

Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States Study Guide

Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States by Helen Prejean

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Plot Summary

Sister Helen Prejean teaches at Hope High School and works with the poor of New Orleans when Chava Colon, representing an organization known as the Prison Coalition, asks if she will become a pen pal with a prisoner. She agrees and is assigned to write to Elmo Patrick Sonnier, convicted of the murder of a teenage couple. Helen is young and excitable and sends off a picture of herself with her first letter to Patrick. She's somewhat surprised when he writes back and they correspond over the coming weeks until Helen broaches the subject of visiting. Patrick is excited at the prospect and names Helen his "spiritual advisor." She receives permission to visit him and isn't really prepared for the polite young man who does not seem like someone who would have committed the horrible crimes. Helen soon realizes that she needs to help Patrick with his legal battles as well and convinces attorney Millar Farmer to take the case. He does and begins working to prove that Patrick's initial legal defense was inadequate but is unable to prompt a stay of execution or a change of sentence through the courts the pardon board or the governor's office.

Helen learns through her experience with Patrick that the legal system is skewed in that wealthy people who can afford an experienced capital case attorney never get the death penalty and that capital punishment is more often meted out in cases with white victims than if the victim is black. This, along with her inner conviction that killing is wrong in any situation prompts Helen to throw her support into programs seeking to eliminate the death penalty. She vows she will never again serve as a personal advisor to a death row inmate but agrees to do just that when Millard Farmer calls and makes the request on behalf of Robert Lee Willie, convicted of the stabbing death of a young woman. Robert is very different from Patrick and Helen is somewhat tougher on him because she feels she was too lenient with Patrick. She reminds herself that she is supposed to be helping Robert prepare for death and that her job is to help him spiritually.

Helen, in her quest to fight the death penalty on principle, finds herself torn between dealing with the spiritual, legal and emotional needs of the convicted murders and the desires of the victims' families for revenge. She cites the toll a death plays on families, especially when the victim is a child. Parents often divorce as each tries to find a way to work through the grieving process. Helen argues that executing the convicted murderer makes those who pull the switch equal to the murderer. She says that the process is arranged so that everyone is able to say he was doing a job as ordered and has no personal responsibility. The problem with that, according to Helen, is that the system is flawed, those who are executed are likely to be poor and their victims white, and that justice is neither fair nor measured.



Chapters One and Two

Chapters One and Two Summary and Analysis

Sister Helen Prejean teaches adult education at Hope High School and works with the poor of New Orleans when Chava Colon, representing an organization known as the Prison Coalition, asks if she will become a pen pal with a prisoner. She agrees and he writes the name "Elmo Patrick Sonnier" along with his address at the Louisiana State Penitentiary on a piece of paper. Sister Helen then gives the background explaining her purpose for being in New Orleans at the St. Thomas housing projects. She is to work with the poor and she sees so many impossible situations. She initially flounders, but in 1980 suddenly realizes that she's been disconnected from her work and the answer is to connect directly with the poor rather than working toward reforms that are out of her reach.

Helen writes to Patrick Sonnier, sending him photos of herself, one of Jesus on the cross and another of a water scene. She knows by now that he and his brother murdered two teenagers. She also questions her own life. She says she grew up with many advantages and that she might have been pregnant at seventeen or shown other cracks in her character without those supports. Despite the fact that Patrick hasn't written to others, he replies to Helen's letter. He says he's been lonely and is soon drawing on the envelope. As they write regularly, Sister Helen says she thinks of him as a human being but is never forgetful of his crime. He tells Sister Helen additional details, including that his mother is in poor health and lives in St. Martinville. After a couple of months, she reads his court files. On November 7, 1977, a newspaper reports that seventeen-year-old David LeBlanc and eighteen-year-old Loretta Bourque, both students at a Catholic High School, had been forced onto their faces and shot with a .22-caliber rifle. Months later, Patrick, then twenty-seven, and his twenty-year-old brother Eddie are arrested after other couples came forward saying that two men posing as security guards had confronted other couples, molesting the girls and handcuffing the boys. At the trial it's pointed out that the Sonnier brothers had been rabbit hunting and had accused David and Loretta of trespassing. Eddie is initially sentenced to death but that sentence is overturned with the courts believing Patrick was the shooter and Eddie's sentence is changed to life in prison. In Patrick's letters, he never talks about the crimes or his own impending death. He does write to Helen about his appreciation for her care and concern. Sister Helen finds that there is no one who visits Patrick and asks if she could.

In chapter two, Patrick begins the process to get Helen added to his approved visitor's list. In July of 1982, Helen is called to Angora for an interview with a priest, necessary before she can become an approved "spiritual advisor" for Patrick and given permission to visit. The visit is pleasant but Helen says that she will later become such a problem for this priest that he tries to have women banned from the role of spiritual advisors. He reminds her that her sole duty is to help Patrick Sonnier accept Christ before he dies. He also warns that prisoners are con men and that she should guard against that.



On September 15, she goes for her first visit with Patrick. He tells about other pen pals referred to him by Helen. He also tells her that his "ex old lady" was named Helen and that it was she who told the police where to find him and warned that he was armed. He has had a series of bad relationships with women and has an eleven-year-old daughter named Star. He says that his parents separated when Eddie was a baby, that he has a sister and that he and Eddie provided much of the family's food by hunting. They hunted at night though it was illegal and once shot a neighbor's cow, a fact their mother knew but didn't object to because they were all hungry. He says his father took him to a bar and that they both got drunk when he was twelve. Later, Patrick was arrested with a cousin for stealing a truck and the cousin's father got him out of jail. Patrick's father was dead of liver cancer by then but Patrick says his dad would have got him out if he'd still been alive.

When Helen leaves the prison, she is fully aware of the feeling of freedom and vows to go wash the feel and smell of the prison away as soon as she can. As she leaves, she realizes that the one thing Patrick did not talk about is the crime itself, but Helen believes that she hasn't the right to require that he confess his sin to her. She realizes that she'd expected someone repulsive but that Patrick is very likable, a fact that she says makes no difference and that her quest to keep him from the death penalty would be the same.

