

The Execution of Noa P. Singleton

by Elizabeth L. Silver

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Reviewed by Mechele Williams

The first impression I had when I finished Elizabeth L. Silver's novel, *The Execution of Noa P. Singleton*, was *decent book—horrible ending*. Then I dug a little deeper to see if perhaps Silver had accomplished what she set out to do with the novel after all. I think she has.

Elizabeth Silver is not just another lawyer who writes about the legal system. She is at heart a writer who just happens to have a law degree. *The Execution of Noa P. Singleton* originated with her research on capital punishment while in her third year of law school. Although none of the characters or subject matter in the book derive from actual cases or persons, Silver credits her work on a clemency petition, which allowed her a glimpse into death row, for helping her find her story.

Noa P. Singleton is a woman who has spent ten years on death row for a murder she admits to committing. What is interesting is she is a likeable character, whereas Marlene, the mother of the woman she murdered, who appears to have had a change of heart about the death penalty and is willing to petition the court for Noa's clemency, is not.

Marlene isn't the only person in Noa's life with less-than-desirable characteristics. As the story progresses, the mystery surrounding "why" Noa committed the crime is as prevalent as the lingering question of "Did she really do it?" Only Noa can answer that question, and the

answers that unfold within her prison memoir expose an absentee father, self-centered mother, guilty conscience, and wounds left unhealed:

I first met Marlene Dixon approximately one month after the Bar Dive incident. She called my cell just as I was walking across the Market Street Bridge on my way home from an eighth-grade science fair.

"Is this Noa Singleton?" she asked.

Instantly I could tell she was a lawyer. That confident tone bordered on aggression, and it didn't take long for me to realize that the tone veered closer to the arrogant slant of the scale than mere confidence. I cleared my throat.

"This is she."

"I think you and I have something in common that I'd like to discuss with you."

Noa's memoir also takes a deeper look at Sarah, a victim on many levels in addition to that of the crime committed against her, who is also not without her own character flaws. Sarah, an only child, is constantly being undermined and told what decisions to make by her mom. Marlene tells her what to wear, what to study, where to work, where to live and whom to date. This not only damages their relationship, but it is the reason Sarah enters an unhealthy relationship with the first person who treats her as an adult—someone Noa knows she shouldn't trust. Sarah is quick to judge others—without knowing the facts, and is naive, and unreceptive when presented with the truth. It is these grievous character flaws within the people living outside the prison walls that call into question the justification and morality of Noa's execution.

Is a death for a death truly reasonable justice in all cases? Noa refuses to participate in any of her appeals, thereby accepting her fate and closing the door on what is supposed to be a fair and just legal system. Her silence serves as atonement for a mistake in her past, and protects the lives of others who harbored their own secrets.

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So why should we care? Because Silver accomplishes what she set out to do with this novel by successfully muddying the waters separating good and bad; right and wrong; guilty and not guilty. She makes us question the justifiability of the death penalty.

In an interview with UK National Bookseller, Foyles, Silver said, “It’s not that these characters are not empathetic or even sympathetic, but that they do not make those emotions easily accessible for readers. They have experienced a tragic shade of life, and for that, they are both endearing and frustrating at the same time. We all make decisions based on raw emotion, be it revenge, love, or insecurity. Sometimes those decisions are simply misguided and sometimes they appear to be unsympathetic, but ultimately they reflect characters who are fallible and imperfect and mortal. I hoped to blur the lines of what is right and what is wrong, and challenge readers to step back and think about capital punishment by virtue of this unclear divide.”

The story opens with the sentence, “In this world, you are either good or evil.” It ends with us asking, “Is there no middle ground?” and reevaluating our views on the death penalty.