

Henri Charriere Biography

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Biography

The French word, papillon (butterfly), was the nickname of French criminal, Henri Charriere, who had a butterfly tattoo on his chest. Born in France in 1906 and dying in Spain in 1973, Charriere was a thief, safecracker, and pimp charged and convicted of murdering another criminal. Charriere always protested his innocence in the killing.

In 1931, Charriere was sentenced to a life of forced labor at the penal colony in French Guyana. He was able to escape after three years of brutality and misery, fleeing over a 1000 miles by boat to Maracaibo. He lived with the natives for awhile. He was captured in South America and returned to Devil's Island prison colony. After numerous attempts at escape Charriere escaped Devil's Island on a raft of coconuts in 1944. He made his escape to Venezuela.

In Venezuela, he remarried and was able to open a restaurant and nightclub in Caracas. At age 62, in 1968, Charriere turned to writing, transcribing his many adventures into the book *Papillon*. In 1970, the French government issued a decree of grace (a pardon) allowing him to return to France. In 1972, he produced a sequel about his life, *Banco: The Further Adventures of Papillon*. By the time of his death his book *Papillon* had sold over 5 million copies and been translated into 16 languages. In 1973 it was also made into a popular movie starring Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman. While the basic claims of his books appear to be factual, researchers have questioned many of his adventures. *Papillon epingle (Butterfly Pinned, 1970)* by Gerard de Villers presents a different viewpoint on the exploits of Charriere.