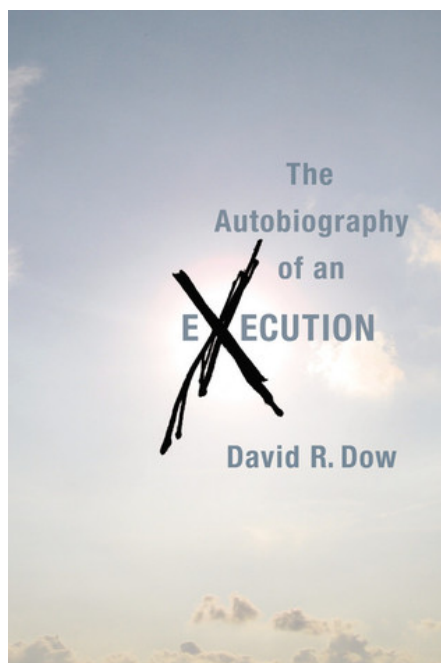




The Autobiography of an Execution

David R. Dow

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Near the beginning of *The Autobiography of an Execution*, David Dow lays his cards on the table. "People think that because I am against the death penalty and don't think people should be executed, that I forgive those people for what they did. Well, it isn't my place to forgive people, and if it were, I probably wouldn't. I'm a judgmental and not very forgiving guy. Just ask my wife."

In this spellbinding true crime narrative, Dow takes us inside of prisons, inside the complicated minds of judges, inside execution-administration chambers, into the lives of death row inmates (some shown to be innocent, others not) and even into his own home--where the toll of working on these gnarled and difficult cases is perhaps inevitably paid. He sheds insight onto unexpected phenomena-- how even religious lawyer and justices can evince deep rooted support for putting criminals to death-- and makes palpable the suspense that clings to every word and action when human lives hang in the balance.

The Autobiography of an Execution Details

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From Reader Review The Autobiography of an Execution for online ebook

Larry Bassett says

There is some information included about how the author wrote about real cases and events without betraying any confidence. I don't quite see how that is possible, but the book is fascinating reading. This is a Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction experience.

For the record: I oppose the death penalty.

Erin Carey says

I absolutely could not put this book down. The style was engaging, the tales were gripping and I found myself actually caring about (most of) the characters. I appreciate the honesty Dow provides the reader; namely that he used to be a supporter of the death penalty and that he does not judge those who still are. Instead, he provides us with an in-depth analysis of the appellate process and allows us to draw our own conclusion. He lays it all out - that most people are guilty (at one point he even acknowledges that his office spends very little time on some clients who don't have much of a chance of winning) but that sometimes the process just isn't fair.

I was fond of Quaker. That's an odd thing to say about a convicted murderer, but I was saddened by his execution. I remember the exact moment in the book when I realized "he's going to die." Yet, at the same point in the book Dow was detailing all the last minute scrambles and efforts to save whom he thought was an innocent man - and still hoping they would. When Dow saw Quaker for the last time, placed his hand on the glass and apologized, I felt his defeat. But perhaps more powerful to me was Quaker's acceptance. Though we'll never be certain who committed the crimes for which Quaker was executed, if he was indeed innocent, I can't think of a better reason to leave the world bitter and spiteful. But he didn't. He was just grateful someone gave a damn. Truly heartbreaking.

Cynthia says

I grew up in Texas and spent the majority of my adulthood there. Knowing this you might think I am for the death penalty and you would be wrong. The author is a death penalty attorney and law professor. He writes of many cases and references them and his family throughout the book. The main story of "Quaker" brought tears to my eyes. I have often wondered how "Christians" can play the part of God and put a person to death instead of just jailing them for life. I realize they refer to "an eye for an eye" from the Bible, but where does it say "kill someone because you think they are guilty?" The cost of appeals for a death row inmate is so much higher than to just imprison a person for life. And if you are rich and white, 99% of the time you won't end up on death row. (I know there are a few exceptions but how often do you hear of them being executed?) Basically in Texas, the judicial system is a sad joke for those of color and little financial means facing a murder charge. DNA does not always exonerate a person there. I personally know of a famous former oilman who got away with murder in Texas who lives in the same neighborhood as a good friend of mine. He is rich and white. He became a Christian after his former wife's daughter's death and used this to his advantage in court. Between that and his expensive attorney, he now lives in a nice house with a new wife scott free. If he had been darker skinned and poor, good luck to him with a state appointed attorney. Those guys are not

