

A photograph of the Metropolitan Opera House interior, showing a grand staircase with red carpeting and a balcony with a large chandelier. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**ACCESS OPERA
EDUCATOR GUIDE**

JAKE HEGGIE / LIBRETTO BY TERENCE McNALLY

DEAD MAN WALKING

The Met
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Opera

DEAD MAN WALKING

THE WORK

An opera in two acts,
sung in English

Music by Jake Heggie

Libretto by Terrence
McNally

Based on the Book by
Sister Helen Prejean,
C.S.J.

First performed October
7, 2000, at San Francisco
Opera

PRODUCTION

Ivo van Hove
Director

Jan Versweyveld
Set and Lighting Designer

An D’Huys
Costume Designer

Christopher Ash
Projection Designer

Tom Gibbons
Sound Designer

Production a gift of C. Graham
Berwind, III; the Ann and Gordon
Getty Foundation; Ted Snowdon
and Duffy Violante, in memory of
Terrence McNally; and Mrs. Diane
B. Wilsey

Additional funding from Franci
Neely; Judy and Jim Pohlman;
Denise Littlefield Sobel, in memory
of Phyllis Cannon Wattis; and The
H.M. Agnes Hsu-Tang, Ph.D. and
Oscar Tang Endowment Fund

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Dead Man Walking Educator Guide
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DEAD MAN WALKING BEGINS AND ENDS WITH A MURDER: ONE BY A MAN, THE OTHER by the state. The question posed by Jake Heggie’s opera—based on activist Sister Helen Prejean’s bestselling eponymous memoir—is whether justice can be served, and forgiveness granted, in either case. Turning away from the public spectacle of investigations, trials, and convictions, *Dead Man Walking* instead welcomes audiences into the intimate and often unseen spaces where the innerworkings of the criminal justice system play out: prison cells, offices, visiting rooms, and parking lots. In so doing, it demonstrates how waves of grief, pain, doubt, and hope ripple through communities grappling with violence and its aftermath.

Following on the success of his debut production of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* during the Met’s 2022–23 season, Tony Award–winning director Ivo van Hove’s new staging of *Dead Man Walking* expands upon its predecessor’s abstract, minimalist vision. “We chose in this case, for this opera, not to create realistic sets,” van Hove remarks. “In the beginning, we are actually in a nunnery, then we go to a community center, and then we end up in the prison. And it’s that journey we wanted to bring to the stage in a more abstract way.” Using video projections to depict the central murder from three distinct vantages—those of a neutral observer, the perpetrator, and finally the victims—this production prompts a confrontation with the magnitude and humanity of the events that set it in motion.

This guide approaches *Dead Man Walking* as an entry point into contentious and evergreen conversations about the criminal justice system in the United States, as well as the powers—and limits—of faith, compassion, resentment, and love. By exploring numerous curricular connections that reach well beyond contemporary public policy debates, students will gain a deeper understanding of how social, political, and legal structures shape the world we inhabit. The information on the following pages is designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of attending a final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera.



The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world. Founded in 1883, the Met first opened in a lavish opera house at Broadway and 39th Street that, while beautiful, had significant practical limitations. Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the stage facilities of the original theater could not meet the Met's technical needs. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September 1966, was a technical marvel of its day, and has remained an architectural landmark ever since.

Each season, the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York, welcoming more than 800,000 attendees. In addition to presenting the indispensable masterpieces of history's great composers, performed by the world's finest singers and directed by visionaries from throughout the theatrical world, the Met is committed to ensuring that opera remains a living art form by commissioning and staging vital new works that tell modern stories and engage with the issues of today. The Met is also a leader in new media distribution initiatives, harnessing state-of-the-art technology to bring performances from the Met's iconic stage to millions of people worldwide.

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Dead Man Walking* whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera or the performing arts. It includes activities for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds, and will encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.

