

Three books put human face on prison inmates



These are the covers of “A Different Kind of Cell: The Story of a Murderer Who Became a Monk” by W. Paul Jones, “Life After Murder: Five Men in Search of Redemption” by Nancy Mullane, and “In this Timeless Time: Living and Dying on Death Row in America” by Bruce Jackson and Diane Christian. The books were reviewed by Brian Welter. (CNS)

“A Different Kind of Cell: The Story of a Murderer Who Became a Monk” by W. Paul Jones. Wm. B. Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, Mich., 2011). 134 pp., \$14.

“Life After Murder: Five Men in Search of Redemption” by Nancy Mullane. PublicAffairs Books (New York, 2012). 384 pp., \$26.99.

“In this Timeless Time: Living and Dying on Death Row in America” by Bruce Jackson and Diane Christian. University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012). 242 pp., with DVD. \$35.

Reviewed by Brian Welter

Catholic News Service

Each of these books brings out in a unique way the humanity of America’s millions of prisoners serving sentences for murder. The authors, and the character portraits they offer, challenge us to see the hurt and pain within the prisoners themselves.

These convicts live with the crimes they have committed. Often, after many years behind bars, they develop the capacity to articulate well the sinful and psychologically dysfunctional reasons for the crimes, and the underlying causes. These causes, including broken families and drug abuse, really point again and again to spiritual problems, such as failing to live lives of meaning and faith. In jail, with

little else to do besides reflect on themselves and their unfortunate lot, some prisoners come to find meaning and hope. Then again, many fail to do so.

“A Different Kind of Cell,” in which W. Paul Jones tells the story of Clayton Fountain, who ended up in jail for murdering a superior officer while in the U.S. military, exemplifies this mixture of hope and despair. Once incarcerated, Fountain began a string of violent attacks that led prison officials to declare him one of the most dangerous inmates in the entire prison system.

He was removed from almost all human contact, and lived in little more than a cage. After reading a letter from a Christian woman asking him why he couldn’t accept the grace offered by Christ, he did indeed open his heart to the Lord.

Yet the author portrays well how this was not an easy conversion. Fountain had years of spiritual struggle ahead of him, not least of all because of the crimes he had committed and his current confinement. Yet he developed a spirituality bursting with questions, ambition and hope. He studied theology by distance, and befriended the Christian individuals with whom he came into contact. This led to a lively exchange of letters (he wasn’t allowed use of a computer).

“A Different Kind of Cell” offers readers an unforgettable journey into the descent and attempted rise of a man who in the end tries very hard to follow Christ.

In “Life After Murder,” journalist Nancy Mullane offers an anecdotal side to the restless hopes of men serving time, as they try to figure out how to move beyond their crimes. The killings were often committed after getting hooked on drugs and hanging out with the wrong people.

One particularly sad story tells how a large family lost their mother at the age of 39, and then the father a few years later, essentially to the despair over losing his wife. The children, some of whom were now young adults, attempted to move on, but the lure of drugs and gang life proved too much for Eddie, even with the help of aunts and uncles.

Mullane gives readers a strong sense of the pain caused by these losses, as when Eddie’s aunt came to visit him in prison: “The first thing she said was, ‘I’m sorry.’ I

asked her what she was sorry for. And she said, ‘When you were living with us for that short time ... I went to check on you and you were curled up, no blankets on the bed, with your back towards the door, crying. I should have went in there and hugged you. Instead I closed the door.’”

Some of these stories have happy endings, and some do not. Looking toward the unhappiest of endings, part one of “In This Timeless Time” is a pictorial essay of men on death row, with some brief written summaries telling a part of their story. As with the other two books, nothing about the crimes committed is glossed over or minimized. Yet the book still aims to show the humanity of these inmates.

One man, 27, muses on the fact that others in jail think he’s much older than he is: “And it’s hard to believe that one can age so swiftly in that amount of time. But I guess it’s all to do with the mental pressure. There’s a lot of mental pressure, but you don’t let yourself go. You try to suppress it.”

In “Life After Murder,” Mullane remarks that many of the convicts she met were “normal” – soft-spoken, even cheerful and friendly. One also gets a sense of this “normality” from “In This Timeless Time,” where murderers smile broadly or show off their tattoos.

America’s high incarceration rate is made worse by the lack of funding for rehabilitation, which means that prisoners often waste years of their time. These books show the sheer tragedy of prison, and how these inmates deserve all the support they can get.

Welter is studying for his doctorate in systematic theology and teaching English in Taiwan.

Copyright (c) 2012 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops