

Book Review

Van Soest, D. (2014). *Just Mercy*. Baltimore: Apprentice House.

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The death penalty is and has been one of the most controversial issues of all time. The concept of “just” punishment for brutality being brutally administered by the “State” continues to illicit images of barbarians. Those opposed to the death penalty often present themselves as pacifists, soft on crime, and/or zealously religious. Pro-death penalty advocates maintain an opinion that the death penalty is a deterrent to homicide and a just punishment for barbarous acts. Interestingly enough the pro-death penalty opinion is also rooted in religious doctrine.

These extreme opinions have been cleverly couched in Dorothy Van Soest’s, *Just Mercy*. Van Soest takes us into the lives of Bernadette and Marty, a couple who moved to Texas as a result of Marty’s appointment as a university professor. Bernadette is a professor’s wife who has raised the couple’s two biological children and one adopted child. As the story opens, we find Bernadette attending the execution of Rae Lynn Blackwell, a young woman sentenced to death for the murder of Bernadette and Marty’s youngest daughter Veronica, (who was prior to Veronica’s death, an anti-death penalty activist), watching Rae Lynn being prepped to die in the death chamber. “Bernie” watches the process and is simultaneously horrified and relieved that “justice is served.” Bernie and Marty’s children Annamarie and Fin are indelibly tangled in this story and bring their views of society, their sister’s murder, and their own strong opinions on crime and punishment to bear on the reader’s impressions.

The story highlights the emotional rollercoaster experienced by the family in response to external circumstances. We initially see Bernadette as an emotional wreck who has literally changed her deeply held views of the death penalty since the murder of her daughter. This change in ideology has morphed the once positive personality into a bitter woman set on justice for Veronica. We see Bernadette’s former opinion deeply ingrained in her son, Fin, who is a social worker and adamantly opposed to the death penalty. Fin’s thoughts and actions are juxtaposed to his sister Annamarie, a lawyer who is portrayed as angry and eager to see Rae Lynn Blackwell suffer for murdering her sister.

My reaction to this read was initially tentative. As a former federal mitigator for death row inmates, I have been exposed to the intricacies of heinous crimes and the often tortured lives of the perpetrators. My experience tended to color my initial opinion of the characters as less than realistic. However, as I continued the story I found myself having emotional responses to the characters as the ebb and flow of their experiences and opinions filled the pages. The story alludes to the facts of Veronica’s murder without exposing the reader to excessive detail. What we are exposed to are the reactions of individual family members and the family unit to the horrific loss of a child. Bernie, Marty, Finn, Annamarie and Annamarie’s daughter Patty have grieved the loss of Veronica for over 10 years. Van Soest uses her social work acumen to introduce the reader to the variety of actions and the process associated with grieving. Van Soest

moves the reader through the transformation of Bernadette from a hostile grief-stricken mother to working through her grief productively. Through Bernadette, we begin to see the circumstances surrounding Rae Lynn Blackwell's life, which influenced her ultimate demise to murderess. Through Marty we encounter the voice of reason as he maintains a stance of acceptance of Rae Lynn's sentence and of his own possibly life-threatening health issues.

Various caveats throughout the story line are useful in exposing the many issues and emotions surrounding the institution of the death penalty. The crescendo of the storyline is somewhat predictable but still adds an interesting and motivating twist.

I believe this book should be included as an ethics assignment for both graduate and undergraduate social work students. It provides an unusual look at many sides of the death penalty as punishment, deterrent, and as a tool for taking out aggressions by those adversely affected by the perpetrator's actions. It is also an excellent tool to examine societal, environmental, and developmental risk factors for violence.

Van Soest's novel provides fodder for considering the complexities associated with crime and punishment and will provide students with a provocative groundwork from which to discuss and debate ethical issues associated with society's use of the death penalty.