

Amnesty International Group 22 Pasadena/Caltech News

Volume XX Number 6, June 2012

UPCOMING EVENTS

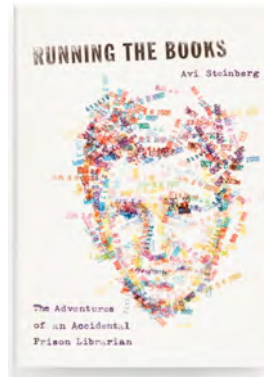
Thursday, June 28, 7:30 PM. Monthly Meeting. We meet at the Caltech Y, Tyson House, 505 S. Wilson Ave., Pasadena. (This is just south of the corner with San Pasqual. Signs will be posted.) We will be planning our activities for the coming months. Please join us! Refreshments provided.

Tuesday, July 10, 7:30 PM. Letter writing meeting at Caltech Athenaeum, corner of Hill and California in Pasadena. This informal gathering is a great way for newcomers to get acquainted with Amnesty!

Sunday, July 15, 6:30 PM. Rights Readers Human Rights Book Discussion group. This month we read "Running the Books" by Avi Steinberg.

RIGHTS READERS Human Rights Book Discussion Group

Keep up with Rights Readers at
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>



Next Rights Readers meeting:

Sunday, July 15, 6:30 PM

**Vroman's Bookstore
695 E. Colorado, Pasadena**

**RUNNING THE BOOKS
The Adventures of an
Accidental Prison Librarian**

By Avi Steinberg

COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Hi All

This month's newsletter finds our editor enjoying the warm but not too hot summer weather during our brief summer break (we go back August 13!!) while working as many extra days as she can to make up for 4 furlough days that will hit our July paycheck! (and 10 + next year...) Ouch!

It's About Time...Aung San Suu Kyi finally gets to pick up her Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo...21 years later! Group 22 and many others have written letters on her behalf, urging the Burmese government to release her from house arrest – she was finally freed in November 2010.

Be sure to read Lucas' account of the various activities Group 22 members have participated in recently. My husband and I did not attend the Tiananmen Square Massacre Commemoration dinner held in Chinatown over Memorial Day weekend. Those of you who did, I'm sure you enjoyed it. Kudos to Ann Lau, the force behind the protests for Chinese activists.

This month's book selection looks like fun – a Nice Jewish Boy (orthodox, no less!) working in a prison library?! Wonder how Martha came up with this one!

Con Cariño,
Kathy

About the Author:



Avi Steinberg was born in Jerusalem and raised in Cleveland and Boston. His work has appeared in the New York Times Magazine, Boston Globe, New York Review of Books, Salon, the Paris Review and the Daily Beast and others. *Running the Books* is his first book. It has been optioned for TV by Reveille Productions, producers of *The Office*.

BOOK REVIEW

by Dwight Garner
Published October 19, 2010
The New York Times

Steinberg's memoir, "Running the Books," about his job as a prison librarian at "the Bay" — the Suffolk County House of Correction in South Bay near Boston — gets off to an obnoxious start.

Mr. Steinberg is a self-described "asthmatic Jewish kid," a young Harvard graduate and a stalled novelist. He applied for the prison library job when he saw it posted on Craigslist. He needed the health insurance. Probably he needed a book idea too.

The early bits of "Running the Books" are as hopped-up as a spaniel with a new rubber ball. The tone is, more or less, "Augusten Burroughs Goes to the Clink." Here's a not atypical passage: "It was official. I was now on the side of angels. The Po-Po. The Fuzz. The Heat. The Big Blue Machine."

But a funny thing happens to "Running the Books" as it inches forward. Mr. Steinberg's sentences start to pop out at you, at first because they're funny and then because they're acidly funny. The book slows down. It blossoms. Mr. Steinberg proves to be a keen observer, and a morally serious one. His memoir is wriggling and alive — as involving, and as layered, as a good coming-of-age novel.

The humor bubbles up organically. When a homophobic prisoner learns about a book called "Queer Theory: An Introduction," he bellows in agony: "They got theories now?" Mr. Steinberg gets this advice from a prison staff member on how to comport himself: "Don't smile. This isn't the Gap." He listens bemusedly to one inmate's intricate disquisition on why pimping, he relates, is "the great male art form, the art form to which all others aspired."

Explaining his relatively pampered Orthodox Jewish background, Mr. Steinberg reports: "My yeshiva high school's basketball team was named not the Tigers or the Hawks, but the MCATS. As in, the Medical College Admission Test."