always bad - but many are burned out and get little to nothing in pay, so why should they bother to adequately research a client's case? Anyway, if you are on the fence regarding the death penalty, this book should persuade you against it. If you are for it, this book will probably make you think you are right. And if you are against it, this book will just make you angrier and sadder about the state of Texas's judicial system. I am proud to be a Texan but I am ashamed about the executions that take place just off of the freeway on the drive to Houston from Dallas.

Meaghan says

This is a brilliant memoir/creative nonfiction that has intensified my opposition to the death penalty. The author runs a legal aid clinic that handles death row inmates' appeals in Texas, a state notorious for its large number of executions. I knew the system was seriously flawed, but I didn't realize it was THIS bad. I was frankly horrified by what I read.

There are several cases in this story, but the central case involves a man convicted of murdering his wife and children, who is facing execution in a matter of weeks. His trial lawyer was really bad and basically presented no defense at all. As the attorney works on the appeal, he discovers clear and convincing evidence that his client is innocent. But can he stop the execution? To coin a cliché, I was on the edge of my seat wondering what would happen next.

This book qualifies as "creative nonfiction" because it's not strictly factual. The author disguised his clients and all the details of the crimes, and changed everyone's names, so that the real people involved could not be identified. He says so in the introduction to the book. There's also a useful essay in the back written by another lawyer, explaining the restrictions of attorney-client privilege and why Dow had to write the book this way.

This is a frankly stunning book. I think anyone interested in the criminal justice system and the death penalty -- on both sides of the debate -- should read it.

Trish says

Dow's new book is made up of part philosophy, part law school 101, part case history, part memoir and part detective story. The most compelling part of these is the detective story, (where he tries to figure out if one of his clients is actually innocent) the worst part was his telling us too much about his precocious 6-year old son (and while I understand that he wants to show us his personal life to give the rest of the story context, this was too much).

Dow tells us that he used to believe in capital punishment, but now no longer does. He now works exclusively with death row prisoners to get them stays of execution. His reasons for having a change of heart aren't detailed in this book (although I think they may have been in his previous book "Executed on a Technicality", that I have not yet read). It seems he is now against the death penalty because it isn't fairly applied and the criminal justice system is skewed toward executing mainly poor minorities. He hints that he doesn't think it is morally right either--murder is murder, but later says he is not sure what he would do if someone killed his family.

When I was younger I was adamantly against the death penalty. Now that I am older and have a young son, I am still theoretically against capital punishment; however I know that if someone sexually abused, tortured

and killed my son, I could personally administer the lethal injection with no qualms. So I wonder if Dow would still be against the death penalty if the same thing happened to his son, of whom he absolutely adores and fawns over in this book.

Dow shows the absurdity of how the court system works and how it is not driven by justice, but by procedures, protocols, and politics. He also shows how it is easy for everyone within this system (from jury members, to judges, and most especially the Governor, to not take responsibility for executing someone no matter if they are guilty, mentally incompetent or innocent, with the statement of "There wasn't anything I could do."

In addition to the too much narrative about his son in this book, his writing was a little too disjointed for me. He was all over the map--back and forth between a past client, to meeting his wife, to the main current case, to his current personal life, back to another current client, a dream, philosophical thoughts etc. He needed a better editor. These issues aside, I did think the book was informative and thought provoking and I would recommend it.

Reader In says

Imagine spending your working hours running a non-profit legal aid corporation that defends death row inmates, constantly scrambling to stop/delay executions. In Texas. If it sounds bleak, that's because it is. Yet David Dow's Autobiography of An Execution is mesmerizing and I expect, will be hard to forget.

The book format -- part memoir, part creative non-fiction -- is not for everyone. I understand readers who would be might be turned off by regular segues into time with his wife and small son. I found it powerful to see how the fight to stave off executions impacted those relationships, and I expect this is mirrored in homes across the United States. While Dow is against the death penalty, that doesn't mean he forgives the people he represents. "I'm a judgmental guy and not very forgiving. Ask my wife."