In March of 1982, Helen visits Patrick's younger brother, Eddie who is having trouble adjusting to life in prison. In July, Patrick calls Helen with the news that an execution date of August 19 has been set. Helen is given permission to visit two days prior to the execution date. There hasn't been an execution in the state of Louisiana since 1961 but with just days to go, Patrick's execution is not stayed by either the courts or the governor. Helen, as Patrick's spiritual advisor, is allowed to witness the execution. Patrick says he doesn't want to put her through that but Helen says she doesn't want him to die without someone who cares about him in the room. Patrick tries to remain upbeat but confides in Helen that he wouldn't be afraid if he could be sure he would die immediately. Helen says that the coroner's report will state that in Patrick's case it took four or five minutes for death to occur. As Helen is driving to the prison on the day of the execution, she hears on the radio that a stay has been granted but she is still hoping that his sentence will be commuted to life in prison instead of death.

Patrick says that he shouldn't have allowed himself to get caught up in Eddie's crime but also believes that he should have kept Eddie from being caught up in it. He tells Helen that their plan had been for both of them to say that they'd shot the two youngsters, believing that it would create a reasonable doubt as to which actually did. Eddie had become confused and thought they were supposed to both accuse the other, which he does. With Patrick confessing and Eddie saying Patrick had pulled the trigger, Patrick had paid for the killing which both brothers now say was actually Eddie's deed. For his part, Eddie seems to Helen to be remorseful but Helen suspects that he's mainly sorry that he's in prison. She says he seems caught up in self-survival. Helen misses the opportunity to tell Eddie that he should apologize to the families of his victims and she says that she has no idea what an apology would mean to them until much later when the father of one cites that as his only reason for witnessing Patrick's execution.



Sister Helen points out that the death penalty comes into play more often in the southern states than in the northern, and that the majority of the executions carried out are those with white victims. Chava Colon gives her Patrick's name and address, then tells her that Patrick is known as a loner, that he doesn't return letters, and that he should perhaps give her someone else. She declines that offer and reassures herself that her mission is to work with the poor, and that a person on death row is bound to qualify.

At one point, Sister Helen realizes that she has become a friend to a man who killed two people. She seems to struggle with this and admits that it bothers her. It seems to concern her that the victims' families will think less of her for this action and she decides that she won't contact them, though she also says that they later tell her they were angry because she didn't make that contact. She says that she continues to hate his crimes but finds herself drawn to him because he seems somehow vulnerable and wants to please people. She says that looking back on the events of 1982 she was caught up in social injustices and felt that Patrick should not have been executed. Looking back at the situation from a perspective of ten years later, Helen admits that she was caught up in the troubles of Patrick and that she later realizes that she should have contacted the families of the victims. She attributes this oversight to her youth and enthusiasm. She also comes to worry if she'd spent enough time counseling Patrick about his soul and the need to confess his sins in order to guard his soul against eternal damnation. For now, Patrick's life becomes her focus, but when it's time for her to counsel her next death row inmate, she'll realize that she needs to help him prepare for death rather than spending so much of her time trying to save his life. Helen also says that she believes she could have saved Patrick's life if she'd worked on getting him a lawyer sooner, but that seems doubtful considering the political climate.



Chapters Three and Four

Chapters Three and Four Summary and Analysis

Helen pleads with attorney Millard Farmer to take Patrick's case and he agrees. Millard's associate, Kimellen Tunkle, arrives in Baton Rouge on Christmas Day to meet with Helen. On January 18, Millard goes with Helen to see Patrick and has Patrick outline various aspects of the case that might be used as the basis for an appeal. While it's clear that Patrick's lawyer at the trial was incapable of a proper defense - he never interviewed Eddie prior to the trial and so had not helped Eddie prepare - many of the points of law would not be allowed now because the lawyer had not broached them at trial. Millard tells Helen that there are seldom wealthy people on death row because the rich can hire adequate attorneys who can dedicate themselves to the task of defending their clients. Court-appointed attorneys are reimbursed one thousand dollars which Millard says would not even cover the cost of one expert witness, meaning the attorneys simply don't put forth the effort to prepare an adequate defense. Millard says the governor is the answer to Patrick's situation, having the power to commute the sentence.

Helen and Sister Lilian Flavin, a "kindred spirit" and fellow staff member at Hope House, meet with Bishop Ort, who agrees to talk to Louisiana Governor Edwards on Patrick's behalf. There's later a meeting with the governor. Those present included Helen and Patrick's mother, and though Helen has hoped for a private meeting with the governor, there are television cameras and reporters present. The next step is the Pardon Board hearing and Millard decides that Patrick should not attend, a fact that Helen accepts without question at the time. Patrick's mother writes a letter to the board but will also not attend, a point both Patrick and Millard feel to be the right decision. Prior to the hearing, Helen and Millard visit with chairperson of the Pardon Board, Howard Marsellus. Howards seems sympathetic to the situation and insinuates that he'll be in favor of commuting Patrick's death sentence. Those speaking for Patrick go first and Lloyd LeBlanc, father of one of Patrick's victims, says that his son is in the grave because of Patrick. While the board deliberates, Lloyd asks Helen how she can speak for Patrick. She feels his anger but still wants Patrick to live, though she's now admitting that her views had initially been far too simplistic on this complicated topic. Helen has been certain Howard Marsellus would vote against death but the board reconvenes and the single vote against the death penalty is not from Howard but from another board member. Helen calls Sister Kathleen Bahlinger and requests that they take care of funeral arrangements for Patrick. They talk about Patrick's clothing size and other needs and Sister Kathleen says that perhaps they won't need the arrangements after all.

In chapter four, Eddie writes a letter to the governor and Helen receives permission to take the letter for delivery. Pat writes a letter of his own to the governor and expresses his anger that he wasn't allowed to attend his own pardon hearing. During a conversation about Patrick's funeral, Sister Kathleen reminds Helen that she's supposed to be helping Patrick prepare to die and that Helen can't lose sight of that



duty. Patrick later tells Helen that he and God "have things squared away." He also says that the governor is bound to be under public pressure to have a white executed, having had two recent blacks executed.