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WHO'S WHO IN DEAD MAN WALKING

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
<p>Sister Helen Prejean A nun and the spiritual advisor to Joseph De Rocher, an inmate on death row</p>	mezzo-soprano	Sister Helen, a Jesuit nun at Hope House (an educational center for children), is asked to write letters to Joseph De Rocher, a convicted murderer on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. When he asks to meet in person, Helen finds herself on a journey that will forever change her life and challenge her faith as she confronts Joseph, his family, and the families of his victims.
<p>Sister Rose A fellow nun and Sister Helen's friend</p>	soprano	Helen's closest friend and confidant, Sister Rose provides much-needed support for Helen as the date of Joe's execution nears.
<p>Joseph De Rocher An inmate on death row</p>	bass-baritone	A convicted rapist and murderer, Joe awaits his execution on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola. When he asks Helen to be his spiritual advisor, he is forced to reckon with the truth and consequences of his crimes.
<p>Father Grenville The prison chaplain</p>	tenor	In charge of religious services and counsel at the prison, Father Grenville is bothered by the fact that Joe turns to Helen for guidance rather than him.
<p>George Benton The prison warden</p>	bass-baritone	As the superintendent overseeing the prison, George Benton introduces Helen to the harsh realities of death row and questions her ability to serve as Joe's spiritual advisor. Ultimately, he is responsible for Joe's execution.
<p>Mrs. Patrick De Rocher Joseph De Rocher's mother</p>	mezzo-soprano	Joe's mother believes his innocence and insists upon his fundamental goodness, pleading before the Pardon Commission for his execution to be stayed and, ultimately, refusing to hear his confession.
<p>Kitty and Owen Hart; Jade and Howard Boucher Parents of the teenagers killed by Joseph De Rocher</p>	soprano and bass-baritone; mezzo-soprano and tenor	The victims' families are furious that Helen has been an advocate for and friend to Joe. They cannot understand why she would comfort the man who killed their children, which they consider a betrayal. Only Owen is willing to speak privately with Helen, inviting her to visit him and his family.

Synopsis

PRELUDE: *A wooded area near a lake in Louisiana.* Two teenagers have been skinny-dipping in a lake surrounded by woods. As they get out of the lake, they turn on their car radio and then lie down on a blanket on the ground to dry off. Two men slowly approach the young couple. Suddenly, they attack, raping the girl and shooting the boy. One man holds the girl down as the other stabs her. There are screams, then silence.

ACT I: *Hope House, an educational center run by the Sisters of St. Joseph in the New Orleans projects.* Sister Helen and Sister Rose lead a group of children in a hymn, "He Will Gather Us Around." Helen keeps making mistakes as she sings. After the parents arrive to pick up their children, Helen admits to Rose why she has been so distracted: She has just received another letter from the death-row inmate she has been writing, Joseph de Rocher, asking to meet in person. Despite Rose's warning, Helen agrees to visit Joe.

A highway, on the three-hour drive from New Orleans to Louisiana State Penitentiary. As Helen drives toward Angola, the prison where Joe is held on death row, she wonders what he will be like in person. She drives by the exit to her hometown and reflects on the happy days of her childhood. Her thoughts continue to race, and she drives more and more quickly—until she is pulled over by a policeman. Impressed that she is a nun, the policeman lets her go with only a warning and a promise to pray for his sick mother.



Entering the 'Death Row' enclosure at Angola Prison—a place where no photography is permitted

Prisoner transport bus inside
Angola prison



Louisiana State Penitentiary. When Helen arrives at the prison, she is greeted by Father Grenville, the prison’s chaplain. He cautions her that Joe shows no signs of remorse—instead, he maintains his innocence—and has been known to lie and insult others. Helen acknowledges Joe’s crimes yet remains invested in his human dignity. When the chaplain leaves, she meets the warden, who warns her that Joe will likely ask her to be his spiritual advisor, requiring her to stay by his side until his execution. As they walk through death row, the prisoners taunt her from their cells.

Finally, Helen is led into the visiting room. She waits nervously until Joe arrives. Neither is comfortable, and when Helen asks Joe if he is afraid, he admits that while he fears some things—walking to the execution chamber, the possibly excruciating pain of lethal injection, the effect his death will have on his mother—he adamantly declares that he is not afraid of her. Joe recalls the many things that he misses about his life of freedom before asking Helen if she will come back. She promises to return.

The courtroom, a meeting of the Pardon Board. Sister Helen, Joe’s mother, and the families of the murdered teens address the Pardon Board tasked with recommending to the governor whether

A NOTE ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS The images of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola, throughout this guide are the work of award-winning photographer Giles Clarke. His work focuses primarily on social and environmental injustice, with much of his time now spent in conflict zones and regions of protracted humanitarian crisis. See more of his work at gilesnclarke.com

the condemned person should be granted clemency. Joe's mother tearfully addresses the board, saying that although she is horrified by the crimes Joe is accused of committing, she knows there is good in her son. She is interrupted by an angry outburst from Owen Hart, the father of one of the victims. The families wait in the parking lot for the Board's decision. When Helen introduces herself to the victims' parents, they accuse her of betrayal. A paralegal exits the courthouse announcing that the Pardon Board has rejected Joe's petition for clemency.