Yet there is a scathing section near the end of the book that everyone should read, especially anyone in favour of the death penalty. Dow notes that the system allows everyone to evade consequences of any decision: a juror is only one person on a jury, a judge is just implementing the jury decision, an appeal court has several judges. And of course, no one who makes any of those decisions has to show up to see the final decision carried out:

"It's easier to kill somebody if it's someone else's decision and if someone else does the killing. Our death penalty regime depends for its functionality on moral cowardice."

Lots of thought-provoking material here.

Salem says

The first thought in reading *The Autobiography of an Execution* was that David Dow's life reminded me an awful lot of that of Mitch McDeere from *The Firm*. Not the mafia parts; just the long hours, beautiful wife, running and drinking and eating parts. I'm not sure if this was subconscious (I'm betting Dow has read Grisham), or if it just means that this is the life of a busy, driven Southern lawyer.

Of course, it shouldn't go without saying that Dow's book is much, much better than Grisham's. I am against the racist institution of capital punishment, but I still appreciated how Dow took it for granted that his readers were. There is no preaching or inveighing in the book: Dow lets his experience speak for itself. And speak

powerfully it does.

The title should be a tip off, so I don't think I'm giving anything away to reveal that Dow is not able to save anyone from death row. That's just not the way his job goes, most of the time -- even though he makes a very strong case for why it should. But he makes an equally strong case for why he does what he does, and for the limits of his profession. He doesn't try to find the good in his clients, or to forgive them, or even to figure out how they got to be where they are. The issue is simply that the death penalty is wrong, and in that way Dow is imminently relatable.

Finally, as a former Houstonian, it made me happy to know that someone like Dow (an atheist Jew, like my husband) is fighting the Texas killing machine. It's a fight worth fighting.

Jan says

This book, by a lawyer who tries to keep Texas Death Row inmates from being executed, contains some very serious, if oblique, accusations that I hope are true and were not embellishments by the author, because if they're not true, I'm shocked that he would "go there."

I also didn't care for his stories about his family. I believe he included those because, as he mentions in the book, he received criticism on his previous books for not having enough of "himself" in them. However, I thought they were an unnecessary distraction. I picked up this book to read about his defense of Death Row inmates, not about his struggles as a father.

That being said, there is a lot about his Death Row cases in here, and those portions of the book didn't disappoint. They are informative, fascinating, frustrating, and sometimes heartbreaking. Dow has a definite agenda--he doesn't believe in capital punishment at all--so if you don't agree with that agenda, this might not be the book for you, unless you're openminded/want to read the side of the argument opposite of yours.

Personally, I thought it was an interesting & quick read. I can definitely see myself reading more of his books in the future.

Brendan Babish says

It was okay. The legal parts were really good, but I was not digging all the detours into the family. I wanted to read a book about the legalities of capital punishment, not a father feeling guilty for not buying his kid a snowcone.

Also, I couldn't find any other reviewer here mention this, but my BS meter went off a few times. Many of the interactions he recounts with prisoners didn't ring true to me, and he seemed a little self-aggrandizing.

Colleen Stinchcombe says

Whatever your feelings toward the death penalty, this is a fascinating read. It's nonfiction, the story of Dow's dealings as a death penalty lawyer who tries to keep people from being executed on death row -- which does not mean he necessarily proves their innocence or downgrades their sentence. If someone dies

from pneumonia instead, he considers it a “victory.” If he can push their sentence back a few days, a victory.

A few things I found interesting about this book:

It largely focuses on Dow and his family and how being a death penalty lawyer affects him (though at the same time, Dow’s voice keeps it from being overly philosophical.)

While I understand that there is corruption in our justice system, this further emphasized exactly what people mean by “corruption.” A public defender falling asleep in trial. The defense making no defense argument. The prosecution disallowing any black individuals from being on the jury of a black man’s trial.

While Dow states several times that he doesn’t believe in the death penalty, and sometimes says that he used to but at the time was misinformed, it doesn’t feel like the book is trying to sway you in one direction or the other. It’s not trying to convince you that the death penalty is wrong. It’s trying to show you what it means to intervene on the behalf of someone on death row.