Helen is notified that she's supposed to speak to the head of the Department of Corrections regarding her presence at the execution but doesn't have time. Helen has been sick and is not allowed food while in the "death house" where Patrick is held. She faints, causing a minor stir, but the rules regarding visitors being allowed to eat are relaxed. Eddie's letter to the governor, in which he says that Patrick did not kill the teens and that it's Eddie who is actually guilty, runs in the papers, but the hoped-for stay is not forthcoming. Helen plans to spend the day with Patrick. As the evening wears on, Patrick receives word that the courts turned down his plea for clemency, but Helen remains hopeful that Millard will succeed with the governor. Patrick tells Helen that he's going to die and writes a will, leaving all his possessions to Helen, then writes a letter to Eddie, encouraging him to make something of his time in prison. He gives Helen his Bible and writes his death date on the page. He refuses communion but asks Helen to take communion for both of them after his death. When the warden asks if Patrick has anything to say, he tells Mr. LeBlanc that he's sorry but says again that Eddie "done it."

Helen sits beside Millard, who arrives at the last moment. She asks Patrick to pray for her and he assures her that he will. As they are strapping him into the chair, he finds Helen's face in the room and mouths the words, "I love you." Helen watches the process and wonders about Patrick's mother, Gladys. As they leave, she notes that Lloyd LeBlanc has been crying but can't find anything to say to him. There are some sisters outside as well as Joe Nusey and Kimellen, Millard's assistants. As Helen rides away with a New Orleans attorney named Bill Quigley, Helen has to stop and vomit.

A tact Millard plans to take on Patrick's behalf is to have Helen present information about Patrick that indicates that Patrick would make an "ideal" and productive lifetime prisoner. There have been recent executions and the political situation is such that there is little hope that the governor will stay the execution. The governor says he won't "interfere" with the judicial process and says that he has been elected by the people of the state to "carry out the law," including executions when ordered by the court. While the arguments and legal maneuvering is ongoing, Helen realizes that all the legal issues probably won't help.

When Helen goes to the Pardon Board hearing, she realizes the full power of this five-member board who will decide whether Patrick lives or dies. Helen is at least a little in awe of this power and she's only just beginning to realize the role politics and the political climate play in the decision of Patrick's execution. The governor uses the board to ensure that he doesn't have to have any personal dealings with the decisions.

Helen talks about the attitudes of some of the guards who say they want nothing to do with the execution process but do it because they have to have a job. She also comes back to the topic of forgiveness and apologies and tells Patrick that if he says anything



negative, he'll leave his life with hatred in his heart. He seems to heed her words because he offers an apology to Lloyd LeBlanc, though he says nothing to the father of his other victim. Helen says she doesn't know why unless he'd noted the unforgiving and outspoken nature of the comments made by Mr. Bourque.



Chapters Five through Seven

Chapters Five through Seven Summary and Analysis

The following morning, Helen is at the home of her mother. The next day the funeral is held and Eddie is granted permission to attend, though he's not allowed to go to the cemetery. Patrick is buried in ground held for the church and is buried near priests and nuns. There is press coverage and a reporter questions Helen, asking if she and Patrick had been in love and citing his final words to her. Helen says theirs was a love as a brother for a sister. Helen is soon caught up in the idea of who is responsible for Patrick's death and knows that everyone is hiding behind the façade of duty. Helen requests an audience with Paul Phelps, the man who has overseen the entire execution process and who has, in fact, designed the steps for the modern process. He also tells her that it's his job and that someone would do it if he didn't. Helen says the cutting of personal responsibility and morality is a common theme touted by everyone involved in the process. Helen decides that she's glad she tried to help Patrick but that she won't become involved with anymore death row inmates.

Helen knows that it's time to return to her job in the adult education program at Hope House and is soon caught up in a torrent of letters, a public outcry against Helen's involvement in the case. One indicates that there's nothing more than this attitude to be expected from the nuns who are described by the writer as a "bunch of naïve, frustrated women who know nothing about the world." Helen is angry and cites statistics that indicate that capital punishment doesn't slow crime and that executions may even prompt new waves of crime. Helen is contacted by a newspaper and agrees to talk to reporter Liz Scott. There's a decision to have a march to bring attention to the case and Helen is chosen to help organize it. She then comes to the realization that this case is her life's calling.

Helen gets a call from Millard Farmer, who asks that she serve as a spiritual advisor to another death row inmate, this one with time already short. His name is Robert Lee Willie and Helen already knows the case. Despite her earlier resolution, she decides that she will do this because Millard, who is also dedicated to this cause, asked.

In chapter six, Helen learns that Robert Willie and Joseph Vaccaro were convicted of killing an eighteen-year-old girl named Faith Hathaway. Faith's stepfather, Vernon Harvey, has been very vocal to the press, saying he wants to see Robert executed. Robert had been involved in two other murders, though it was agreed he didn't fire the fatal shot in the death of a law enforcement official. He also participated in the beating that left a young man partially paralyzed and the rape of another girl. Helen writes to Robert and he immediately replies, asking that she come. Helen has to get past the new attitudes that women should not be involved with death row inmates because they are too delicate. Helen has to explain the fainting spell she had when visiting Patrick but does so satisfactorily and is granted permission to visit with Robert. She does in



October of 1984 and notes that the time feels like it moves much more quickly than when she'd worked with Patrick.

Robert is different from Patrick both in appearance and mannerisms. He asks Helen why she's a nun and whether she ever misses having a man of her own. He tells her that he'd greatly enjoyed sex and couldn't imagine a life without it. Robert is working to improve prisoners' rights on death row though, he probably won't be alive if and when any of the reforms are enacted. On October 26, the march begins and Helen speaks often with the media, pointing out various facts including that it costs more to execute an inmate than to keep him in prison for life with most of that cost spend on the trials, sometimes more than three million dollars. She also questions whether the government should have the right to kill. At the end of the march, they are met by a group of proponents of executions. Helen is then told that Vernon Harvey wants to talk to her. She meets him and he issues an invitation to visit, which Helen does a short time later.

Helen meets Faith Hathaway's mother, Elizabeth, and learns about Faith's life and her death. She'd been slated to leave for the military the day after her murder and had accepted a ride home from Robert Willie and Joseph Vaccaro. It's days before Faith's body is discovered in a cave. She's been stabbed seventeen times. Elizabeth feels that she's been promised the death of her daughter's murderer and that the execution will close this horrible chapter of her life. Helen notes that they believe they will have achieved justice when Robert dies and that they will have peace. Vernon says that he'd had an opportunity to kill Robert and had thought about it, but that he'd feared some innocent bystander would be hurt. Helen leaves their home with the promise that she'll pray for them. She notes that life has been more difficult since Faith's death because their friends have stopped coming around.

