

Life Without Parole: Living and Dying in Prison Today

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For my Honors Capstone, I have served as co-editor (with Robert Johnson) of Life Without Parole: Living and Dying in Prison Today, the fifth and final edition of an Oxford University Press book written by Victor Hassine. Hassine was a life-without-parole inmate who served over 25 years in Pennsylvania prisons. During this time, Hassine devoted himself to bettering prison living conditions for himself as well as his fellow inmates through various lawsuits that he both initiated and worked on. But more interestingly, Hassine was the author of various works of both fiction, including short stories on crime and punishment, and non-fiction, including books on prison life. He hoped to convey to the outside world the truths about American prisons and the implications of these truths on society. Hassine urged the readers of his works to realize that the way we treat prisoners will most certainly affect the way they treat us upon their release.

Among his many works, Hassine authored four editions of a book titled Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today published first by Roxbury Publishing Company and then taken over by Oxford University Press. Sadly, after the release of the fourth edition of this well-known text, Hassine took his own life upon being denied a commutation hearing and the opportunity to make his case for an early release – hence the addition of “and Dying” to the title of this final edition. As a tribute to Hassine’s dedication to prison reform and in memory of his life, Johnson and I embarked on producing this final edition with two goals in mind. First, we hoped to remain true to the original purpose of this text: to capture and relay the realities that life-without-parole inmates face, in order to foster open dialogue regarding issues of crime and punishment. And secondly, we wanted to convert this book from a compilation of discontinuous narratives and opinion essays, to a flowing prison journey that would more thoroughly convey Hassine’s life story. Producing the final edition of this book has entailed a number of tasks, all of which Johnson and I have been diligently working on with the above two goals in mind.

We began with the first and perhaps most daunting task, entirely disassembling the disjointed contents of the previous edition and rearranging them to convey Hassine’s journey through prisons as a chronological story. Upon being presented with the fourth edition, my initial reaction was that the various elements of the book felt entirely segregated. The book was comprised of three distinct sections that in my opinion were not cohesive and did not proceed smoothly; this structural flaw was not conducive to conveying Hassine’s life. As such, I was immediately compelled to take on the job of integrating the sections into a more fluid and consequently more powerful text. This involved first determining which parts of the text should be cut entirely; then breaking down the remainder of the book into fragments as small as individual sentences and putting the text back together in a new and improved order.

Another element of the fourth edition that Johnson and I wanted to address was the chapter introductions. We found that they were very brief and somewhat redundant, serving more as summaries of the upcoming text rather than offering a new perspective for readers. In fact, we polled a class of Johnson’s and these students revealed that they stopped reading the introductions for these very reasons. Therefore, Johnson and I have replaced the chapter introductions with an introductory essay, *Life Without*, and concluding essay, *Death Without*. These essays engage the reader in a new way of understanding prisoners and life in prison. As we note in *Life Without*, “All men in prison are vulnerable and must live with fear. All men in prison are, at bottom, alone and apart from the larger society, and must live with loss. All men in prison, being human, cling to hope – for a decent day, a sustaining relationship, or more

ambitiously, a better life down the road, after prison.” We hope that such insights will remind readers that inmates are people too, with feelings and aspirations. While they may be deserving of punishment, these essays will encourage readers to consider the true effects of these punishments both on these inmates and on society.

Finally, the third critical amendment that Johnson and I implemented to produce this final edition was to incorporate a number of Hassine’s original works of fiction; works that have been praised on their ability to capture very important elements of prison life in unique and captivating ways. The short stories we selected to feature capture the three primary themes of this book and Hassine’s prison journey: fear, loss, and hope. The first story, *The Beast*, is a study in fear that describes vividly the feelings of debilitating terror that many inmates endure upon entering the prison world. *The Crying Wall* then explores the depths of loss that prisoners face after settling into the prison and becoming more aware of the tangible and intangible things they will no longer experience. And the third story, which I edited and co-authored with Hassine, is titled *The Prison Librarian* and examines the power of hope in a setting seemingly dedicated to the extinction of hope.

Unfortunately, due to the nature of my capstone, the text that I have reconstructed and the introductory and closing essays I have contributed to are copyrighted by Oxford University Press. Likewise, the short stories are copyrighted by Carolina Academic Press, as they were recently published in Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment (May 2009, co-edited by Robert Johnson and Sonia Tabriz). Consequently, I cannot disclose any of the contexts of the book at this time. Johnson and I are currently finalizing the text and will soon be presenting it to Oxford University Press. We anticipate the book will be published in late 2010 or early 2011. While the book may undergo a few changes in structure and context, I anticipate that these changes will be very minor and that the various amendments and additions dictated in this report will be reflected in the final text. I very much look forward to donating one of the very first copies of Life Without Parole: Living and Dying in Prison Today (Oxford University Press) to the American University Honors Department upon its publication.