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### Book Review

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Wright Jr., Isaac. *Marked for Life: One Man's Fight for Justice from the Inside*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022. 316p. \$29.99.

*Reviewed by Staci J. Pratt\**

¶62 In this legal memoir, Isaac Wright Jr. traces his heroic journey fighting a wrongful conviction on drug-dealing conspiracy charges. Wright opens the story with a portrait of his success as a young music producer and the manager of his wife Sunshine's career. He is seated in a red modified AMG Hammer when he is framed by a local drug dealer who throws a brick of cocaine in his direction. The waiting police swarm Wright, and he begins to drown in the systemic corruption and misconduct of the local police and district attorney. He is eventually sentenced to Trenton State Prison for life, plus 70 years, in 1991.

¶63 Against this tide, Wright found solace in the prison law library. "The law library would begin as a curiosity, but as the months bled together, as my hopes for a true legal advocate dissolved, that place would become my lifeline" (p.55–56). Even though the "law library was equal parts inadequate and intimidating" (p.56), it offered Wright the opportunity for empowerment and the tools to eventually obtain freedom. "Those musty books were deceptively powerful . . . when I opened them, it was like lifting the hood on society itself, like getting a peek at the spark plugs and shafts of the larger system" (p.58).

¶64 Wright became his own lawyer, appearing pro se at a 1996 post-conviction relief hearing that eventually led to his freedom. He also assisted fellow inmates in asserting their legal rights, using information gained from the law library. However, the value of his knowledge and his willingness to teach other inmates made him a target for the guards' aggression. "It offended [another prisoner's] sense of fairness that there were murderers and rapists in there, but I was picked on because I was learning the law and helping out my fellow inmates" (p.105).

¶65 The law library Wright accessed while incarcerated at Trenton existed due to previous litigation by the prison inmates. Relying on the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Bounds v Smith*,<sup>17</sup> the Trenton inmates successfully argued that the constitutional right to meaningful access to the courts meant prison officials must provide inmates with a law library or assistance from persons trained in the law. As a result, the Inmates Legal Association (ILA) "at Trenton was a huge legal and administrative machine, with multiple offices of desks, fax and copy machines, typewriters and word processors, a full law library with updated treatises rivaling any you could find in the average courthouse" (p.194). Wright's work there and his tenacity in document review brought him to the smoking gun in his case, a prosecution memo demonstrating a conspiracy to cover up police misconduct.

¶66 A lasting question remains, however. What will happen to others like Isaac Wright Jr. in the future? Since the *Bounds* decision, the Court has sharply curtailed an

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17. 430 U.S. 817 (1977).

inmate's right to access a law library. In *Lewis v. Casey*,<sup>18</sup> the Court rejected the existence of a free-standing right to a law library or legal assistance for correctional inmates. *Lewis* arose from a Ninth Circuit decision requiring the Arizona Department of Corrections to significantly upgrade their law library facilities. Justice Scalia reversed the decision, requiring a demonstration of "actual injury" prior to recovery. In addition, the right of access is only guaranteed for certain claims: direct and collateral attacks upon a conviction or sentence and civil rights actions challenging conditions of confinement. Finally, in *Kane v. Garcia*,<sup>19</sup> the Court held that a pro se individual housed in jail before trial did not have a clearly established right under federal law to access to a law library, even when asserting claims for habeas relief.

¶67 Changes in technology also complicate access. According to the Prison Policy Institute, "Prisons and jails are increasingly turning to electronic law libraries, moving from traditional book collections to databases accessed via shared kiosks or tablets. As of 2018, 88% of states have transitioned to electronic-only legal research tools."<sup>20</sup> Many inmates struggle with literacy, however, both for printed and electronic resources. For example, one New Jersey inmate sued when he could not navigate Lexis.<sup>21</sup>

¶68 Wright's story highlights not only his personal determination, but the incredible value of access to a prison law library. Without legal knowledge, individuals lack the ability to resist injustice. According to Wright, "The criminal justice system was destroying Black people . . . with impunity. And they were using what was ostensibly the glue of a functioning society—the law—to do it. Through complex procedures, deceptive phrases, and indecipherable rules, the law has been wielded like a weapon, sharpened and pointed at those who can't afford to learn or buy it" (p.55). A system of justice depends on meaningful access and its legitimacy. Wright's memoir is a call to action for all who care about our institutions. "In a place where nothing made sense, the library was a sanctuary, a dusty temple, a well-lit path" (p.65). It is natural to pray that no one else falls into Isaac Wright Jr.'s predicament. However, we must strive to ensure that if someone does, the doors to the law library remain open.

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18. 518 U.S. 343 (1996).

19. 546 U.S. 9 (2005).

20. Stephen Raheer & Andrea Fenster, *A Tale of Two Technologies: Why "Digital" Doesn't Always Mean "Better" for Prison Law Libraries*, PRISON POL'Y INST. (Oct. 28, 2020), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/10/28/digital-law-libraries/> [<https://perma.cc/7GBW-JLCR>].

21. *Brown v. Hopper*, 2010 WL 3210697, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 82100 (D.N.J. Aug. 11, 2010).