Death Row. Knowing that Joe's only hope is for the governor to grant him clemency, Helen begs Joe to confess to his crime. The warden comes in and tells Helen to leave. Outside, she becomes faint from hunger as a cacophony of voices begins to pound in her head. The warden comes out of the visiting room and finds her slumped on a bench. He informs her that the governor has rejected Joe's request for a pardon. The voices return and Helen faints on the floor.

ACT II: *Death Row.* Joe is alone in his cell doing pushups when the warden enters to tell him that the date for his execution has been set: August 4, at midnight. Joe ignores the warden and keeps doing pushups. But when the reality of his predicament begins to sink in, he passes through bursts of anger and fear as he thinks back to the crime.

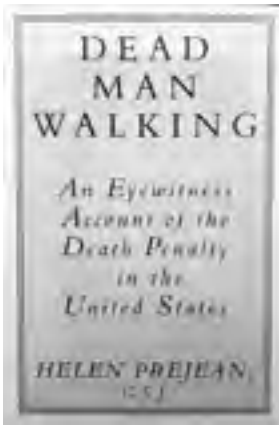
Sister Helen's room. Helen wakes up screaming from a nightmare about Joe and his victims. Rose rushes to her side and comforts her. When Rose reminds Helen that Joe has already been convicted of his crimes, Helen retorts that only God can choose whether to forgive him. Rose reminds Helen that she has agreed to help Joe—and she can only do so if she can forgive Joe herself.

August 4, around 7PM, Joe's prison cell. Helen and Joe sit in his cell. They both know that Joe's execution is only a few hours away, yet they still manage to make small talk, laughing and reminiscing about Elvis Presley. Helen encourages Joe to tell her the truth about the crime, but he angrily refuses. In the meantime, Joe's mother and two brothers have arrived for their final visit with him. Helen accompanies him. Joe's mother asks Helen to take a photo of the family and reminisces about happier times. The guard arrives to lead Joe away.

The death house. Outside the death house, the families of Joe's victims arrive to watch his execution, and they accuse Helen of being on Joe's side. Only Owen Hart expresses doubts about the closure and comfort Joe's death will bring. In a quiet moment with Helen, he invites her to visit him; she promises she will.

Inside the death house, guards prepare Joe for his execution. Left alone with Helen for the last time, he admits his guilt. The guards arrive to take Joe to the lethal injection chamber. As he walks, Helen walks behind him, her hand on his shoulder, reading from her Bible. In the background, the families and inmates can all be heard reciting the Lord's prayer. Joe apologizes to the victims' families before the lethal injection needle is inserted into his arm. In his final moment, Joe says to Helen: "I love you." After his death, the witnesses leave, and Helen is alone with Joe. One last time, she sings her hymn: "He Will Gather Us Around."

Dead Man Walking by Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.



Dead Man Walking is adapted from Sister Helen Prejean's 1993 memoir of the same name, which was also made into a major motion picture directed by Tim Robbins and starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Prejean's book, subtitled *An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*, chronicles her experiences serving as spiritual advisor to two inmates on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary—Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie—as well as her early activism and efforts to abolish the death penalty nationwide.

The narrative in *Dead Man Walking* is not merely a straightforward account of its author's respective relationships with Sonnier and Willie. It is interwoven with statistics on crime, punishment, and the uneven, often prejudicial administration of the death penalty in the United States; overviews of political attitudes toward and misinformation about the death penalty among the American population at the time of the book's writing; and anecdotes from the author's journey from a local community organizer and educator to a full-time advocate for the abolition of the death penalty—work that Sister Helen continues to this day.

Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's operatic adaptation borrows and expands upon elements found in both versions of the story, Prejean's text and the Academy Award–winning film. In both the film and the opera, for example, the two death-row prisoners Helen advises are amalgamated into a single character: in the film, Matthew Poncelet; in the opera, Joseph De Rocher. The elements of the original crime described in the opera also derive from those committed by Sonnier (the shooting) and Willie (the stabbing), respectively. The double murder of a young teenage couple corresponds to Sonnier's alleged crime, but the inclusion of the perpetrator's family in the events leading to the execution—particularly his mother's tearful appearance at the Pardon Board meeting and final visit with her son, both of which take pride of place in the film adaptation—is taken from Prejean's experience with Willie.