He nails the way that Boston is both a very big city and a very small town. "In Boston, justice is a mom-and-pop shop," he writes. "Bob throws you into the joint, Patti takes it from there." (For non-Bostonians, he elaborates: "Patti, director of the prison's education department, was my supervisor. She is married to Boston's No. 2 cop, a perennial candidate for the police commissioner's job.")

Once he's installed in his new post, after nearly failing a mandatory drug test, Mr. Steinberg comes to realize what a humming and humane place his library is. Prison officials tend to distrust libraries, because they're hard to patrol. They're good places, too, to pass notes (in books) or to plan crimes.

Worse, hardcover books can be fashioned into body armor. A few rolled-up magazines, with the application of duct tape, can be made into a billy club. "A floppy disk?" he writes, paraphrasing a security expert. "Easily outfitted into a switchblade."

But prison libraries, as Mr. Steinberg points out, are also places where lives can be rebooted. Malcolm X educated himself, and underwent a major transformation, in a Massachusetts prison library. Alas, so did James (Whitey) Bulger, the notorious Boston Irish crime boss, who learned plenty from devouring books about brutal military tactics and then used that information on the street.

The most important section in a prison library's stacks may be its law books. But inmate tastes ran to James Patterson and James Frey, to pulpy hip-hop novels and to books about dream interpretation. The most requested book of all, Mr. Steinberg says, may have been Robert Greene's "48 Laws of Power" (1998), a macho and plainspoken synthesis of the ideas in books like Machiavelli's "Prince" and Sun Tzu's "Art of War."

In the writing classes Mr. Steinberg also teaches in prison, he introduces inmates to other authors: Toni Morrison, Philip Larkin, Amiri Baraka. There's a weirdly moving moment in which Mr. Steinberg asks a group of female inmates to read a Flannery O'Connor story. "Can we see a picture of her first?" one asks. When he shows her O'Connor's photo, she says she'll read her because "she looks kind of busted up, y'know? She ain't too pretty. I trust her." A fair amount of drama seeps into "Running the Books." The author has battles, some of them frightening, with the prison guards, who mostly scorn him as a Harvard twerp. He befriends two inmates — a pimp who's writing a memoir and a woman who abandoned her son as a child — and these relationships become complicated and intense.

Mr. Steinberg listens. When a prostitute delivers a lecture about marriage and its discontents, he wisely observes: "This woman worked in the trenches of marital warfare. She had something to say on the subject."

He writes particularly well about the many, and mostly furtive, attempts at male-female communication in the prison. Letters left in books for other prisoners have a name, it turns out — they're called kites. He reads and admires many: "Some were masterpieces of the genre, contenders for the Great American Kite." Gripped by an archival impulse, he begins to save certain ones.

He watches, with awe, a form of communication called skywriting, in which male prisoners make sweeping hand motions, spelling letters in the

air. These messages are aimed at female prisoners, who look down from windows above. One of the running gags in this memoir is that few, if any, of the prisoners can pronounce Mr. Steinberg's first name: "I got called everything: Ari, Javi, Ali, Artie, Avery, Arnie, Alley, Arlo, Albie, Harley, Halley, Arfi, Advil, Alvie, Audi (as in the car), Arby (as in the fast food chain), A. V., Harvey, Harvin, and my personal favorite, which I heard but once: Ally. That name got right to the point."

In the end most people simply called Mr. Steinberg this: Bookie. Now they can also start calling him a writer.

SPECIAL EVENTS OF THE PAST MONTH by Lucas Kamp

On May 23rd, the Caltech Y Social Activism Speaker Series presented a talk by Dr. Susie Baldwin, a speaker who had been proposed by our group. The subject was "Human Trafficking, Healthcare and Underserved Populations in LA County", on which Dr. Baldwin is a recognized expert. The talk was both enlightening and moving, as the speaker explained the issues clearly and in depth, and also allowed considerable time for Q&A, which was very lively. Regretfully, the final note was somber, because the lack of funds in the current political situation means that conditions will only get worse in these areas.

On June 4th there was a candlelight vigil at the Chinese consulate on Shatto Place, LA, to commemorate the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. As always, there was an AI presence, since one of the organizers has always been Ann Lau of the Visual Artists Guild and AI Group 175. Group 22 has been attending this event for many years, and this year we were represented by myself and new group member Tracy Gore. We carried an AI banner, Tracy spoke to the crowd on AI's involvement in this issue, and we both gave interviews to the Chinese press. There were a large number of speakers (mostly in Chinese), including survivors of the massacre and their children, alternating with songs. It was a moving event.