In chapter seven, Helen thinks more about Faith's death, how she probably had consumed some alcohol and then tried to shake off the sluggish effects when she realized the danger. She knows that the knowledge of the terror that Faith must have endured eats at Faith's parents. Helen cites writing by Susan Jacoby in which she urges "measured justice," and Helen says that she's certain execution is not measured. This also goes in the other direction, with Helen saying it isn't right for a murderer to serve only a few years in prison.

On a subsequent visit, Robert tells Helen about his life. He says that his father was jailed, his parents separated, and that he lived with various family members. He describes his thoughts on the night of Faith's murder, saying that he'd been under the influence of drugs and hadn't slept. Helen refuses to allow him to explain away his actions, saying that other people do drugs without murdering young women. He tells about Joseph's influence, saying that Joe insisted that Robert kill a young man that they'd kidnapped but that his heart hadn't been in it and that Joe had then shot the young man, paralyzing the man for life. Helen asks if Robert has thought about the families of his victims and he says that it's hard to feel sympathy for them when they are putting so much effort into trying to kill him. Helen tells Robert that her goal is to help him die - if the time comes - with integrity, and that she can't imagine that happening unless Robert admits to his crimes and his guilt.



Robert gives Helen all his files related to his trial and his sentence. He has meticulously organized them and Helen goes over the pages carefully, just as she had done in the case of Patrick. Helen reads the newspaper accounts of the trial, including that Robert had called the judge "cap" and had ordered his mother to "dry up" when she broke down in tears at his sentencing. She learns that Robert has been in and out of jail for an array of offenses. She also notes details about the trial, including that the district attorney had warned the jury against sentencing Robert to life in prison by saying that someone in the future might not know all the details of Robert's case and that he might be granted parole. There was a change of venue due to pretrial publicity and the same jury pool was used for the cases of both Robert and his co-defendant. In November, the courts deny Robert a new trial and Helen says that the Pardon Board and the governor are the only options that could save Robert.

Helen realizes on the morning after Patrick's death that his body must by now be at Rabenhorst Funeral Home and she recalls that Patrick told her that he'd watched his father's body being embalmed. Patrick spoke at length about events in his own life that shocked Helen, such as the fact that he had known the mortician working on his father and had wanted to see the embalming process conducted on his own father. Perhaps equally disturbing is the mortician who agrees to the request.

Helen talks at length about the countries that use capital punishment and says none of them "get it right." She cites the attitude of some people that if an execution hasn't prevented any criminal acts, it also hasn't cost anything but the life of a convicted criminal, a fact that Helen says puts the government in the position of deciding who dies.

Helen says that she is aware that life is fragile and that she suddenly realizes that she needs desperately to know that all of her family is safe. She also feels that Robert Willie is unaware of the horrible pain he'd caused. She does seem to grasp the fact that Robert is so caught up in self-preservation that he just can't be bothered to think about the pain he's caused or the impact of any of his previous actions. Helen notes that Robert tells her he is not against the death penalty and that if someone were to murder innocent young children, he'd be willing to "pull the switch" himself. Helen wants to make him see that his victims were innocent young people and that any victim is not acceptable. Helen says that it seems everyone has a specific moral code - a place past which they believe the wrongs are so heinous as to be unacceptable, but that people tend to believe that person who deserves the death penalty is someone who has committed some crime other than the one they committed.



Chapters Eight and Nine

Chapters Eight and Nine Summary and Analysis

John Croft is selected by Millard Farmer to help with the case locally and it's John who tells Helen that Robert must not take up the time during his pardon hearing arguing that he's a political prisoner. He tells Helen that there are undoubtedly political aspects of the case, but that it would be a mistake to bring it up at the hearing. Robert tells Helen that he'd signed a confession but says that it was because he'd been told by the police that his mother was being arrested for helping him get out of the area. Robert says he was promised that his mother would be set free if he confessed and that he'd done so in order to protect his mother. He says he is angry that his mother served six months in jail anyway and says that the police did this as a punishment to Robert. Robert now says that he isn't sure his mother can handle being at the pardon hearing. She does appear but begins to cry uncontrollably and Helen tells her that the tears likely speak as loudly to the board as any words she could have said. When it's Elizabeth's turn to talk, she tells the board about the guards who say they don't want to participate in the process but feel they have no option. Helen says that the members of the board say that they also have no real options. Helen says that she knows that this is another way the process protects individuals from any responsibility related to the process so that everyone can point to someone else who could have stopped the death sentence and didn't. Helen likens it to the firing squad that has one person firing blanks so that every person can reassure themselves that they might not have been the person who fired the fatal shot.

In 1991, Helen has a talk with Howard Marcellus who was convicted in 1986 accepting bribes in his role as chairperson of the pardon board. Howard had been planning to run for state legislature but was contacted with an official from the governor's office with an offer as chairperson of the board in return for agreeing to be a "team player." His role as a "team player" had been to ensure that the board voted the way Howard was instructed, sometimes granting undeserved pardons and sometimes upholding executions though he personally had doubts. Howard tells Helen that he'd had several moments of believing that he should agree to stay an execution but that he'd been always reminded of "his duty" and that he knew he would be removed from the position if he did anything contrary to what he was told. Howard says that whenever the board expressed concerns, he'd say that the governor is committed to some action and that they are to follow those instructions. He tells Helen that monetary bribes were behind his instructions, though he didn't personally receive the money. He also alleges that the governor was fully aware of the bribes.

In chapter nine, Helen learns through friend and reporter Liz Scott that the Harveys are angry with her. Robert tells Helen that he doesn't plan to be "all chummy" with the guards who are going to participate in his execution because he believes that is like putting his approval on their actions. He says that he's told a prison chaplain that he doesn't want the spiritual services of anyone on the state prison payroll. The electric



chair is called "Gruesome Gerty" and Helen marvels at how strong Robert is. On Wednesday, Helen is to spend the day with Robert. His execution is set for just after midnight on Friday. Robert asks Helen to arrange for him to take a polygraph, saying that he wants his mother to know the truth about his role in the murder of Faith Hathaway - that he'd held her hands but hadn't stabbed her. Helen uses the opening to question Robert, citing a discrepancy between his testimony and what the police say they found at the scene, but Robert stands by his statement. She knows someone who administers polygraph tests and arranges for the test the following morning.