There are also important distinctions between what occurs in Prejean's text and in Heggie's opera. Whereas Joseph De Rocher's quiet confession is a dramatic highpoint of the opera, neither Sonnier nor Willie ever admitted to their crimes—both maintained their innocence to the bitter end. In fact, Sonnier claimed that it was his brother Edward, then serving a life sentence at Angola, who fired the murder weapon. (In Prejean's memoir, Edward confesses to the murder in a last-ditch effort to halt his brother's execution.) In the film version of *Dead Man Walking*, however, Helen's advisee does ultimately confess to the crime before his execution.

Other elements from Tim Robbins's film that made its way into the opera include the execution by lethal injection, whereas both Sonnier and Willie were executed by electrocution; Helen's fainting spell, which occurred while she was working with Sonnier; and a short scene where Helen is pulled over by a cop while speeding down the highway. (This incident apparently happened to Prejean while filming the movie, and she insisted it be included in the script.)

The Creation of *Dead Man Walking*

- 1938** Terrence McNally is born on November 3 in St. Petersburg, Florida.
- 1961** Jake Heggie is born on March 31 in West Palm Beach, Florida. He learns piano as a child and starts writing music at age 11 before beginning more serious composition study as a teenager.
 Having graduated from Columbia University the year prior, McNally is hired by novelist John Steinbeck to tutor his sons while the Steinbeck family travels the world. During this trip, Steinbeck asks McNally to write the libretto for a musical adaptation of his 1952 novel *East of Eden*.
- 1979** From 1979 until 2008, McNally is a regular guest panelist for the Texaco Opera Quiz during weekly Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts.
- 1984** Heggie graduates from UCLA after spending a gap year studying piano at the American University in Paris. After finishing college, he begins performing recitals with his piano teacher Johana Harris. They continue to tour until focal dystonia in Heggie's hand forces him to turn his attention to composition.
- 1989** McNally publishes *The Lisbon Traviata*, the first of a trilogy of plays—including *Master Class* (1995) and *Golden Age* (2014)—inspired by opera and specifically the Greek American soprano Maria Callas.
- 1993** Heggie moves to San Francisco and takes a job in public relations at San Francisco Opera. He continues to compose music, focusing on art songs.
 Sister Helen Prejean publishes *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. The book remains number one on *The New York Times* Best Seller List for 31 weeks and is eventually translated into ten languages.
- 1994** McNally's play *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994) opens off Broadway in October and transfers to Broadway the following February. It wins the Tony Award for Best Play and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play.
- 1995** McNally's *Master Class*, about Maria Callas, opens on Broadway and wins the Tony Award for Best Play and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play.
 Heggie wins the G. Schirmer Art Song Competition for his setting of "If you were coming in the fall..." a poem by Emily Dickinson.
 Prejean's memoir *Dead Man Walking* is adapted into a major motion picture directed by Tim Robbins and starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Sarandon goes on to win the Academy Award for Best Actress, and Robbins and Penn receive nominations for Best Director and Best Actor, respectively.

1998 Heggie is appointed composer-in-residence at San Francisco Opera, where general director Lotfi Mansouri commissions him to work with McNally on a new opera for the 2000–01 season.

1999 Heggie releases his first album of original compositions, *Faces of Love*, featuring songs for voice performed by sopranos Renée Fleming, Kristin Clayton, Nicolle Foland, Sylvia McNair, and Carol Vaness; mezzo-sopranos Zheng Cao, Jennifer Larmore, and Frederica von Stade; and countertenor Brian Asawa.

McNally contributes the libretto for *The Food of Love*, an opera by American composer Robert Beaser.

2000 *Dead Man Walking* premieres at San Francisco Opera in a production conducted by Patrick Summers and starring Susan Graham as Sister Helen, John Packard as Joseph De Rocher, and Frederica von Stade as Mrs. Patrick De Rocher. Erato Records releases a live recording of the premiere production the following year. Since its premiere, the opera has been performed internationally more than 150 times.



