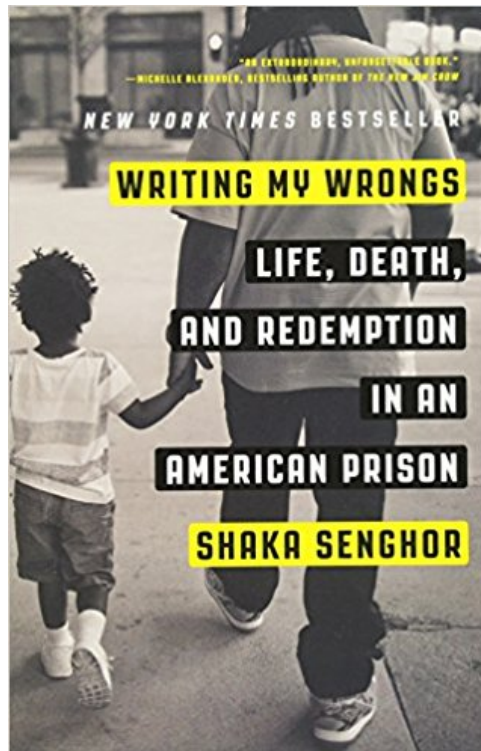


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**Review of *Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death, and Redemption in an American Prison*
By Shaka Senghor**

Adult/Educator Reviewer: Brady Nash
The University of Texas, Austin, TX
Student Review: Gemma Williams, College Freshman



Senghor, S. (2016). *Writing my wrongs: Life, death, and redemption in an American prison*. New York, NY: Convergent Books.

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Adult Review: Brady Nash

Shaka Senghor's *Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death and Redemption in an American Prison* is a powerful, human narrative of one man's journey through the Michigan prison system after he is convicted of murder.

Filled with visceral sensory detail, short, cutting sentences and winding, personal explorations, Senghor's memoir invites readers into his inner and outer worlds with openness and honesty. Jumping back in time between 1980s Detroit and Senghor's experiences as a prisoner across two decades, the narrative is gripping and heart-wrenching. While Senghor takes great care to be direct in presenting and reflecting upon his own actions, his prose highlights the ways in which both visible and invisible systems have impacted his life as he navigated the streets in Detroit and an extended period of incarceration, including seven years of solitary confinement.

Writing My Wrongs is an intensely human story, and a humanizing narrative for a segment of the population that is often dehumanized in our culture and media. Without making excuses for his actions or simplifying himself through binary conceptions of good and bad people, he provides a complex counter-narrative to the one-dimensional vision of convicts,

"Writing My Wrongs is an intensely human story, and a humanizing narrative for a segment of the population that is often dehumanized in our culture and media."

particularly if they are young black men, played and replayed in films, TV shows, and cable news. As stirring as the physical descriptions of places, scenes and events are in the book, the most powerful element here is Senghor himself, a complex, sensitive, aching human with a multitude of dimensions. His confusion, pride, thoughtfulness, hope, and the full array of emotions and qualities we all share allow us to relate poignantly to Senghor.

At the same time, a great deal of this book is hard to read. Senghor's prose is bold and descriptive, its depiction of prison life assaulting to the senses. Near the beginning of his time moving between a network of facilities across the state of Michigan, Senghor describes "the nauseating smell of spoiled ass, funky armpits, and crusty socks" (2016, p. 8) that confront him as he enters the Wayne County Jail. This description seems tame compared to the horrors he witnesses and experiences in other prisons. The physicality of life in captivity is powerfully rendered, the abjectness that comes with imprisoning so many bodies in confined spaces made palpable. This level of detail, presented hand-in-hand with the reflective narrative of Senghor's growth while in prison, brings to life the dehumanizing nature of our country's prison system. It is worth noting explicitly that there are a great number of disturbing scenes presented with soberness and lucidity. Rape, murder, feces, and an array of literal and emotional violence that many readers may be privileged enough to avoid in real life are on full display. Teachers considering recommending this book should be cognizant of its content, which is disturbing by its nature, and take into account

their knowledge of and relationship with students who might be interested.

Student Review: Gemma Williams

I entered the reading of this book with a sense of trepidation. There's a sense of dread instilled in me as a black reader, having the instinctual fear of law enforcement officers and mass incarceration facilities. Upon beginning the book, I feared that Shaka Senghor's journey would resemble that of many other black men victimized by the institutional racism gripping America. And as I was reading, I feared that Senghor would never be freed from the bonds which held him captive, even though logic told me he would have had to have been free to publish this book. Even after I'd read through the afterword, Senghor's writing had instilled a sense of hope in me; a hope for him, for his family, for his future. I found myself hoping that he was happy.

That's what I found most striking about this memoir: the intimacy Senghor is able to inspire between the reader and his experience in multiple prisons. Part of this is Senghor's bravery; he is unwilling to shy away from difficult topics (like brutality, rape, and suicide) and the tribulations he was forced to endure and invites the reader to slip into his mind and feel the way he felt during those times. Part of this is simply at the hands of vivid, honest writing: the sincerity with which Senghor writes almost makes it feel as if the reader had been invited to read Senghor's diary, or private journal. But what makes this book particularly thoughtful is his level of introspection.

Having spent seven years in solitary confinement (and making it out alive), Senghor details his process towards forgiving himself for his past crimes, as well as forgiving those who had hurt him. However, he does this form of taking accountability for his actions while still acknowledging the abuse and neglect he faced as a boy growing up, reaching an intricate balance where he acknowledges the toxicity of the system of poverty and racism in which he was raised while also recognizing he could have done better-- something which many readers will be able to relate to when looking back at their own past mistakes.

"...for those who are willing to listen with open ears and open eyes to his journey to success, for those seeking to abolish the stereotypes they learned surrounding racialized mass incarceration, and even for those who stumble upon this book by chance and are amused by Senghor's clever title, I would recommend this book."

This book isn't for everyone, however. Shaka Senghor has faced a multitude of struggles, and recounts them in great detail. If anyone is sensitive to topics like rape, suicide, drug addiction, and gun violence, I would warn potential readers with those triggers so they are prepared to fully focus on Senghor's experience. I would also be aware of the emotions of students of color when reading this text: as I was reading even just the first chapter I felt tears well up in my eyes and I had to bite my lip to keep from crying. Senghor's life story is one which demands consideration from both the heart and the

mind. And for those who are willing to listen with open ears and open eyes to his journey to success, for those seeking to abolish the stereotypes they learned surrounding racialized mass incarceration, and even for those who stumble upon this book by chance

and are amused by Senghor's clever title, I would recommend this book. And I wish for you all to feel the same hope I felt upon experiencing Senghor's writing and understanding just how important it is that his story is heard.