Helen says that she has people who quote the scripture, "an eye for an eye," as grounds to keep the death penalty. Helen says that the words are taken out of context and that the true meaning is that justice should be commiserate with the crime. She adheres to the idea that this verse begins by saying that if a man causes the death of an unborn child but the mother lives, the man should be punished for the one death, but that if he causes the death of mother and child, a different punishment would be more appropriate. She points out that there was a need for "restraint" in revenge because families would attack entire villages in retaliation for the death of one of their own. Helen says that she tries to avoid the arguments that go along these same lines because there is little good to come out of them.

Helen goes to her mother's home that night, and returns to the death house the following day to find Robert's mother and his three stepbrothers already there. The visit should have been allowed until 5:45 but the warden asks that they leave at three o'clock. There is no explanation, but Robert doesn't object and promises to call them that night. Robert asks the results of the polygraph and is disappointed that it's "inconclusive." Helen says she'd been warned that the stress of being just hours from death would likely skew the results, but Robert says he'd felt sure he passed. Helen reassures him that a mother knows the heart of her child and that he shouldn't worry about what his mother thinks. The evening passes with Robert talking about his life, his childhood, his stepfather who had tried to be a good dad to him, his rebelliousness and his intention to "go out with his boots on." He questions Helen about the preparations, learns that his head will be shaved, his jeans cut to the knee and a diaper put on. He calls his mother twice, crying freely during the first call - the first time he's cried since Helen has known him. They walk together to the execution chamber with Helen quoting scripture the entire way. As they are putting the hood over his face, Robert finds Helen's face in the audience and winks at her. Helen says that she had closed her eyes as Patrick was being executed, but this time she watches the entire proceedings.

Helen has come to believe that there's nothing they can possibly say at the pardon hearing that will help Robert Willie - an aspect of her life that has changed since her time with Patrick. She says that when she'd appeared before the same board pleading for Patrick's life, she'd held out hope that her words would matter. Now she has no such hope but she does her best anyway.



Robert gives a series of interviews to various reporters as his final days are approaching and it's during this time that he expresses his views of the supremacy of the white race and his approval for the actions of Hitler and Castro, though he admits that Hitler took his actions too far. Helen has seen aspects of his prejudice prior to this, but now she talks to him about his words, saying that by his words people will remember him as someone unworthy of mercy. Robert gives it some thought and admits that she's right in that he shouldn't have voiced his opinions, but stands by the ideals. He later tells her that he'd been taken in by the Aryan Brotherhood upon his first arrival in prison at Marion and that it was this group of men who served as a surrogate family. He says they shared everything with him and that he shared with them, though he admits that he would have been killed for refusing. His need for a family connection and for father figures is obvious as he talks about this group of men, and it seems that Robert probably would not have been so vocal in his prejudices had he not been taught by this group at a time when he was vulnerable.

As Helen is spending the day with Robert on Wednesday, she reminds herself that he has only one more full day to life. She reminds herself not to panic, but also reminds herself that she can't be condescending just because Robert is nearing the time of his death. She says that Robert has somehow managed to make himself outwardly calm. He tells her that he's at peace and ready to die, but it's unclear how much of this is a performance such as Robert would have expected of himself in any situation. Another interesting point is that the warden will question Helen, wanting to know if Robert is going to go quietly to his death or if there's going to be problems. Helen says that the officials always want the execution to go smoothly and cites a case in which a man had gone to the gas chamber, screaming and pleading, and the effect that had on the execution team. Helen tells the warden that she doesn't know about Robert but admits to herself that she doesn't want to give the warden any peace of mind for his actions.



Chapters Ten and Eleven

Chapters Ten and Eleven Summary and Analysis

Outside the prison, there are television crews and Helen sees Vernon Harvey talking to reporters, saying that every victim should have the satisfaction of watching the murderer's execution. Helen recalls the spasms of Robert's body as he dies as she and the other nuns, present to object to the execution, leave. Helen is interviewed the following day by Peter Jennings for a segment on the capital punishment. Another person being interviewed says he doesn't believe executions should be televised because it would harden those who saw death on a regular basis, but he calls executions "noble." Helen says that the real horror of the death penalty is not the final moments when death actually occurs, but the waiting for weeks or months with the knowledge of the date of your death hanging over you. Helen then cites a series of cases in which the convicted person was later found to be innocent, sometimes after the execution had already occurred.

Helen attends Robert's funeral in Covington. His mother faints during the service but there's a light moment when Robert's aunt Bessie chases away a reporter using her shoe as a would-be weapon. Helen visits with Robert's mother, Elizabeth, after the funeral and Elizabeth gives Helen two pictures of Robert, one of him as a child and one after his arrest with the words "Hello, Mom, here is the picture of me living every day to the fullest" written on the back.

In chapter eleven, Helen has decided that she must stay away from the Harveys and other families of victims because they see her as a proponent of the person who killed their loved ones and she believes her very presence causes pain. As Helen is holding a seminar on the death penalty, she sees the Harveys and Elizabeth Harvey asks why Helen never visits them. Helen says that she will and she does a short time later, taking Vernon an apple pie. Helen notes that Vernon had devoted all his time and attention to the pending death of Robert Willie as an outlet for his rage. As his final words, Robert said he hoped his death would bring some peace to the Harveys but Helen see that Vernon is every bit as angry but now has no outlet for that rage.

The Harveys invite Helen to a meeting of a support group they've formed for the families of victims. The Harveys now counsel families, instructing them on how to deal with the legal system and what their rights are. Helen attends a meeting and hears the stories of the grieving families. Later, Elizabeth calls on Helen with news that Vernon has had open heart surgery and seems to be giving up. Elizabeth says that Helen is the one person she can think of who can prompt Vernon to fight for his life. Helen visits and she and Vernon go through their routine death penalty arguments, which does bring Vernon back to life.

