

The Man in the Box

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Based on a true story

Willie Bosket is considered the most violent inmate in New York state history. He lives in a specially-designed 6' by 10' Plexiglas cell and is monitored by video cameras twenty four hours a day. As terrible as his initial crimes were – killing two passengers on a New York City subway when he was fifteen – Willie is not in prison today because of them. He will remain in his cell for the remainder of his life because of his attacks on guards, representatives of what he calls “The System,” the network of reform schools and juvenile institutions and prisons that he has spent his life in since he was nine years old. What drives a man to such extremes of violence, and to what end? Does the blame rest entirely with Willie, or should his environment, upbringing, and the long-term effects of his solitary incarceration share some of it? *The Man in the Box* tells this story.

Willie Bosket’s life has been a life divided in segments, sentences of time spent in various states of incarceration. The film, then, is broken up into these segments of time in an effort to capture a life marked by change but also lived in the stasis of confinement. We follow Willie at age nine, where he is first institutionalized for petty theft and refusing to attend school, Willie at age fifteen, where he murdered two passengers on a subway and the media frenzy that follows, Willie at eighteen, serving out his sentence for the subway killings and corresponding with his convict father, Willie at age twenty-six, where he declares war on the justice system and strives to become the most violent inmate in history, and Willie as he is today, at age forty-two, crippled by a medical condition, alone and as helpless as a child.

What makes Willie’s story so striking is its complexity, marked by extremes in both environment and upbringing and ancestry. What, if anything, is responsible for Willie’s behavior? The film explores Willie’s environment, a dilapidated 70s-era Harlem addled with crime and violence, his upbringing, an impoverished home-life with no father and a loving but mostly passive and abusive mother, and his ancestry, the son of a double-murderer who led an eerily similar life to Willie’s, though the two never met.

Willie’s father, Butch, in the long tradition of Bosket males stretching back to Civil War times, was an intellectually gifted child prone to outbursts of extreme violence. While Willie’s mother was pregnant with him, Butch murdered two people and was sent to prison. This episode had a lasting effect on Willie. He thought of his father as a “bad man” in the tradition of the black folk hero, and looked up to this example and tried to live his young life in light of it. In a short lived but important correspondence between the two, Willie, while in prison himself, learns that his father is a model inmate and has strived to prove himself the smartest convict in American history, just as Willie will eventually strive to prove himself the most violent. Butch completes his college

education and is elected to Phi Beta Kappa, the most prestigious of American honor societies, and the only inmate in history to do so. These wildly divergent paths between father and son speak to the potential to rise up from the system and self-destruct within it.

Though Willie's story is a sad one, it is an important, valuable and rarely explored aspect of society. With juvenile crime rates still a large problem and thousands of potential Willie Boskets living in the impoverished, squalid conditions of today's inner cities, *The Man in the Box* is a testament to those who rarely have a voice of their own.