

He Called Me Sister: A True Story of Finding Humanity on Death Row

Suzanne Craig Robertson

Helen Prejean, Contributor

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In her captivating memoir, Suzanne Craig Robertson brings out the nuances of a death row inmate's story that news reports and court judgments ignored.

Robertson's husband, Alan, was a participant in a church ministry that visited those on Tennessee's death row. She received a phone call from an inmate, Cecil C. Johnson Jr., checking to see when Alan would be arriving. That conversation led to a friendship and a feeling of kinship.

Robertson never asked Cecil if he committed the three murders he was accused of; in some ways, it didn't matter. It is clear from the book's outset that he did not get his hoped-for clemency or have his final appeal succeed. Instead, Robertson focuses on detailing her growing connection to Cecil. She came to know him as a person. She learned that he mourned the years he missed while he was away from his daughter. He shared childhood memories with her, too, as of walking to visit his grandmother in the winter with cardboard covering the holes in his shoes.

Cecil's character is established before the book explains the details of his case. Robertson treats him as someone worthy of caring about, independent of the crimes he may or may not have committed. Excerpts from his own work are included, too, like poems and letters that further express what the world has lost, with insights into his childhood loneliness and the pain he felt because of poverty and neglect. And the book's closing includes a lawyer's claim that, while it was likely that Cecil committed the crimes he was charged with, there was no certainty; doubts remained.

Pregnant with a sense of tragedy and wrestling with what could have been, *He Called Me Sister* is a touching memoir about how faith and love reached beyond prison bars.

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