Helen says that it's appropriate that she end her story by talking about Lloyd LeBlanc, father of murder victim David. Lloyd tells Helen that he'd done what was asked of him by



the family of Patrick Sonnier's other victim, the Bourques. He says that he later went to confession because he was troubled by the execution. He did attend, hoping for an apology, and Patrick's final words of regret were acknowledged by Lloyd who had forgiven his son's murderer at the scene when he was called to identify the body. Lloyd says he would have been satisfied if Patrick had been sentenced to life in prison, but admits that he finds himself struggling to retain that forgiveness sometimes as he thinks about David's next birthday and the milestones of his life - marriage and children.

The Harveys tell Helen that most of their friends fell away after Faith's death and Helen puts it down to the fear of knowing that this tragedy hit this close to home. Helen then gets into the facts of the strain on marriages and families. The majority of parents divorce after a child is murdered.

Helen talks about a victims' group called Survive. The group provides support for families of victims and seems to target mothers. Helen listens as members tell about their family members devastated by crimes, usually shootings and often at the hands of criminals who are never caught. Helen presents some statistics and some stories in which race, affluence and family connections matter. She cites the case of the daughter of a wealthy contractor who was asked by the D.A. for a sentence recommendation. The father wanted the death penalty and when the D.A. achieved that, the father made a hefty campaign contribution for the man's bid for a judge's seat. The stories go on to include the parents who never learn the status of the case and are never contacted unless they themselves are considered suspects.



Characters

Sister Helen Prejean

Helen is a nun who is working with the poor of New Orleans when she's asked to start up a correspondence with a prisoner on death row. She immediately picks up the challenge of becoming Patrick Sonnier's spiritual advisor and admits that she learns a great deal about the system from her dealings with him. Helen's first instinct is that she expects Patrick to be something less than human, but finds a polite young man who describes a rough upbringing. This makes Helen take an objective look at herself and she notes all the positive role models and the support system in her own life, admitting that she might have discovered some serious flaws in her own personality without those advantages. Helen is a strong person, going through the entire ritual of preparing for death with Patrick and then agreeing to do it again when called on to help Robert Willie. She cites the work of others, including Millard Farmer, as her reason for taking on the role with Robert, saying that if others are working hard for Robert and ask for her help, she must give it. Helen continues to stand strong on her belief that the death penalty is wrong, though she feels for the pain of the families of the victims. This will remain a struggle in her life and she eventually comes to terms with the fact that some of the families hate her for her work to eliminate the death penalty.

Patrick Sonnier

Patrick is in his twenties when he and his younger brother kidnap several young couples, raping the girls and holding the boys at gunpoint. This apparently continues for some time until one of the two men - probably Eddie - shoots and kills seventeen-year-old David LeBlanc and eighteen-year-old Loretta Bourque. Patrick admits to being involved but says that Eddie actually pulled the trigger. Patrick does claim responsibility, saying that he should never have allowed himself to be in the situation. An interesting point is that he claims responsibility for his brother as well. Patrick expresses concern for his mother and at one point tells Helen that he's ready to die. Patrick had become known as something of a loner prior to his involvement with Helen, and the man who asks Helen to write to Patrick says that he should have given her the name of someone who would respond. Helen sends Patrick a picture of herself as a youngster and is surprised when she quickly receives a reply. Patrick tells her that he's lonely, a fact that is evident as time goes on and the time of his execution draws near. There are moments during which Patrick seems angry, but these are interlaced with moments of apparent peace. Patrick mouths the words, "I love you" to Helen just before his execution and his final words are an apology to the family of one of his victims though he doesn't address the other and still insists that it was Eddie who killed the teenagers.



Robert Lee Willie

Robert is the man convicted of murdering a young girl named Faith Hathaway and of several other crimes, including the rape of another girl and an assault on a young man that left him paralyzed. Robert is a cocky young man, intent on saving his pride through the proceedings and anxious to accomplish something with his death. He continues to be optimistic until the final days, and then his optimism about being saved from execution turns to a peaceful acceptance and he plans to die with dignity. Robert describes a rough childhood but also claims responsibility for himself, saying that he was a rebellious teenager who didn't do what he should have. Robert works toward improving conditions for death row inmates, though he knows that he won't be alive to see the majority of them implemented. Robert seems to naturally seek approval and it seems that it would have been natural for him to become friendly with the guards in the death house because the prisoner and guards are in such close proximity for those final days. But Robert tells Helen that he isn't going to do anything to make the guards feel he accepts that the guards are doing their jobs. He says that he won't make it any easier on those who are going to kill him. As his final words, he says he hopes his death brings some peace to Faith Hathaway's family.

Eddie Sonnier

Younger brother of Patrick, Eddie accuses Patrick upon his arrest. Eddie later says that he'd gotten mixed up in the situation, thinking that Patrick had told Eddie that they should both accuse the other in order to create reasonable doubt when Patrick had in fact said that they should both confess. Eddie seems to have been the more protected of the two, being the younger and just a baby when their parents split up. Eddie is initially in constant trouble in the prison but eventually finds peace with his situation. Eddie is devastated by Patrick's execution and writes a letter to the governor just days before the sentence date, claiming responsibility himself. Though the letter receives publicity, Eddie's plea is denied.

Elizabeth, Robert's Mother

Elizabeth is jailed for six months after Robert's crimes for helping Robert and his accomplice evade authorities. Elizabeth is horrified at the upcoming execution and cries almost constantly. Robert, who has spent a great deal of energy maintaining a façade of outward calmness and a cocky attitude, tells her to "dry up" when the sentence is passed down. Despite this display, it seems that Elizabeth and Robert grow closer as the date of the execution nears and Robert tells Helen that he plans to let his tears fall freely during his last telephone call to his mother.



Gladys

Patrick's mother, Gladys, is in poor health and Patrick seeks to save her from as much of the publicity as possible. When Patrick says that he doesn't want his mother to attend the meeting with the Pardon Board, Helen points out that he's denying her the opportunity to speak for her son. Gladys raised the children without the benefit of a husband and Patrick notes that he and Eddie had often fed the family by hunting. He cites a time when he and Eddie had killed a neighbor's cow and that Gladys had known that it was a cow but had not objected because the family was hungry.