2002 Heggie composes *The Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love*, set to original poems by Prejean. The premiere performance features mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato and conductor Patrick Summers.

2007 Heggie composes a chamber opera, *Three Decembers*, with a libretto by Gene Scheer based on an original work by McNally, *Some Christmas Letters (and a Couple of Phone Calls, Too)* (1999). Heggie's opera *Moby-Dick*, adapted from the 1851 Herman Melville novel and with a libretto by Scheer, premieres at Dallas Opera. *Moby-Dick* is scheduled to premiere at the Met in the 2024–25 season.

2011 Virgin Classics releases a new live recording of Houston Grand Opera's production of *Dead Man Walking*, starring DiDonato, von Stade, and Philip Cutlip. The same year, Carnegie Hall commissions Heggie's *The Breaking Waves*, a setting of original texts by Prejean premiered by DiDonato.

2019 McNally receives a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement.

2020 On March 24, at 81 years old, McNally dies in Sarasota, Florida, from complications of Covid-19.

The Life and Work of Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

- 1939** Helen Prejean is born on April 21 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
- 1957** At the age of 18, Prejean joins the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, a Roman Catholic congregation.
- 1962** Prejean graduates from St. Mary's Dominican College in New Orleans, Louisiana, with a bachelor's degree in English and Education.
- 1972** In the case *Furman v. Georgia*, the Supreme Court finds that the "arbitrary and capricious" application of the death penalty in the United States violates the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which protects against "cruel and unusual punishment."
- 1973** Prejean earns a master's degree in religious education from Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada.
- 1976** Citing improved policies for determining who should receive the death penalty, the Supreme Court reinstates capital punishment in *Gregg v. Georgia*. The first execution after the reinstatement takes place in 1977.
- 1977** On the night of November 4, David LeBlanc (age 16) and Loretta Bourque (18) are driven to a field in rural Louisiana by an unknown assailant or assailants. Bourque is raped; then she and LeBlanc are shot in the back of the head with a .22 caliber rifle.
- On December 1, Elmo Patrick ("Pat") Sonnier (age 27) and his brother Eddie Sonnier (20) are arrested in connection with a series of rapes that have taken place in the area. They are soon charged with LeBlanc and Bourque's murder. Initially, both men are sentenced to death; Eddie's sentence, however, is commuted to life in prison when his lawyers argue that he merely assisted at the murder (rather than pulling the trigger himself).
- 1982** Having worked as a high school teacher and Religious Education Director at St. Frances Cabrini Parish in New Orleans, Prejean moves into the city's St. Thomas Housing Project to live and work with the poor.



In January, Prejean is contacted by the Louisiana Coalition on Jails and Prisons about writing letters to death-row inmates. Prejean agrees, and she is given the name of an inmate at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as "Angola": Pat Sonnier.

After several months of correspondence, Prejean offers to be Sonnier's "spiritual advisor"; Sonnier accepts, and Prejean gets clearance from the prison in July. On September 15, Prejean visits Sonnier in prison for the first time. Prejean will continue visiting Sonnier for the rest of his time on death row, eventually testifying at his Pardon Board hearing and organizing legal representation for him. Nevertheless, his capital conviction stands.

