

# The Bars in Our Minds

by Barbara I. Bond

## Women On The Row : Revelations From Both Sides Of The Bars

by Kathleen A. O'Shea. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 2000, 156 pp., \$12.95. ISBN 1-56341-124-5.

Kathleen A. O'Shea is an ordinary woman doing extraordinary work. She has been in contact with the women on death row in the United States since the early 1990s. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, as of April 1, 2000 there were 55 women awaiting execution in the United States. On May 2, Christina Riggs, one woman in O'Shea's most recent book, *Women on the Row: Revelations from Both Sides of the Bars*, was executed. What began as a graduate school project has evolved into a moving chronicle. Her most recent book, a unique memoir, juxtaposes her life against the disparate musings of ten death row inmates.

O'Shea is the publisher of a newsletter, "Women on the Row," that she distributes to about 150 people. As a Catholic nun for over thirty years, O'Shea has frequently been involved with issues involving human rights. Today, although she is no longer a nun, her work to improve human rights continues as a writer.

According to Amnesty International, over 30 countries worldwide have abolished the death penalty since 1990. In the United States, support is at its lowest point in 19 years. Further, over

ninety percent of people polled would opt for alternative sentencing if it were presented. Increasingly, the United Nations and the European Union are calling for the United States to abolish the death penalty. Ironically, President George W. Bush was governor of the state with the highest execution rate in the country. Since 1995 Texas has put to death over 130 people. As Kathleen O'Shea pointed out in our recent conversation, although public support for the death penalty is falling, the United States Congress continues to support the practice. "[The movie] *Dead Man Walking* and the work of people like Sister Helen Prejean has raised people's consciousness. States are looking at DNA testing and wrongly convicted people; some have a moratorium on the death penalty. Since working through Congress didn't work, people are working in their own states to enact change."

For O'Shea, the women on death row are more than an abstract concept or newspaper headline. One reason she wrote her book was to present a different side of the women on the row to the public. "In meeting them, and getting to know them and talk to them, I saw a lot of their humanity. That's what



Kathleen O'Shea

I tried to bring out." In writing her recent memoir, she was able to chronicle the emotional impact her relationships with the women have on her life. Although the final manuscript wasn't the book she envisioned, it did pave the way for her to increase the public's awareness of women death row inmates.

The inhumane living conditions for women on death row continue to arouse O'Shea's passion and ire. "One of the things I think people don't understand about the conditions is that prisons were never made with Death Rows. When women started getting the death penalty they didn't have any place to put women in women's prisons so they put them in isolation, which is where they put all the behavior problems. Seven women live in isolation in states with only one woman on death row."

O'Shea saw the invisibility of the women and wanted to give them a voice. When she was a young nun in the 1960s, she went to teach in Chile. Teaching at a private school for the power elite, O'Shea unwittingly became involved in politics. The events she was to witness over the next eight years would change her. With the high school students under her supervision O'Shea would travel to the south of Chile to teach reading and writing as part of the literacy campaign. When Pinochet came into power, many of her students were arrested and later became among the "disappeared." O'Shea recalls that painful time:

Their crime was they were teaching other people to read and write. If you're in a government that doesn't want people to learn to read and write—then they kill the teachers. People were picked up in the middle of the night and taken away and never seen again, just because members of their family were one of these people we had taken to teach people to read and write. To this day, I'm 25 years away from it and only now am I beginning to write about it because of what it meant for me.

When I was there they didn't kill nuns, so I felt very fortunate. We were involved in a lot of things that were we doing them today... we wouldn't be alive.

Upon her return to the United States,

O'Shea was to have an experience that would alter the course of her life. As a naive young nun teaching high school Spanish she fell in love with a younger woman—a student. O'Shea explains in her memoirs that she still doesn't know exactly how it happened. Yet it did.

We touched and kissed and my body came alive. . . . It was an awakening I'd never dreamt of. Suddenly I had a body, I had needs and wants, I had desires. I flowed. I was alive and ridiculously happy. (94, 95)

And although it would take her years to put the affair and its aftermath into perspective, O'Shea admits that without it her life probably would have never become what it is today.

Today Kathleen O'Shea lives and works at Innisfree Village in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Innisfree is a community where mentally handicapped adults live in group homes with staff members. The life there allows her the flexibility she needs to live as a writer and fulfills her desire to live in a community. When O'Shea came to Innisfree in 1979, she was searching for community. She found just that, and so much more. Innisfree has given her the courage to begin anew, no longer "sister," just Kathleen O'Shea.

The novel O'Shea is currently writing is just one of several projects she is juggling. For this work of historical fiction, O'Shea will draw on her experiences living in Chile in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For her, it is the only way to put that painful past into words. O'Shea explains that it is a novel about a Midwestern girl who goes to American University in Washington, D.C. and is recruited by the C.I.A. to work in Chile. She is supposed to work undercover and infiltrate the Catholic Church as a nun.

For Kathleen O'Shea, life at one time represented her struggle to maintain a connection to reality in the face of physical and emotional adversity. For the women on the row, maintaining a connection to reality is their life. O'Shea has been able to put her life into perspective recently, as her memoirs attest and her good works illustrate.

Kathleen O'Shea wants people to see the human side of American justice through the women on the row. Judging from the positive reactions to *Women on the Row: Revelations from Both Sides of the Bars*, perhaps someday she will succeed. ♦♦♦

Barbara I. Bond is a free-lance writer living in Portland, Oregon with her partner and their two small children. She says, "While talking to Kathleen O'Shea about the women on death row, I asked her what point she really wanted people to understand about these women. Without hesitation she replied, 'Their humanity.' As I researched capital punishment for this article, I realized the hypocrisy of living in a country that brags about its support of human rights while continuing to sentence people to death. Perhaps readers will be compelled to examine capital punishment in their own backyards."

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