

WHY WE WATCH

On the farm
with the ghost

by Wright Thompson



EVEN TUA LLY TH IS WILL BE A STORY about a Frito pie, and the reasons we are drawn to stadiums, but that comes later, after the party hosted by the warden. It's a garden party, and from the look of it, one partially staffed by murderers and thieves. I wish prison buffet stations included not only a description of the dish but the crime of the person serving it: MAC N CH EESE—STA BBE D MOTH ER 42 TIMES WITH AN ICE PICK.

I'm in a hellish bend of murky river called Angola, Louisiana, and today is the annual prison rodeo. In one of those odd twists in the life of a sportswriter, I'm the guest of Billy Cannon—The Billy Cannon: football player, counterfeiter, felon, bayou legend. Everyone in Louisiana knows about his punt return on Halloween, 1959, has seen the black-and-white footage. In the hallway of a fancy New York City hotel, I once watched an LSU man recognize Cannon and proceed to recite the radio play-by-play. In some ways, that sepia image trailed

Billy off the field, a shackle, pulling him back toward the past, yet away from the people who watched him run. He exists in black and white, so it's startling to see him in person, with bright blue eyes and a weathered, reddish nose.

"Are you Billy Cannon?" an LSU fan asks.

"I'm what's left of him," Cannon says.

The warden, a bowling ball of a man named Burl Cain—who once told me that everything was "peaches but the can, chicken but the feet," which I'm still trying to decipher—notes the way people react to the former running back, who, after his own release from federal prison, is now the Louisiana State Penitentiary dentist.

"Everybody loves Billy Cannon," the warden says.

Cannon is telling stories, about raising his horses, about the way Tiger Stadium glows at night. The fascination with him is a

strange thing to see up close, even stranger to articulate. It's not just that he's a famous athlete. There's something else they see in him, or want to see, which is why they crowd around. Everyone knows why he went to jail, about his burying counterfeit bills in coolers around his farm, so it's a little funny when he pulls out a check he got for signing his name for a few hours.

"I'm gonna throw it in a deep hole," he says.

He pauses.

"Horses," he says.

As much as Billy Cannon loves his horses, people want to hear him talk football, so the conversation moves eventually to the current LSU team.

"They could have used you," someone jokes.

Billy smiles.

"They'd have killed me," he says.

This goes on. It's sort of like they're seeing a ghost. They all know the punt return, can see each grainy cut and juke, and ... and ... it's never occurred to them that there's a real man who did those things, who remembers the punt return in color. Everyone knows what Billy Cannon did, but nobody knows how, or why, or what it was like to be young and untouchable.

Finally, it's time to go down the road to the arena, where convicts will get in the ring with bulls. Cannon excuses himself. He'd rather go play with his horses, he says, walking off alone down the road.

The bull coldly picks them off, the hits landing with a sickening thud, and the last man to flinch wins.



I sit in the warden's box, eating—FRITO PIE—BURNED DOWN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL—and looking into the arena floor. Stone-cold killers sit at a card table, playing chicken with a pissed-off bull. Get on YouTube and watch this; search "convict poker." The bull coldly picks them off, the hits landing with a sickening thud, and the last

man to flinch wins. I sit down the row from the white-haired warden, who looks like Caesar, presiding in judgment over all he surveys—plantation fields, an elaborate mechanism for killing his fellow man, a rodeo, and one former Heisman Trophy-winning tailback. But, it occurs to me, he doesn't own, or even know, their thoughts. Nor do I.

I don't know why they're here, or what brought them into this ring with this animal, and I don't know what made Billy Cannon run, or what it felt like on a long-ago Halloween night, when everything in his world was, briefly, perfect. There are people who watch, and there are people who do, and the tiny space between the two cannot be bridged. Whether it's a dusty jail or the loudest football stadium in the world, there is something known only to the man in the arena. Maybe that's why we watch—a prison rodeo, a punt return, an old man at a garden party.

Maybe this time we'll know, if only for a breath, what it's like to be them. 🍷

Gravy guest editor Wright Thompson is a senior writer for ESPN.com and ESPN The Magazine.

PHOTO, PAGE 13: Untitled, from the series Nothing to Lose (2010), by Darryl Richardson.

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