

Q&A with Jarvis Jay Masters Author of *That Bird Has My Wings*

What's the meaning of your memoir's title, *That Bird Has My Wings*?

This title actually comes from a story in the book, "Wings." One day in the prison exercise yard I found myself saving a seagull's life from the senseless violence of a fellow inmate. The bird symbolized my deeply held desire to be free, the part of me that wanted to fly over the fence and just keep going. The act of writing helps me find freedom—even for just a little while. It's a freedom I dream about and one day hope to have. That bird remains my inspiration.

Some people may read your subtitle and scoff at the notion of "an innocent man on death row." In what way are you claiming to be innocent?

Surely I am not claiming to be innocent of the bad decisions I made throughout my life. I made plenty and have expressed in my book, and elsewhere, how deeply regretful I am for all the suffering I have caused others. But I am, in fact, innocent of participating in planning to kill someone, the conviction that sent me to death row.

For whom are you writing and what do you hope to accomplish by telling this story?

My hope is that this memoir gets in the hands of the many professionals who feel a personal responsibility for doing everything possible in preventing and protecting kids from becoming lost and abandoned in the foster care system. It takes the heartfelt willingness of



dedicated and committed adults to provide greater opportunities to change the direction for youth in similar life circumstances. And I hope this book about my life story will contribute to that in some way.

What means do you have at your disposal to write on death row?

Both of my books were written in solitary confinement, and the only writing instrument I was allowed was a "pen filler," the inside of a ballpoint pen. (The hard plastic cylinder could conceivably be used as a weapon, so the prison authorities take that off before

giving an inmate a pen.) Over the days and months that I wrote this memoir, I went through many pen fillers.

Pema Chödrön, a bestselling author and personal friend, calls you a "role model" for many children and adolescents out there. How can you serve as a role model while sitting on death row?

I am not sure about a "role model," but what I've discovered out of my own life circumstances can hopefully benefit others. I've been through the system and can identify with those kids who may be following in my path. I believe we are all expected to give something back. I hope that the publication of *That Bird Has My Wings* does everything possible to prevent abused or ignored children and adolescents from ending their lives or entering a 4' x 9' prison cell, the likes of San Quentin, and instead enables them to live out the rest of their natural lives in freedom.