Lloyd LeBlanc

Father of David LeBlanc, Patrick Sonnier's seventeen-year-old victim, David. Lloyd is the exception to the rule among the victims who seek justice in the form of execution as revenge for the deaths of their children. Lloyd says that he recited the Lord's Prayer at the scene where his son was killed when he was taken there to identify the body. Though his son had been murdered and was lying face down on the ground where he'd been shot, Lloyd says that he never hesitated when he came to the part of the prayer indicating the necessity to forgive. Lloyd says that he presented the wishes of the two families for execution but that he'd done so at the request of the other family and that he'd later gone to confess this to his priest. Lloyd says that he has to stay busy and that he has to work to maintain that forgiveness, especially when he thinks of all he lost with David.

Vernon Harvey

Stepfather of slain teenager Faith Hathaway, Vernon is eaten up with rage over Faith's death. His anger is such that it has become his life and Vernon has focused all his energy into seeing that Robert Willie is executed. When Helen visits the Harveys after Robert's execution, she finds that Vernon is still angry but now has nothing to absorb the rage.

Millard Farmer

The attorney who agrees, at Helen's insistence, to take Patrick Sonnier's case. Millard is adept at law and seems to care greatly about the indigent death row cases he takes on, despite the fact that the deck is stacked against the defendants and they are almost certain to lose. It's Millard who calls on Helen after Patrick's death and pleads with her to become the spiritual advisor for another death row inmate. Helen, citing Millard's own dedication to these cases, says she has to agree with his request.

Howard Marcellus

The chairperson of the Pardon Board, Howard tells Millard and Helen that he is ultimately in favor of sparing Patrick from the death penalty and that he'll work toward that goal but then votes to uphold the penalty. Howard is later convicted of accepting bribes and tells Helen that he'd been ordered to uphold the death sentences in order to spare the governor any direct involvements in the cases.



Objects/Places

The Prison Coalition

Represented by Chava Colon at the beginning of the story, this is an organization that provides support and services to prisoners.

St. Thomas

A housing project in New Orleans where Helen works at the time she becomes Patrick's spiritual advisor.

New Orleans

Where Sister Helen works with the poor prior to becoming involved with the death penalty.

Hope House

Where Sister Helen teaches adult education.

St. Martinville

Where Patrick's mother lives.

Baton Rouge

Where Helen's mother lives.

Louisiana State Penitentiary

Where Patrick Sonnier is being held for murder pending his execution.

Gruesome Gerty

The nickname given to the electric chair.



Death House

The name given to the building where inmates are held in the days prior to execution.

Covington

Where Robert Willie's family lives and where he was to be buried.



Themes

The Death Penalty is Wrong

The entire book is dedicated to persuading the reader to the fact that the death penalty is wrong on Biblical, moral, and financial grounds, and this theme recurs throughout every chapter. In many cases, Helen cites the rebuttals she gives to those who support the death penalty. For example, she says that the scripture, "an eye for an eye," is typically taken out of context and really calls for measured punishment in keeping with the crime. Helen cites the average cost of an execution as more than three million dollars because of the need for expert witnesses, appeals and extensive research, but says it costs less than six hundred thousand to keep a man in prison for life. Other times, Helen points out that the government, which is an imperfect body with human, fallible components and flawed ideals, should not be given the power to decide who should die. Helen takes her argument further with an exploration of those who have been convicted only to have their innocence proven later - sometimes after the death penalty had already been carried out. All these arguments may pale in comparison to her driving argument that a prisoner waiting to be executed knows the exact time and method of his death but is powerless to do anything to stop it. The emotional toll on both the prisoner and his family is, according to Helen, intolerably cruel. Finally, Helen cites figures to prove that the death penalty does not deter crime but may actually incite violence.

The Fragility of Life

Helen says that she's surprised to learn that Faith Hathaway's parents say they have lost most of their friends after the death of their daughter. They tell Helen that they believe it's because Faith's death hit so close to home for most them, making it clear that no one could be safe in any situation and that life is fragile. That strikes Helen as a basic human reaction and prompts her to call her own mother, not to reassure her mother but to make sure that all the other members of the family are safe. Helen's reaction seems typical of those who had been friends of Faith's parents. Those people realized that no one could have expected that Faith would be killed, making it evident that anyone could fall victim in some unforeseen situation. Of course it's evident that life is fragile and could end at any second, but the death of this vibrant young woman makes that fact more real. This is seen in another aspect of the story, in the impending deaths of those on death row. While Helen repeatedly says that she doesn't condone the crimes of Patrick or Robert, she says that she also can't condone taking the lives of the two men for several reasons. One of those is that life is always precious and that by sentencing the two to death the government has sentenced the two to weeks of waiting for the moment their own lives will end.



The Failures of the Legal System

One of Helen's arguments related to the death penalty is that the legal system is flawed, a point that she doesn't really comprehend until she becomes involved with Patrick Sonnier. Even without law training, Helen is able to see points that Patrick's attorney should have made but didn't. For example, his attorney was not dedicated to his case and did not interview Eddie prior to his appearance at Patrick's trial, meaning the lawyer put Eddie - Patrick's only real chance to escape the death penalty - on the stand without knowing what Eddie might or might not say. Millard Farmer later explains that this is because the attorney was appointed by the courts and hadn't been paid nearly what the trial cost him. Another failure is in the statistics. Helen says that there are more blacks sentenced to death than whites and that the victims are almost always white. The poor defendants - like Patrick and Robert, who can't afford a private lawyer - also wind up on death row more often than wealthy ones. Another flaw pointed out by Helen is that there were several errors in Patrick's original trial that could have impacted the outcome. These were not mentioned by his lawyer during those proceedings and Millard was not permitted to bring them up later. Finally, Helen points out the possibility of corruption and cites the conviction of the Pardon Board chairperson on this charge. That man, Howard Marcellus, later tells Helen that he'd been instructed to be a team player, that money had changed hands in return for specific verdicts including pardons that the board felt undeserved, and that the governor was at the heart of this corruption.



