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Women on the Row: Revelations from Both Sides of the Bars

Kathleen A. O'Shea
Firebrand Books (November 2000)
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The shadows dividing good and evil, free and imprisoned blur almost beyond recognition in O'Shea's dramatic collection of the most intimate thoughts and experiences of eleven women. Ten speak from beyond society, behind the bars on America's death rows. The final and primary voice is her own, echoing from her past as a nun discovering her sexuality.

"I don't ever expect society as a whole to understand or try to because I have learned that it is easier to see the difference than the likeness," said Christina Riggs, who was condemned to die after murdering her two children and failed suicide in 1997. She was executed in May of 2000. O'Shea draws parallels between her own fall from grace and these death-row inmates' mortal sins.

O'Shea is an advocate in Women on the Row. She gives a new voice to the inmates' complaints about shower schedules, lack of privacy, isolation from family, and paltry living conditions. Women on the Row begins with ten descriptions; each of which runs one or two pages long. In them, O'Shea describes the death-row women, their lives, their crimes, their defenses. Through the remainder of the book O'Shea tells her personal story, intertwining pieces from each of the other women.

The format takes some adjustment. O'Shea conveys a chronological story—from her days dreaming of the convent as an elementary student, to her first lesbian experience with an underage minor, to the present day as she completes this novel. Quotations from the other women are mixed in. They appear in italics and with attribution throughout O'Shea's story, often every other paragraph. Their words are poignant, but are used only to highlight O'Shea's story and do not tell a complete story of the condemned women themselves.

The format, although uncommon, is effective. These eleven women taken as a whole tell a story much larger than themselves or the crimes they have committed. They speak of the inherent good and evil in everyone and in society. The crosses and chains they bear combine into a truly groundbreaking book on death-row women and all of humanity.

MARJORY RAYMER (July / August 2000)

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