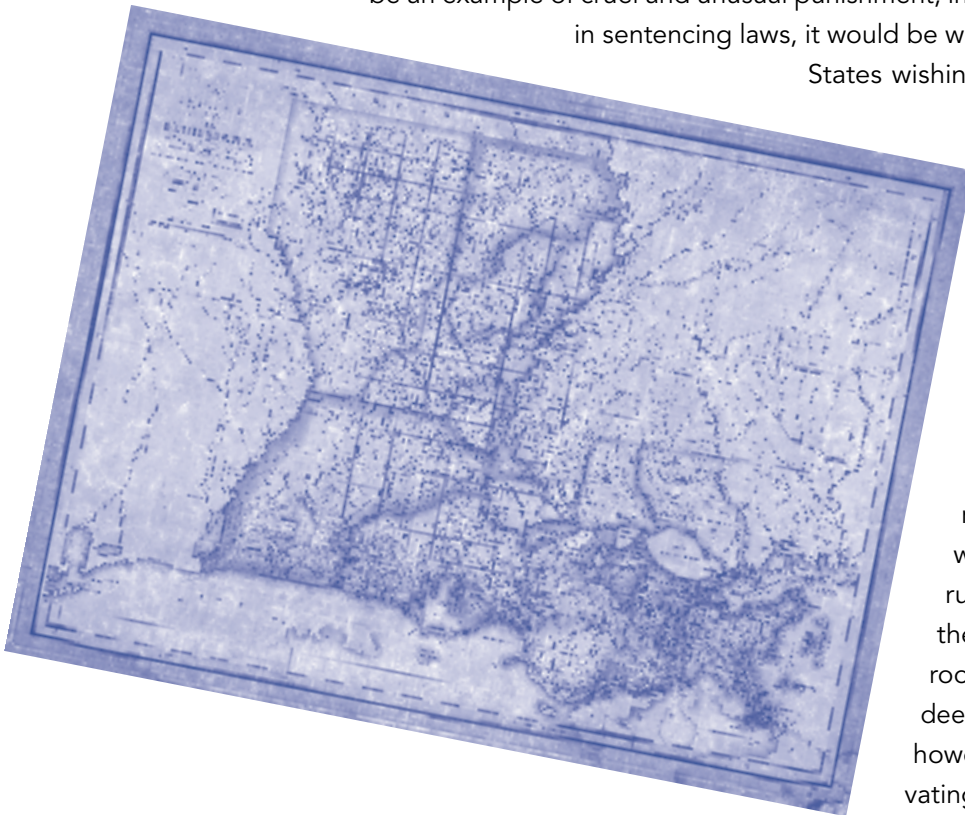
- 1984** On April 5, at midnight, Pat Sonnier, now 35 years old, is executed in the electric chair at Angola. Prejean reads to him from the Bible as he walks to the execution chamber and sits with witnesses as the execution takes place. Sonnier is pronounced dead at 12:15AM. Two days later, he is buried in New Orleans's Roselawn Memorial Park, in a plot secured by Prejean and her fellow nuns.
- 1993** Prejean publishes the memoir *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. The book remains number one on *The New York Times* Best Seller List for 31 weeks and becomes an international best seller after being translated into ten languages. She also begins serving as the National Chairperson of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.
- 1995** *Dead Man Walking* is adapted into a major motion picture directed by Tim Robbins and starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Sarandon goes on to win the Academy Award for Best Actress, and Robbins and Penn receive nominations for Best Director and Best Actor, respectively.
- 1999** Prejean establishes Moratorium 2000, a petition drive advocating a nationwide moratorium on executions. This project eventually expands into the Moratorium Campaign.
- 2000** Democratic Senator Russell Feingold of California introduces S.2463, the National Death Penalty Moratorium Act of 2000, into Congress; the bill does not receive a vote.
 Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's *Dead Man Walking* premieres at San Francisco Opera in a production conducted by Patrick Summers and starring mezzo-soprano Susan Graham as Sister Helen, baritone John Packard as Joseph De Rocher, and mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade as Mrs. Patrick De Rocher.
- 2002** Prejean founds Ministry Against the Death Penalty, an advocacy group "compelled by the compassion of Jesus and his strong expression of mercy and justice."
- 2003** Prejean and Ray Krone, the 100th person exonerated from death row in the United States, together establish Witness to Innocence, an anti-death penalty organization composed of and operated by death-row survivors exonerated for crimes they did not commit.
- 2004** Prejean publishes her second book, *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions*.
- 2007** *Dead Family Walking*, a book by D. D. DeVinci detailing the Bourque family's experience of Sonnier's trial and execution, is published. It is highly critical of what the Bourque family views as Prejean's efforts to protect Sonnier from the death penalty.
- 2013** On December 19, Eddie Sonnier dies at Angola of an illness contracted in prison. He is buried in the prison cemetery.
- 2019** Prejean publishes her third memoir, *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey*.

Capital of Punishment

The death penalty has a long history in the United States, with the earliest examples of capital punishment in the American colonies dating to the 1630s. By the 1800s, however, the country faced increasing opposition to the death penalty. Early reformists included Thomas Jefferson, who introduced a bill to the Virginia assembly in 1779 curtailing the widespread use of capital punishment. In 1794, as advocated by statesmen Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania repealed the death penalty for all crimes except first-degree murder and later became the first state to conduct executions in prisons rather than in public.