So if you’re at all interested in the subject matter, it’s a good read. One that is easy to come back to when you inevitably put it down for some time to let what you’ve read sink in.

Eric says

towards the end of david dow's 'the autobiography of an execution', he writes:

"The cases I have written about are not unusual. My other cases, every death-penalty lawyer's cases, are just like them. What's missing is the proof that what you have just finished reading is mundane. The day after Henry Quaker got put to death, my colleagues and I went back to the office and did it all over again, and all the same things happened."

and this is maddening. this should be enough to convince any rational human being that the death penalty is flawed. one innocent person put to death is one too many.

dow's book is at turns suspenseful, illuminating, morose, maddening, sentimental, hard-boiled, and provocative. it's a book that is not easy to classify. it's more memoir than anything, due to the subject matter - due to attorney-client privilege, dow has been forced to cobble a true story out of true stories without actually telling the true story. that's pretty much the definition of memoir, but in a book about crime and justice, we usually want facts and dates and names and details. it's a tall order for a writer to win our trust enough to tell a true story that is not actually 'true.' but he succeeds.

at points i did find that dow's home life details intruded on the story that i wanted to hear. i am not so sure how much of that was his fault, and how much of it was that i was interested in reading a different book. i found the juxtaposition of his picture-perfect family and his penchant for expensive whiskeys and cuban cigars against the backdrop of desperate death row inmates who lived in poverty to be a bit distracting and maybe even distasteful. but that is a minor gripe. someone doing the thankful work that dow does surely deserves such little victories in life -- for there are not many to be had in his professional life.

"I'd do exhaustive research, write a powerful legal argument, and then watch no one pay it any heed. The problem with this lawyerly approach is that nobody cares about rules or principles when they're dealing with a murderer. The lawyer says that the Constitution was violated every which way, and the judge says, Yeah, but your client killed somebody, right? For all our so-called progress, the tribal vengefulness that we think of as limited to backward African countries is still how our legal system works. Deuteronomy trumps the Sixth Amendment every time. Prosecutors and judges kowtow to family members of murder victims who demand

an eye for an eye, and the lonely lawyer declaiming about proper procedures is a shouting lunatic in the asylum whom people look at curiously and then walk on by."

Diane Yannick says

This book is kind of a gender bender-- memoir and a crime and punishment narrative. The author, David Dow, has lots of titles but basically represents death row inmates in Texas. Although he's against the death penalty, he does not try to convince the reader of anything. He believes that most of his clients are guilty and he doesn't like them. BUT, it's the seven who he thought were innocent who still seem to haunt him--seven clients out of more than a hundred spanning the past twenty years. The focus of the book is Henry Quaker (name changed due to lawyer-client privilege which I guess extends beyond death) a gentle man who the evidence appears to exonerate. That doesn't keep him from being executed in a system that appears to be biased, reckless and inhuman. Henry's appointed lawyer apparently slept through most of his initial trial.

I liked the way the author meshed his personal and professional lives. His wife, son, and dog ground him. He allowed us to see the impact that his work has on his life at home. After an execution, he comes home and launders his clothes in a separate load. Yet his nights are filled with vivid dreams that blur his two worlds. Although I have no reason to doubt his account, I do wonder how anyone can be as sweet and supportive as his wife, Katya.

Many reviewers criticized his decisions not to use quotation marks or break the narrative into chapters. Didn't bother me a bit. I did think he missed some opportunities to include Henry's backstory. He made the point clearly that Henry was one of many in a long cycle of death row clients. One would be executed and the next would be waiting. The arbitrary deadlines, legal mumbo jumbo, and complicated protocols seem ridiculous to an average person like me. When there is evidence that could refute an inmate's guilt, why can't the evidence be fully evaluated before an arbitrary death date mandates the execution? Won't we be looked at as barbarians playing God by future generations?

David Dow made me think. Just a few quotes I want to remember:

"We don't always choose what we think."

"My goal is to save my clients, but that object is beyond my control. All I can control is whether I abandon them."

"There are certain truths in life you have to evade in order to keep being the person you have convinced yourself you are."

"Lots of things are legal and also wrong."