Tracy also represented our group at another vigil on June 11th, for Li Wangyang, a Chinese labor rights activist, who was found hanged in

his hospital room in what the Chinese authorities labeled a suicide, but was probably murder. Tracy reports that this was extremely moving and quite different from the June 4th vigil.

PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE **Gao Zhisheng** by Joyce Wolf

Group 22 continues to work for imprisoned Chinese human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng (pronounced Gow Jir-sheng).

Following his brother's brief prison visit in March, which marked the first confirmation for nearly two years that Gao Zhisheng was actually alive and well, there have been no reports of further contacts. His wife, Geng He, writes in an open letter to her husband that she has tried repeatedly to contact Shaya prison by phone, but with no success. She mentions that other dissident prisoners in China have been permitted monthly visits by their families and brief phone calls, and says that she will keep trying. You can read her letter at ChinaAid.org. <http://tinyurl.com/79lvfvs>.

In her letter to Gao, Geng He writes with hope and longing, "When I go shopping with our daughter, I can't help wandering to men's wear section for a look, thinking to myself, 'This piece will look good on you.' I wonder if I should get it for you, and then I'll think, 'I'll just wait. I'll buy it for you when you come out.' She concludes, "I'm writing this letter to tell you that I will never give up on your freedom. I trust you will never give up either. I will never stop writing to you to encourage you as well as myself."

In a recent interview on NTDTV, Gao Zhisheng's daughter Geng Ge spoke about her life in the U.S.. She recalled the difficulties endured before the family fled China in 2009. She said her father would be pleased to know that she will start college this fall. <http://tinyurl.com/7t8hc2j>

On the general topic of human rights in China, you could check out Amnesty International's new Annual Report, which was released in May. www.amnesty.org/en/region/china/report-2012. For an overview of the last decade in China, try the farewell article by Guardian journalist Jonathan Watts, <http://tinyurl.com/cl8usya>. He

writes, "Compared with nine years ago, people in China have more freedom to shop, to travel and to express their views on the internet. The Communist party tolerates a degree of criticism, but step over the invisible line of what is acceptable and the consequences are brutal. In my first years in China, I interviewed several outspoken opponents – Liu Xiaobo, Gao Zhisheng, Hu Jia and Teng Biao. I was impressed back then that they were at liberty to speak out. It seemed like the act of a confident government. But all of them have subsequently been locked up and, in at least two cases, tortured."

Let's make sure that Shaya Prison knows that Gao Zhisheng is not forgotten. Send him a card of support and offer congratulations on his daughter's starting college. Postage is \$1.05. Here is his address:

Gao Zhisheng
Shaya Prison
P.O. Box 15, Sub-box 16
Shaya County, Aksu Prefecture
Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, 842208
People's Republic of China

DEATH PENALTY NEWS

By Stevi Carroll

SAFE California Campaign

November's coming and so is the ballot initiative to take the death penalty away from California. In July the SAFE California Campaign initiative will have its ballot number. Let the education of Californians begin. We have a new Amnesty organizer, William Syms, here in southern California to work on this campaign. Welcome, William.

At a meeting on June 9, Miguel Cruz discussed the need to register voters as we spread the SAFE CA word. We went over how to fill out the registration form and talked about the importance of its getting in the mail. I will do a mini in-service on registering voters at our next meeting and would be happy to explain the process to anyone interested who is not at the meeting.

As local sites for registering become available, we'll be notified so that anyone who is able can

volunteer. We discussed college students as possible registrants, especially since we are a CalTech group. If students live the majority of their year in California, they are able to register. Perhaps during the group fair, we could offer voter registration.

Having a speaker with SASS is also a possibility; although, our contact person with SASS has not responded to my emails.

Finally, oh yes, money. The SAFE campaign would like people to have house parties. Laura has volunteered her home with stipulations. We've been thinking about having an open house/pot luck to which we could invite not only our Amnesty members but also other friends who may want to learn more about the initiative. We will have information about the campaign, including how to donate and will take up a collection for us to give as a group. This endeavor is predicated on the decision of the group.

Influence of Social Media: Wu Ying's Death Sentence in China

While the Chinese courts act when public pressure supports the imposition of the death penalty, in Wu Ying's case more than 3.7 million registered tweets showed how public sentiment can influence the Chinese legal system to reverse a death sentence.

