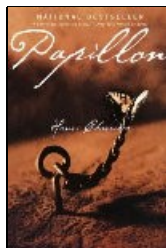


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Book Review

Papillon

by [Henri Charriere](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer

Posted: April 3, 2006

I first read *Papillon* more than thirty years ago, not long after it was published. A few years later I saw the movie with Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman. In fact I projected it, since my first real job was as a movie projectionist in Lake Placid, New York.

Yet the images that stayed with me over the years came from the book, not the movie, and when I returned to *Papillon* not long ago I was struck with how much I remembered and how well the book stands up.

Papillon is not a great work of literature, but it comes closer than I remembered. In some ways I was a fussier critic at the age of twelve than I am today, and some of the phrases I remember seeming stazy at the time — like the opening line: “It was a knockout blow — a punch so overwhelming that I didn't get back on my feet for fourteen years” — no longer bother me. Instead I'm impressed with the clear, strong language of the book, and the author's ability not just to render every sweaty, painful detail of his escape attempts but also the quieter agonies and victories, like the hours-long recreations of past days that helped him keep his sanity while in solitary confinement.

Critics have cast doubt on the accuracy of some of Charriere's account, and some of the scenes — particularly his idyllic account of living among the Guajiro Indians with two beautiful young wives — seem a little too good to be true. But whether you can believe every detail, Charriere has created an enduring story that continues to bring new life to that battered phrase, the triumph of the human spirit. Many of the images that have stayed with me all these years are those of his tireless, ingenious escape attempts: the explosion that tore a hole in a prison wall, the guard knocked out by a cup of drugged coffee, and finally the simple bag of coconuts that carried him to shore from Devil's Island.

Much is written about the horrors of Devil's Island penal colony, but Charriere points out that it was actually much healthier to live there than in prison on the swampy mainland. To Charriere, the most frightening thing about Devil's Island was how easy it was to get comfortable there, and to forget about freedom. *Papillon* was one of the few who never forgot.

About the Reviewer

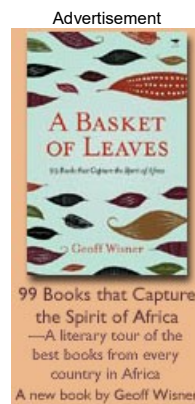
[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.

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