Ensiform says

The author, a death-penalty defense lawyer in Texas, discusses some of his cases (with identifying details removed) and all their nail-biting, guilt-inducing, soul-crushing drama and tragedy. He mentions several cases as once, but most of the book centers on the case of a man he calls Quaker, who got a sickeningly

unfair deal at his first trial and who seems innocent based on the evidence Dow has. Undeniably driven to do this work, and justifiably angry at what he perceives as uncaring, blatantly unfair, and hypocritical judges who sign death orders from afar, he is plagued by nightmares and sometimes overly harsh with his young son. He depicts his home life, with his wife whom he adores and his five-year-old, as a refuge, but one that too often is violated by the on-call nature of his work.

It makes for truly compelling reading, as Dow tells it, giving a vain scintilla of hope to the hopeless and mostly forsaken, only to deliver disappointment, and be disappointed, time and again. Dow tries at times too hard to be the poet, eschewing quotation marks, postmodern hipster style, and possibly infusing his son's comments about life and cruelty with more weight than they truly carry. And at times he is in need of an editor, often dropping a subject and referring to a previous subject with an "it" or "he" so that it's not clear whom he's referring to. And perhaps an editor would have convinced Dow tone down the "women sure do hit on clueless ol' me a lot" bits that only serve to make him look self-aggrandizing or wallowing in false modesty or both. He mentions in his afterword that a previous book of his was reviewed by a critic who said it had a lot of facts but nothing of him in it. Of course, everyone's tolerance for authorial ego varies, and yes, I understand that he was trying to show the delicate balance defense attorneys must carve out to stay sane, but frankly I wish there had been less of Dow in this one, and more on the nuts and bolts of his late nights futilely trying to save the unsympathetic.

Kate says

This book is several things: an intimate and humane argument against the injustice of capital punishment, a critique of other anti-capital punishment literature, and, as Louisa Thomas, writing in *The New York Times* described Mary Clearman Blew's *This is Not the Ivy League*: "a kind of anti-memoir — an incredulous account, a catalog of confusion."

David R. Dow has been representing death row inmates for 20 odd years or so. Once a proponent of the death penalty, he got started in the business as an academic exercise: early on in his career he set out to compare the competencies of lawyers representing death row inmates in Virginia, Florida and Texas. What he found was troubling enough to take up the mantle of defense of men and women sentenced to death, most of them guilty of absolutely heinous crimes, not out of any great sense of compassion for them but out of a strong belief in the Rule of Law, which, as we find in *Autobiography of an Execution*, most prosecutors, judges and defense lawyers don't seem to give a damn about. Dow's argument against the death penalty is this: if the system is this screwed up, no one can expect justice from the system. If the system by which the state administers justice is too screwed up to administer justice then that state does not have the authority to execute anyone.

I rest my personal opposition to the death penalty on a belief in the sanctity of human life, QED. This position falls flat however, when taking it in argument against someone (or some system) that does not recognize or believe in sanctity. Dow's position is very important, then, for abolitionists. He offers an abolitionist position that does not rely on a belief in the sanctity of human life.

AOAE is Dow's account of how the Rule of Law has broken down in capital cases in Texas; we are taken through five or six narratives (Dow is bound by legal code and ethics not to share identifying details about his clients, and these narratives represent cases that he and his colleagues have worked on, though names, dates and identifying details have been changed) that demonstrate what happens when a man or woman is sentenced to death. Dow takes the reader through a light crash course in the legal basics and what he and his colleagues go through to prevent their client's executions. Dow has a strong moral backbone and makes his case against capital punishment skillfully and subtly. I was furious after reading of the institutionalized callousness of the death penalty machine: that a man may go to his death because a computer server was down and his lawyer left unable to file a motion in time. That a judge would write an op-ed saying that in angered him he couldn't schedule dinner parties on nights of executions because the last minute phone calls

from lawyers trying to save a man or woman's life (no matter how heinous that person may be) disrupted his dinner. The ridiculous sense of privilege and entitlement that those in power have blew my mind. I am a lowly bench scientist, but if there is work for me to do after five o'clock, I stay at work until its finished. I don't think that we should expect any less from lawyers or federal court judges.