The early 20th century saw an uptick in the administration of capital punishment. Throughout the 1930s, the United States averaged 167 executions per year—more than in any other decade in American history. 1,298 executions were carried out in the following decade. These numbers began to fall gradually until 1972, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Furman v. Georgia* that the application of the death penalty in the United States violated the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which protects against “cruel and unusual punishment.” Yet it was not the death penalty itself that the court found unconstitutional. Rather, it was the “arbitrary and capricious” application of the penalty. The imposition of the death penalty, they found, was highly dependent not only on a defendant’s geographical location (only some states had the death penalty), but also on the defendant’s race, class, and education (poor defendants and defendants of color were disproportionately sentenced to death). The Court did not find the death penalty itself to be an example of cruel and unusual punishment, instead conceding that, pending a change in sentencing laws, it would be willing to reinstate the death penalty.

States wishing to continue executing prisoners thus began drafting bills to minimize the arbitrariness of the death penalty’s implementation. One possibility was to impose a mandatory death penalty on capital offenses. Another possibility was to strike a balance between “mitigating” circumstances that would help explain the crime (e.g., the defendant’s mental capacity or history of abuse) and “aggravating” circumstances that made the crime more severe (e.g., killing women or children). The Supreme Court ruled that the mandatory imposition of the death penalty did not leave sufficient room for the nuances of individual cases and deemed it unconstitutional. The latter solution, however—considering mitigating and aggravating circumstances during sentencing—was allowed to stand. In three cases known together



as the 1976 *Gregg* decision, the Supreme Court approved new statutes in Georgia, Texas, and Florida, in addition to holding that the death penalty itself was constitutional under the Eighth Amendment. The following year, executions resumed in those three states.

Serious concerns about the application of the death penalty remain. Over the past 25 years, following an increase in the administration of capital punishment in the 1980s and 1990s, new death sentences have declined by over 80%, and executions have fallen by roughly 75%. In 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that executing death-row inmates with intellectual disabilities was a violation of the “cruel and unusual punishment” clause of the Eighth Amendment. Just a few years later, the Court likewise found that death penalty sentences for crimes committed before the defendant turned 18 years old were unconstitutional.

Still, 27 states currently administer the death penalty, three of which (California, Pennsylvania, and Oregon) have a governor-imposed moratorium on executions. There are five methods of execution used in the U.S.: lethal injection, electrocution, lethal gas, hanging, and firing squad. Since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976, nearly 90% of executions have been carried out by lethal injection—a method first developed in the U.S. and now used internationally. Of the 23 states that have abolished the death penalty, 11 have done so since 2004.

Capital punishment continues to be rife with racial disparities. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, Black Americans constitute 41% of death-row inmates and 34% of those executed, despite making up only 14% of the U.S. population. Defendants are 11 times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim is white than if the victim is Black, and defendants are 22 times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim is white and the defendant is Black. These biases are also reflected in exoneration cases. In 2018, official misconduct by police and/or prosecutors was found in nearly 80% of homicide exonerations, and misconduct is more common in death penalty cases if the defendant is Black. 87% of Black death-row exonerees suffered official misconduct, compared to 67% of white death-row exonerees. Since 1973, almost 200 people have been exonerated of death-penalty sentences. For every eight inmates who are executed, one is found innocent and exonerated—a “failure rate” of more than 10%.

Today, some 60% of Americans prefer life imprisonment without the possibility of parole to the death penalty, yet in 2019 the U.S. federal government began imposing death penalties again after a 16-year hiatus. In 2022, the United States voted against a United Nations resolution for a global moratorium on the death penalty, writing in a statement that, “the U.S. does not understand the lawful use of this form of punishment as contravening respect for human rights, both as it relates to the convicted and sentenced individual as well as the rights of others.” As of August, 17 people have been executed in the U.S. in 2023: five in Florida and Texas, four in Missouri, two in Oklahoma, and one in Alabama.

Hell on Angola

Dead Man Walking largely takes place at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, where Joseph De Rocher awaits his execution on death row. Known commonly as Angola, it is the largest maximum-security prison in the United States, incarcerating approximately 5,000 people on 18,000 acres of land—a property larger than the island of Manhattan.

The name “Angola” derives from the site’s connection to slavery. In the 19th century, the property now spanned by the facility was once occupied by seven neighboring slave plantations: Angola, Bellevue, Lake Killarney, Lochloman, Loango, Panola, and Monrovia. Most of this property, which originated from Spanish land grants awarded in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was used for the cultivation of cotton.

