Ill Never Forget That Face

Jennifer Thompson was raped at knifepoint by a man who broke into her apartment while she slept. She was able to escape, and eventually positively identified Ronald Cotton as her attacker. Ronald insisted that she was mistaken-- but Jennifers positive identification was the compelling evidence that put him behind bars. After eleven years, Ronald was allowed to take a DNA test that proved his innocence. He was released, after serving more than a decade in prison for a crime he never committed. Two years later, Jennifer and Ronald met face to face-- and forged an unlikely friendship that changed both of their lives. In their own words, Jennifer and Ronald unfold the harrowing details of their tragedy, and challenge our ideas of memory and judgment while demonstrating the profound nature of human grace and the healing power of forgiveness.
Jennifer Thompson-Cannino lives in North Carolina with her family. She speaks frequently about the need for judicial reform, and is a member of the North Carolina Actual Innocence Commission, the advisory committee for Active Voices, and the Constitution Project. Her op-eds have appeared in The New York Times, The Durham-Herald Sun, and The Tallahassee Democrat.

Ronald Cotton lives with his wife and daughter in North Carolina. He has spoken at various schools and conferences including Washington and Lee University, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Georgetown Law School, and the Community March for Justice for Troy Anthony Davis in Savannah, Georgia.

Erin Torneo is a Los Angeles-based writer. She was a 2007 New York Foundation for the Arts Nonfiction Fellow.

The authors received the 2008 Soros Justice Media Fellowship for Picking Cotton.

In 1984, Jennifer Thompson was raped at knifepoint by a man who broke into her apartment while she slept. She was able to escape, and because she had studied his face intently during the attack, she later identified Ronald Cotton as her attacker. Ronald insisted that she was mistaken—but Jennifer’s positive identification was the evidence that compelled a jury to put him behind bars. After eleven years in prison, Ronald was allowed to take a DNA test that proved his innocence. He was released after serving more than a decade in prison for a crime he never committed. Two years later, Jennifer and Ronald met face to face. They forged an unlikely friendship that changed both of their lives.

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Picking Cotton is a brave, important book. It puts human faces on the problem of wrongful conviction caused by faulty eyewitness testimony and shows how even good people with the best intentions can get things terribly wrong. — Elizabeth Loftus, Ph.D, Past President, Association for Psychological Science and author of Eyewitness Testimony

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This book will break your heart and lift it up again . . . a touching and beautiful example of the power of faith and forgiveness. Its message of hope should reverberate far beyond the halls of justice.”—Sister Helen Prejean, csj, author of Dead Man Walking

“What happened in this book will change what you think of the criminal justice system in this country, and challenge you to help fix it. Each of them tells an extraordinary story about crime, punishment and exoneration, but it’s their shared spiritual journey toward reconciliation and forgiveness that is even more compelling and profound.”—Barry C. Scheck, Co-Founder and Co-Director of The Innocence Project®

“Few people have done more to put a human face on issues involving wrongful convictions than Jennifer Thompson-Cannino and Ronald Cotton. Yet through their shared pain, they have been able to forge a friendship that most of us search our lives for.”—Janet Reno, Former United States Attorney General

“[A] remarkable testament . . . powerful . . . A must-read.”—Studs Terkel

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Personal Review: Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption by Erin Torneo
In 1984 a college student woke up in her Burlington, North Carolina, apartment to find a young black man in her bed who intended to rape her. Because Jennifer Thompson was about half the size of the man she faced, and was already pinned down by his weight by the time she awoke, she recognized that any physical defense she presented would only worsen her situation. Jennifer, however, was not prepared to give up that easily. As the man began raping her she made a conscious effort to study his face and everything about him so that she would be able to work as closely as possible with the police on his capture. She even talked him into interrupting the rape long enough for her to escape the apartment and run for help.
Jennifer's attention to detail resulted in the well-executed police artist sketch that would lead to the quick arrest of Ronald Cotton, a local man, as the man who raped her and another woman on the same night.

Cotton was not at all worried when his family told him the Burlington Police Department wanted to speak with him in connection with the two rapes. He knew he had a rock-solid alibi for the night in question, so he drove himself to the police station in order to prove that he had nothing to do with either crime. Unfortunately for Cotton, he got his dates mixed up, making his supposed alibi worthless, and he was charged with both rapes.

The trial jury recognized Cotton's resemblance to the police sketch and considered Thompson to be an exceptional witness because of her decision to concentrate on her assailant even as the assault against her was happening. Her strong trial testimony, during which she appeared to be absolutely certain of Cotton's guilt, was all the jury needed to convict Cotton of her rape, and they quickly did just that.

Eleven years later, in 1995, DNA testing would prove that Ronald Cotton had nothing to do with Jennifer Thompson's rape and he was freed from prison, a dream that Cotton had all but given up on ever seeing happen. Ronald Cotton, now in his early thirties and lucky to have survived more than a decade in prison, was back with his family hoping to start a new life for himself.

Tragic as all of this is, it is far from being a unique story because, sadly, this kind of thing happens more than anyone in law enforcement would care to admit. Thousands of people have been imprisoned with no more evidence against them than the word of their accuser. Honest mistakes are made, lies are purposely told, and justice is not always blind.

No, the truly remarkable part of this story is what happened next.

Jennifer Thompson, married and the mother of triplets by the time of Cotton's release, feared that he would take his revenge by harming her or her children. Two years passed before the two of them finally came face-to-face but, when it did happen, both their lives were changed forever. Cotton, an extremely compassionate man, surprised Thompson by readily offering his forgiveness in their first conversation - and that would be the beginning of a powerful, loving friendship between the two and their families that is still going strong.

Today Cotton and Thompson work together to bring attention to other inmates around the country who have been imprisoned under circumstances similar to those that placed Ronald Cotton in jeopardy of spending his whole life in a jail cell. Much good has come from the awful circumstances that have linked forever the lives of these two people, and Thompson and Cotton have both thanked God that Cotton is the one she
chose that day in the Burlington police station if she was destined to get it wrong.

Read Picking Cotton to get the rest of the story - there's a lot more.

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Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption by Erin Torneo 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!