Dow does not reward himself for his work; he is far tougher on himself, as a lawyer, as a father, and as a person, than he is on the machine that he fights so ruthlessly. I've never read a memoir by anyone who knows the facts of them selves so well, and yet is so honest in their refusal to fake a linear narrative of their lives. This is a true anti-memoir: Dow has far more questions for himself than he has answers for the reader. This is a fitting stance to take, as it puts the reader in the mind to question themselves, as well, and once in a questioning mood, perhaps question whether we, as a nation, may put a man or woman to death and call it justice, when we know so little of our own motivations.

There was some poor editing: Jeremy Winston has two life stories, making it too obvious that he is, in reality, at least two people. Also, if I, as a fellow bourbon drinker may quibble: Dow once mentions that after his first capital case, he took a case of Jack Daniels with him to his cabin on Galveston Island. Later, he refers to such as 'A case of bourbon'. Sir, if you were a true bourbon drinker, you would know this to be false.

An Autobiography of an Execution is highly recommended as an excellent (anti) memoir, and for those readers who care about the administration of justice.

Amber says

This book is a screed—but it's a screed that everyone with any interest in understanding how the American legal system works should read. The author has a very interesting perspective, having worked for Texas death-row inmates, and he is, I would say, enraged at how the legal system has treated them. The book is written somewhat unconventionally—not separated into chapters, really, more just pauses, and with a rather plaintive writing style—but the content is so important, and engrossing, that by the third page or so, you forget that it's different at all. And certainly it's well written, just a little differently than the non-fiction I usually read.

In several cases, his writing is so powerful that, upon rereading my notes, I'm struck by just how perfectly he has described the situation. One such example is when he describes how his own feelings on the death penalty have evolved: "I changed my mind when I learned how lawless the system is. If you have reservations about supporting a racist, classist, unprincipled regime, a regime where white skin is valued far more highly than dark, where prosecutors hide evidence and policemen routinely lie, where judges decide what justice requires by consulting the most recent Gallup poll, where rich people sometimes get away with murder and never end up on death row, then the death-penalty system we have here in America will embarrass you to no end."

Interestingly, however, the primary focus of the book is about a death-row inmate he believes is innocent. For some, this may undermine his point above, about how guilty inmates are treated, but to me it was no less powerful. He reserves particular animosity toward the court of appeals with jurisdiction for Texas, and points out egregious examples of their upholding the death penalty even in cases with egregious racism in jury selection, with lawyers who didn't point out their client's extremely low IQ score, lawyers waited too long to identify proof of innocence, lawyers slept through trial, etc., and claims that the judges hide their lawlessness inside legalese. In another particularly poignant comment, he notes that "most people say that the murderer got treated better than his victim, and that pretty much sums up the attitude of the judges on the court of

appeals as well.”

In one lighter moment, he recalls a conversation with a nun, who noted that the support for the death penalty is a mile wide and an inch deep. To which the author notes that you can drown in an inch of water. I found that exchange a particularly apt analogy for the death penalty’s staying power despite its massive legal and moral issues.

This book certainly isn’t uplifting, and at times is upsetting to read, which is all the more reason it’s an essential read. Highly recommended.

Stacy Pershall says

Wow. This book should be required reading to be a human. So very deserving of the Barnes and Noble Discover Award! The writing was so gorgeous I was able to overlook the author's aversion to quotation marks -- lots of, "I said, thank you very much. He said, you're welcome. I said, let's go get some ice cream." Not sure what the reasoning was behind this stylistic choice, but hey, if I'm going to think William Faulkner is the great genius of the universe, I can't say I don't like authors who break the rules. Also, I'm kind of in love with Lincoln.

Mazola1 says

David Dow represented hundreds of death row inmates. The vast majority were guilty. Most were executed. A few were mentally retarded. Almost all had horrendous upbringings and were severely damaged human beings. Some he disliked intensely. Some he regarded as just plain evil. And at least a few were innocent.

Dow's book sketches the reality of the death penalty in America and tells his own story -- that of a lawyer trying to stop his clients from being put to death and almost always losing. His work would seem to be stressful in the extreme and extremely discouraging, yet as Dow describes it, the reader comes to understand why it is important. In spare and simple prose, Dow describes his day to day work, his clients, and the effect his work has on his home and family life and his dreams.