Wu Ying's crime was "for having illegally raised \$120 million in loans from private investors whom she failed to repay when her business collapsed." The difficulty private business-people have raising money sparked the public outcry. Chinese banks are more apt to loan money to state owned businesses, thus putting private ones in the position of relying on illegal private sources of capital.

Since 2006 the Chinese Supreme Court has reviewed all death sentences by lower courts, but it has never revealed how many of these sentences have been overturned. While China will not state the number of executions carried out each year, Amnesty International puts the number in the thousands, more than all other countries combined.

To read more on this story, go to <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2012/0522/In-China-public-outcry-softens-sentence-for-Wu-Ying>.

Mercy for Henry Jackson, Jr.

Prior to Henry Jackson, Jr's execution, his sisters asked Governor Phil Bryant, Mississippi, to spare their brother. This is especially poignant because Mr. Jackson's crimes included stabbing one of the sisters, killing four of their children, and paralyzing one sister. Regina Jackson, the sister Mr. Jackson stabbed, said she "just can't take any more killing."

In their plea to the Governor, another sister and her husband said, "We are not asking you to take pity on Curtis (what Mr. Jackson was called), we're asking you to show US mercy."

Mr. Jackson was executed June 5, 2012.

**Online Action
Stop the Execution of Samuel Lopez in Arizona**

Sammy Lopez is scheduled to be executed in Arizona on June 27 for a murder committed in 1986. The details of his background of extreme poverty and severe childhood abuse and its effects on him were never presented to the sentencing judge. Urge Arizona Governor Jan Brewer to grant clemency in this case.

<http://takeaction.amnestyusa.org/siteapps/advocacy/ActionItem.aspx?c=60jCLOPAIjJUG&b=6645049&aid=518540>

Reprieve Given

June
6 Abdul Hamin Awkal (foreign national - Lebanon) Ohio

Stays of Executions

June
6 Bobby Lee Hines Texas
20 Abdul Hamin Awkal (foreign national - Lebanon) Ohio

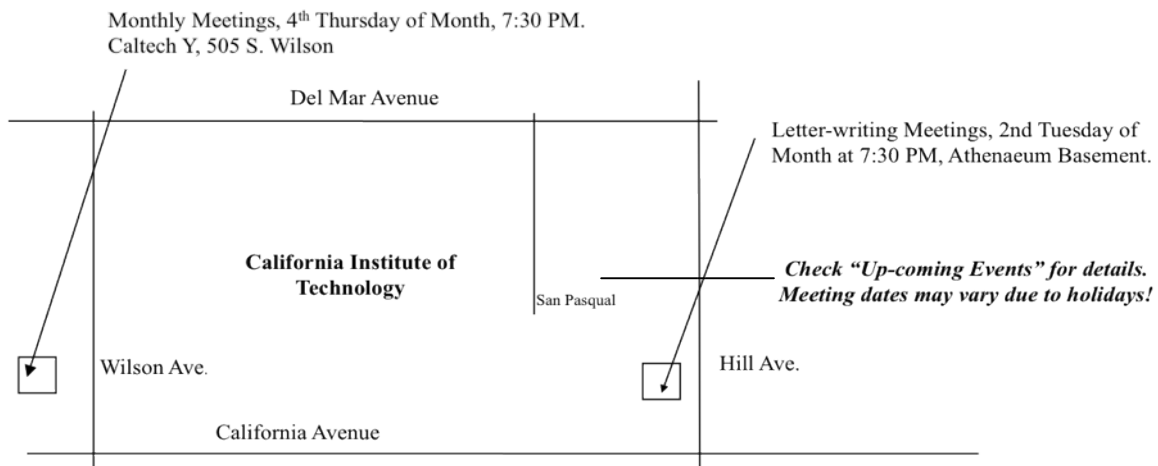
Executions

June
5 Henry Jackson, Jr. Mississippi
3- Drug Lethal Injection
12 Jan Michael Brawner Mississippi
3-Drug Lethal Injection
12 Richard Albert Leavitt Idaho
1-Drug Lethal Injection
20 Gary Carl Simmons Mississippi
3-Drug Lethal Injection

GROUP 22 MONTHLY LETTER COUNT	
UAs	12
POC	6
US	6
Total	24
To add your letters to the total contact lwkamp@gmail.com .	

Our newest member...what a cutie!





From the 210 exit on Lake Avenue, head south, turn left on Del Mar
From the 110 continue on Arroyo Parkway north, turn right on California
Street parking is generally available.

Amnesty International Group 22
The Caltech Y
Mail Code C1-128
Pasadena, CA 91125
www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>



Amnesty International's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights.