



A Courageous Fool: Marie Deans and Her Struggle against the Death Penalty

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Marie Deans was a strong writer, and her words have an immediacy that nicely contrasts with the thorough biography of her life.

For about three decades, Marie Deans devoted herself to fighting the death penalty, first in South Carolina and then in Virginia. From working to get new trials for convicted men to fighting for prison reform to simply listening to inmates' attempts at redemption, she became an important figure in the fight against capital punishment. In *A Courageous Fool*, Todd C. Peppers and Margaret A. Anderson tell the interesting story of Deans's life and work.

Originally, this book was intended as a memoir by Marie Deans, but she passed away in 2011, before the work could be completed. Instead, Peppers and Anderson lean heavily on the work Deans had already completed, as well as letters she received from death-row inmates over the years, and interviews with family members, fellow activists, and, notably, Joe Giarratano—a wrongfully convicted man whom Deans helped exonerate. Many of these materials are quoted at length, and the authors fill in the gaps by introducing Deans's complicated childhood and telling the stories of numerous death-row inmates in whose cases she became involved.

Throughout the book, Deans comes across as a flawed but noble figure who was able to bond with death-row inmates without absolving them of their crimes, and able to agitate for better conditions in prison and more accountability in the process. The book also includes useful context about what Virginia's death row was like in the 1980s and 1990s, with inmates who never received their mandated appeals, men being executed who didn't understand the finality of the punishment, and public officials so focused on executing prisoners that new and exonerating evidence was automatically seen as suspect.

A Courageous Fool includes long passages of the activist's own words—most movingly in her recollection of the night her mother-in-law, Penny Deans, was murdered during a random home invasion, and how her realization of vengeance's emptiness in the aftermath helped form her opposition to the death penalty. She was a strong writer, and her words have an immediacy that nicely contrasts with the thorough biography of her life. *A Courageous Fool* does a solid job telling her story and those of the inmates she tried to help.

JEFF FLEISCHER (July/August 2017)

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