In 1834, the majority of Angola was acquired by Francis Routh, who established a commercial partnership with Tennessee slave trader Isaac Franklin. When Routh’s finances collapsed in 1837, Franklin took possession of the Angola plantations. Franklin died shortly thereafter, and the property was inherited by his wife Adelia Hayes, who married businessman Joseph Alexander Smith Acklen in 1849. Hayes and Acklen split their time between Nashville and Angola, where in 1852 a newspaper reported that 700 slaves were cultivating cotton. In 1859, after Acklen had expanded his real estate portfolio by purchasing additional plantations, his and his wife’s properties produced 3,149 bales of cotton—the third most in Louisiana.

Headstones in the Angola prison graveyard. Ninety percent of prisoners who are incarcerated at Angola eventually die inside the prison grounds. They are buried in one of the two cemeteries on premises.



With the Civil War looming, Acklen pledged loyalty to the Confederacy, to which he donated \$30,000, and the Angola properties—adjacent to the Mississippi River—served as the main river crossing for Confederate troops and provisions. In 1880, Acklen’s widow Adelicia and her third husband William Archer Cheatham sold their properties totaling over 10,000 acres to Louis Trager and Samuel L. James. A civil engineer, James had been awarded an exclusive contract with the Louisiana State Penitentiary under a system of “convict leasing” in 1870. This practice allowed states to lease their prisoners to private enterprises like plantations, mines, and railways. States would thus earn revenue from these contracts while businesses took advantage of cheap, coerced penal labor to further their commercial interests.

News spread widely of deleterious conditions at Angola, which became known as the “James Prison Camp.” The Prison Reform Association was founded in New Orleans in 1886, and the state of Louisiana bought back James’s property in 1900. After devastation caused by floods in 1902, 1912, and 1922, Angola was expanded to include additional neighboring plantations, bringing the total acreage to 18,000. Though federal management of the penitentiary aimed to improve working conditions for prisoners, the facility’s reputation for brutality persisted throughout the 20th century. In 1943, former prisoner William Sadler published “Hell on Angola,” a series of articles in *The Angolite*—the prison’s inmate-operated newspaper—exposing abuses at the institution. Just a decade later, a group of 31 inmates known as the “Heel String Gang” cut their own Achilles tendons to protest conditions at Angola. In the 1960s, the prison was dubbed the “bloodiest prison in the South.” Women were permanently removed from the premises in 1961. And in 1971, prisoners brought a lawsuit against the state of Louisiana, alleging that the level of medical care provided at Angola violated the “cruel and unusual punishment” clause of the Eighth Amendment, in addition to the rights of disabled inmates covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act.

Today, Angola maintains several enterprises. Prisoners cultivate 38 types of vegetables, including corn, cotton, soybean, and wheat crops; herd 3,000 cattle (the prison has an annual rodeo); manufacture license plates (all Louisiana and Puerto Rico plates are made there); and operate a metal shop, silkscreen shop, and a factory that produces mattresses, brooms, and mops. As of 2021, Louisiana sentences prisoners to life without parole more frequently than any other state in the U.S. And as of 2022, 73% of all inmates serving life sentences at Angola are Black—more than twice their proportion of the state population. As of May 2023, the U.S. incarcerates 531 people for every 100,000 residents, while Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the nation. *Dead Man Walking* is thus set in one of the most carceral places in the world.

Dead Man Walking

Performance date:

Reviewed by:

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *Dead Man Walking*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about the opera and this performance at the Met!

THE PERFORMANCE, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Two teenagers go skinny-dipping. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Sister Helen and Sister Rose teach children a hymn. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Helen arrives at the prison and is greeted by Father Grenville. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Helen and Father Grenville talk in his office about Joseph De Rocher. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The Warden confronts Helen about being Joseph's spiritual advisor. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
As the Warden and Helen walk through death row, she is taunted by the inmates. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE PERFORMANCE, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Helen meets Joseph in the death-row visiting room.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
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Joseph's mother, Mrs. Patrick De Rocher, pleads before the Pardon Commission.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
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The victims' parents confront Helen in the parking lot outside the courtroom.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
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Helen and Joseph discuss the denial of his appeal for a pardon.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
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Prison guards prepare Joseph for his execution.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
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Helen pleads with Joseph until he confesses to the murder.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
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The Warden leads Joseph to his execution.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
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