Style

Perspective

The story is written in first person from the perspective of the author, Sister Helen Prejean. In an interesting derivation from the typical method of writing in past tense, the author uses present tense which gives the story a sense of immediacy that might otherwise have been lost. Some aspects of the story are presented in the order in which Sister Helen observes the events. For example, the murders of which Patrick Sonnier is accused happens well before the opening pages of the story and Sister Helen's involvement in Patrick's life, but she tells of the murders when she learns about it by reading the court records. However, many aspects of the story are presented greatly out of order. For example, she says that Patrick tells her that he would not be nearly as afraid of his impending execution if he could be certain that he would die instantly. Helen presents this thought and then says that she would later read in the coroner's report that Patrick had taken four or five minutes to die. The presentation takes away a great deal of the suspense that might ordinarily have been part of this story. It's evident that Patrick will be executed long before that happens by Helen's comments. The purpose of the story, to convince the reader that the death penalty is not the answer to deterring crime and that it should not be up to the government to decide who lives and dies, makes the presentation of facts and details appropriate to the story.

Tone

The book covers the executions of two convicted murderers, both who claim they didn't play the role of which they'd been accused. Helen relates the agony of waiting as the two men prepare themselves to meet death, knowing the exact time, place and method of their deaths. Patrick Sonnier admits that he would not be nearly so afraid if he was certain that death would be immediate, but Helen says that the coroner's report indicated that death took four or five minutes in Patrick's case. There is a sense of helplessness and hopelessness about the story that can't be hidden behind words of peace and forgiveness, and the author doesn't really try to overcome that sense of despair. Her own work is also hopeless, fighting against a system that sees the death penalty as a solution for heinous crimes. The majority of the story focuses on the lives and crimes of the two men Helen advises on death row and their deaths with the remainder of the book set aside for arguing her point - that the death penalty is wrong because it is merely a form of murder. Helen argues that point from a Biblical and ethical standpoint. There are many scriptures recited as arguments as well as scriptures Helen presents to Patrick and Robert as she tries to help them prepare for death.



Structure

The story is divided into eleven chapters ranging from twenty to thirty-seven pages. Chapters are numbered only. The book also includes acknowledgments and an introduction at the beginning as well as notes and an index at the end. The notes include sources and additional details of information included in the book. The introduction includes a note from the author indicating that there is "pain in these pages." There is an interesting quote at the opening of the book, after the introduction and prior to the first chapter. The quote is attributed to the fictional character, Huckleberry Finn, through author Mark Twain. The quote reads, "I went right along, not fixing up any particular plan, but just trusting to Providence to put the right words in my mouth when the time come: for I'd noticed that Providence always did put the right words in my mouth, if I left it alone." This is a foreshadowing of the fact that the author, Sister Helen Prejean, feels she is inadequate to the job she has as spiritual advisor and friend to convicted murderer Patrick Sonnier. The story is presented roughly in chronological order through the perspective of Sister Helen. The story is divided between narrative, dialogue and quotes from letters. All three are adequate to the story and believable. It should be noted that the dialogue is presented as direct quotes, though the author admits that she was not allowed to have writing materials with her in the prison. Therefore, the dialogue she presents is written after the fact and is subject to the author's interpretation and memory.



Quotes

"What cracks would have turned up in my character? What makes me think that I wouldn't have been pregnant at seventeen?" Chap. 1, p. 10

"I would not want my death avenged. Especially by government - which can't be trusted to control its own bureaucrats or collect taxes equitably or fill a pothole, much less decide which of its citizens to kill." Chap. 1, p. 21

"'The sad, terrible truth,' he says, 'is that if he and Eddie had killed two black kids, chances are they would never have been sentenced to death.'" -Millard Farmer, Chap. 3, p. 48

"Finally, Millard says, summing it all up, race, poverty, and geography determine who gets the death penalty - if the victim is white, if the defendant is poor, and whether or not the local D.A. is willing to plea-bargain." Chap. 3, p. 50

"Two brothers in two vehicles are now taking leave of each other: one going into the ground and one going into Angola for the rest of his life." Chap. 5, p. 99

"Do you really believe that Jesus, who taught us not to return hate for hate and evil for evil and whose dying words were 'Father, forgive them,' would participate in these executions? Would Jesus pull the switch?" Chap. 6, p. 123

"All they can think, all they know, all they want is the death of their child's murderer that the state has promised them." Chap. 6, p. 137

"He asks the Board to give Robert the same consideration that he gave Faith Hathaway when he and Vaccaro led her nude into a cave and raped her and stabbed her seventeen times in the throat and then let her bleed to death and rot in the woods." Chap. 8, p. 168

"My hunch is that he would say something like: Look, no matter what reasons you give to justify killing criminals, when you're there and you see it, when you watch it happen with your own eyes and are part of it, you feel dirty. You're killing a man who can't defend himself and that is just as wrong as what he did." Chap. 9, p. 181

"That, I believe, is what it's going to take to abolish the death penalty in this country: we must persuade the American people that government killings are too costly for us, not only financially, but - more important - morally." Chap. 9, p. 197

"Mildred Brewer witnessed the shooting of her daughter in 1979. Instead of being allowed to accompany her in the ambulance to the hospital, she was taken to police headquarters and questioned for three hours - during which her daughter died." Chap. 11, p. 241

"Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won." Chap. 11, p. 245



Topics for Discussion

Who is Sister Helen Prejean? How does she become involved in death row inmates? Why does she remain involved? How and why does her personal focus and her life change over the course of her story?

Who is Patrick Sonnier? Eddie Sonnier? How do they come to know Sister Helen Prejean? What is her role in their lives? What does Helen feel after Patrick's execution?

Who is Robert Lee Willie? What kind of person is he? How does Sister Helen Prejean become involved in his life? What is her role throughout their relationship?

Describe the role of Sister Helen Prejean in the lives and deaths of Patrick Sonnier and Robert Willie. How do the two situations differ? Why do they differ? Compare the two men.

List at least four of Sister Helen's arguments against the death penalty. What counterarguments do proponents of the death penalty give? What do you believe? Why?

List two of the parents of the victims. How does each handle the deaths of their children? How does this compare with attitudes and grief of the mothers of Patrick and Robert?

Helen is torn over her role she plays as spiritual adviser to convicted murderers and her sympathy for the parents of the two victims. How does she resolve these feelings? What actions does she take to ensure that victims know she cares about them as well? Is she effective in both roles?