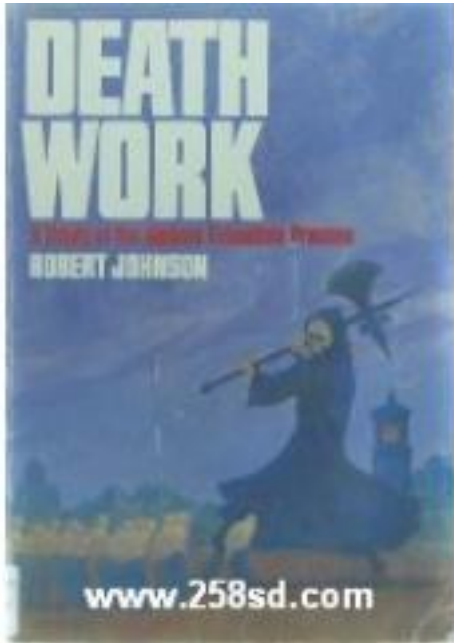


# Death Work Study of the Modern Execution Process



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Death Work is about executions. I've studied this grim topic for about a decade now. My first concern was with the character of life on death row where condemned prisoners await the outcome of their legal appeals. In this book I build on my earlier research studying the executions that for more and more prisoners end the long lonely wait on death row. It is in the death chamber that the condemned and their executioners make capital punishment a social reality. My aim is to place that fatal connection in historical perspective and to probe its psychological and moral significance. In a perverse sort of way this is a timely topic. For roughly a decade from the late sixties to the late

seventies¼ there was a moratorium on executions¼ backed by the authority of the Supreme Court. This was the culmination of a gradual but persistent decline in the use of the death penalty in the Western world during the twentieth century. It appeared that executions would forever pass from the American scene. Nothing could have been further from the truth. In 1977¼ the moratorium on carrying out the death sentence ended with the well publicized execution of Gary Gilmore. Since then¼ more than a hundred people have been put to death¼ most of them in the past few years. Some twenty-three hundred prisoners are presently confined on death rows across the nation. Most have lived under sentence of death for years¼ in some cases a decade or more. Many of them are coming to the end of the legal appeals process. It is fair to say that executions will be with us for the foreseeable future. For better or worse¼ the modern death penalty is a man's affair. Of the prisoners executed recently¼ only one¼ less than 1 percent¼ was a woman; fewer than 1 percent of the prisoners waiting to die are women. More women were executed in the past¼ especially during the infamous witch hunts¼ but so far as I can determine¼ in every historical period women have been executed for crimes at substantially lower rates than men. I am aware of no instance¼ at any time in history¼ of a woman serving as an executioner. Certainly none of today's executioners are women. To be sure¼ women staff members may take on supporting roles¼ particularly when the condemned prisoner is a woman¼ but their involvement stops at that point. Accordingly¼ my narration maintains a generic male perspective except where it is obviously inappropriate to do so. The execution process today is distinctively mechanical¼ impersonal¼ and ultimately dehumanizing. This procedure may be routine¼ but it can never be k~¼

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