell in the hole. Instead of doing my time, I allowed time to start doing me, and in the spring of 2005 I was transferred to the super-maximum security housing unit at the Ohio State Penitentiary, charged with assaulting an officer while I was in leg irons with my hands cuffed behind my back.

Railroaded into Ohio's "supermax," I let 23-hour solitary confinement worsen my behavior. I hurled obscenities at officers and their superiors whenever they came near me, and I became a target for reprisals from the administration. Fortunately, during this time I met an older, charismatic political prisoner, Siddique Abdullah Hasan¹, a seasoned writer and editor of an anti-death penalty newsletter. Hasan, was held three cells from me, and I introduced myself while he was exercising in the dayroom area in front of my cell. He took a liking to me and offered wisdom to me on a regular basis during our brief daily conversations. "You don't have to meet every situation with aggression," he advised me one day. "It's like when a bug keeps flying in your face: you don't have to kill it. All you have to do is just swat it away." It took a while, but I began to heed Hasan's words, and my behavior improved. Instead of arguing all day, I started reading, and after reading some of Hasan's published essays, I felt my interest in writing come alive again. I decided to give it another try.

I decided to write a novel loosely based on my own experience growing up as a troubled youth who made big mistakes and found injustice in America's criminal justice system. Fiction, I decided, would free me to paint a broader picture of what it's like for hundreds of thousands of young Black males to grow up in America's inner cities. In my novel, *Brother of the Struggle*, I try to offer the reader a glimpse into the struggles encountered by countless young Black males.

I started the first draft of *Brother of the Struggle* in the summer of 2005. At first I wrote one to three pages per day, usually late at night, when everyone was sleeping. It seemed impossible to write in the day because of the constant commotion in my cellblock. So I became a night owl and, as a result, a coffee drinker too. Slowly but surely the pages of my draft began adding up, and I estimated I would be able to complete the final version of my draft some time in 2006.

1 Siddique Abdullah Hasan, an African-American Imam, was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death for his alleged leadership role in the infamous 1993 prison uprising at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, Ohio. There is information about Hasan's case at www.FreeHasan.org. See also, Staughton Lynd, *Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011.

Less than two months after I started my second literary journey, an invitation of friendship came to me on a social networking website from a kind-hearted young woman, Nicia Aiyetoro. As fate would have it Nicia Aiyetoro was the author of two unpublished books, *Children of the State* and *What the . . . ! & ? : A Straight Up Guide to Life, Love and Money*. Excited by the prospect of getting to know someone who shared my interest in writing, I wrote back and told her about my novel. She began helping me with my writing skills, and she typed up all the pages I had written in cursive.

With the help of a newfound friend in my corner and my daily writing regimen, I should have been able to coast to my projected completion in 2006. But isolation proved to be more difficult for me than I anticipated. Six months of doors slamming every fifteen minutes when officers did their security range checks began to unnerve me. My body would lock up in a rigid state of tension as though I were trying to do a million push-ups nonstop. It made me irritable and aggressive, and I wasted many hours and most of my energy arguing with people for days at a time.

Those days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into years. I made myself believe I was working on the novel, but I was actually procrastinating. And I was frustrating my friend, my source of support, Nicia Aiyetoro, who said more than once that she was growing impatient with my slow writing progress. I should have taken heed, but I didn't, and in 2008, after three years of patience, Nicia Aiyetoro abruptly ended our correspondence.

The sudden reality of being back on my own shook me to the core, and I couldn't blame anyone but myself. Still, I felt anger toward the world and stopped caring about anything at all. I was miserable, and I hated waking up in the morning. For months I felt no motivation to write.

Languishing in my own misery for those long months, I began to think about how I could get my manuscript typed if I did get back to writing. Then I read an essay about torture and solitary confinement by a retired college professor, William Nichols, and decided to reach out to him and ask if he would help me get my manuscript typed. Professor Nichols must have been impressed with my determination because he volunteered to type everything I'd already written.

When I began corresponding with the professor, I figured my manuscript was three-fourths complete. Instead of completing it, and having him wait for me to finish, I hand-copied all my completed pages and mailed them to him chapter by chapter so he could begin typing. While copying, I made dozens of revisions to each chapter.

At the beginning of 2009, in the middle of serving a 36-month sentencing continuance I'd received from the Parole Board, everything was going smoothly with work on my manuscript. Once again, however, I ran into turbulence when I was moved into a cellblock made up mostly of White prisoners who were openly racist. Less than two hours after I moved into the new cellblock, one of the racists called me a nigger. What followed was a two-year war of words with a few stabbing attempts against me by three of the racists. They tried to get to me while I was showering in a locked shower cell out of view of the control post. They signaled the preoccupied control post officers that they were ready to shower while they were exercising in the dayroom area, hoping the officers would slip up and release the shower door while I was still in there, giving them a chance to stab me with a shank. Control post officers have been duped before by this strategy, but in my case fortunately they failed to take the bait.

Having already lost the support of one lifeline and then getting a second chance by the professor's support, I feared the time I was wasting on warring with a bunch of wannabe White supremacists might lose me the backing of the professor, who was waiting for me to get the revised manuscript chapters in the mail to him. This time I vowed to rise above the anger and racial conflict. I vowed to complete the novel and get it in the mail, and in the first quarter of 2012, I did just that. Finally.

Jason Goudlock is a progressive writer embedded in the struggle against the repressive United States prison industrial complex. If you would like to offer him support on his quest to attain justice for Ohio old-law prisoners, you can contact him at the following:

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Learn more about Jason Goudlock and his struggle for freedom at freejasongoudlock.org.