If Dow himself is one focus of the book, the other is the death penalty itself. The book provides food for thought for both those who support and those who oppose the death penalty. The reality is that a lot of poor defendants don't get anything like competent legal representation, even when their lives are at stake. The reality is that racism is often a factor. The reality is that many defendants are given the death penalty on something less than airtight evidence. The reality is that prosecutors, judges and jurors are often far more concerned with punishing those they perceive or believe to be guilty of heinous crimes than in making sure they are only punished after getting a fair trial. The reality is that most of those who are found guilty and sentenced to death are in fact guilty.

But the really troubling reality is that a few of those condemned to death aren't guilty, didn't get a fair trial, and don't deserve to die. Another troubling reality is that all too often procedural rules are given greater weight than substantive fairness. Claims of actual innocence, with evidence to back them up, are sometimes blocked because they were not raised in the right court or at the right time. The incompetence of trial counsel, including famously, lawyers who slept through large parts of their clients' death penalty trials, is over overlooked, excused or justified. This is a very disturbing book. It will very surely disturb those who

oppose the death penalty. It should disturb those who support it even more.

Felicity says

If you're for the death penalty, I'm not convinced that reading books by lawyers such as David Dow seeking to save death-row inmates is really going to make any difference to what you think. So, what then, is the purpose of Dow's book, assuming he is preaching to an army of the converted...those who don't believe in the death penalty?

David Dow is an academic and a lead lawyer at Texas's non-profit anti-death penalty litigation center. The greatest strength of Dow's book is his frankness. Dow argues that most of the people he represents are undoubtedly guilty. Often, their crimes have been horrific--and most of the inmates for whom he advocates are not people he likes very much. Focusing on innocence, argues Dow, distracts people from the real injustices of the death penalty. People who are sentenced to death are disproportionately black and poor, represented by unbelievably crappy lawyers who miss filing deadlines, fail to raise pertinent points of appeal, and who essentially doom their clients to death by virtue of their inadequacy. Stepping in to try and clean up these messes are people like Dow and his team. Dow's work is mainly about buying time...as Dow explains, an extra thirty days of life becomes an enormous victory in the context of the alternative: death. If buying time means that a prisoner on death row dies of an AIDS-related illness rather than via state execution, then that death is counted as a success.

Bobby says

David Dow's memoir is about some of the death-row inmates whom he's represented as their attorney, and all the injustices and challenges that exist where he practices (Texas). He used to support the death penalty but opposes it now...and after reading the book it's easy to see why.

I can see some people being turned off by the way the book is written: he skips back and forth between his interactions with his family (wife, son, and a dog) and his clients. However, it didn't bother me at all; in fact, I rather liked the stark contrasts it produces. A very refreshing aspect of the book for me was the brutal honesty with which the author gives his views on his colleagues, judges, clients, wife's friends, etc.

I think everybody should read this book, no matter where you stand on the issue. Since the author has held both views on the death penalty, he understands the perspective of those who still favor it and does not get preachy but let's the stories speak for themselves. It's a fast read and definitely worth spending the time IMHO.

Trin says

There are many reasons I could give for why you should read a book about the death penalty: cold, hard, fact-based reasons, like the chilling statistic that to date 17 people who have been executed in this country have since been exonerated by DNA evidence, according to the Innocence Project (and that even one is too many). But really, my own opinions on the issue are irrelevant, and Dow's searing memoir can be

approached equally well as a death penalty proponent, opponent, or as someone who has no real feelings on the issue at all. Dow, who defends death row inmates in Texas, occupied the first position before coming firmly around to the second, and his reasoning is much more ethically than morally based. Dow doesn't like most of his clients; he thinks even fewer of them are innocent. But the system he sees is a broken one, corrupted and corrosive -- death by a drunk executioner swinging a rusty blade. The stories that make up *Autobiography of an Execution* are exercises in frustration, Kafkaesque bureaucratic nightmare, and heartbreak. And yet: Dow tempers all this with prose that is more Hemingwayesque in its simple, stark power. And yet: the overall effect is as pulse-poundingly intense as the best John Grisham thriller -- and a thousand times more emotionally resonant, as it's all true, each life and death that of a real person. Forget politics: this is a book about people, and it should be read.
