



# Dead Man Walking: The Eyewitness Account Of The Death Penalty That Sparked a National Debate

By Helen Prejean

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In 1982, Sister Helen Prejean became the spiritual advisor to Patrick Sonnier, the convicted killer of two teenagers who was sentenced to die in the electric chair of Louisiana's Angola State Prison. In the months before Sonnier's death, the Roman Catholic nun came to know a man who was as terrified as he had once been terrifying. She also came to know the families of the victims and the men whose job it was to execute—men who often harbored doubts about the rightness of what they were doing.

Out of that dreadful intimacy comes a profoundly moving spiritual journey through our system of capital punishment. Here Sister Helen confronts both the plight of the condemned and the rage of the bereaved, the fears of a society shattered by violence and the Christian imperative of love. On its original publication in 1993, *Dead Man Walking* emerged as an unprecedented look at the human consequences of the death penalty. Now, some two decades later, this story—which has inspired a film, a stage play, an opera and a musical album—is more gut-wrenching than ever, stirring deep and life-changing reflection in all who encounter it.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

A Catholic nun's compelling polemic against capital punishment.

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From Library Journal

Prejean, a Catholic nun, has written a moral indictment of capital punishment. This book is the result of her visits to two death-row inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary where she serves as a spiritual advisor. Although she documents the inequalities of the judicial system that has condemned these men, her main point is that if society is to inflict this extreme punishment, it should, itself, be perfect. Needless to say, it is not. Opponents of the death penalty will find reinforcement for their cause here. The general reader, however, will probably find the book too narrow in focus, too self-righteous. Prejean writes well, but her material will not attract the wide audience she wants. An optional purchase.

- *Frances Sandiford, Green Haven Correctional Facility Lib., Stormville, N.Y.*

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From Kirkus Reviews

A Catholic nun's impassioned memoir of her friendship with two death-row inmates, coupled with a plea for the abolition of capital punishment. In 1982, Prejean, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, agrees to correspond with convicted rapist and murderer Patrick Sonnier, awaiting execution in Louisiana's electric chair. Letters lead to visits, and Prejean becomes spiritual advisor to the condemned man. Her counsel takes hold, and Sonnier dies repentant--far more so than Prejean's second death-row friend, the arrogant Robert Lee Wilson, also a rapist and murderer. Both killers come off as repellently fascinating, but the real interest here is in Prejean, who begins as a frail but courageous soul, utterly out of place inside a prison, and winds up as a fierce spokeswoman for the right to life--even of those who have taken the lives of others. Her arguments against capital punishment are well known but preached with passion: The death penalty is racist, barbaric, and doesn't deter crime; innocent people get killed, etc. But her real brief lies in the grim details of execution, both in the degradation of the long weeks of waiting and in the torture of the execution itself--which involves, says Prejean, extreme physical and mental pain. The details will turn heads and stomachs: last-minute meetings with the governor, who always has his own agenda; last meals with the prisoner (Sonnier feasts on steak and apple pie, and thanks the cook); the last seconds of life, as the condemned man's face is covered by a veil (Wilson winks at Prejean as the cloth descends). To Prejean, the whole story is a web of crimes--the original murder; the execution; the moral hypocrisy of the judicial system; the suffering inflicted upon the families of both killer and victim--to which the only moral response is love inspired by Christ, who ``refused to meet hate with hate and violence with violence.'' Touching and compelling. (First printing of 30,000) -- *Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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