

Reflections on *Lethal Rejection: Stories on Crime and Punishment*

A Summary and Commentary

by

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Section 1 Summary

“Cautionary Tales,” the first section of this original and engaging book edited by Robert Johnson and Sonia Tabriz, is designed to make the reader aware of the conscious societal choices that have nurtured our mammoth and often brutal prison system. The section also serves as an introductory showcase for Victor Hassine. This is fitting because Hassine constitutes the primary insider portrayal of prison. Hassine takes no chances with the first story of the book. Its message is simple and explicit, leaving little to the imagination. In “The Farmer and the Fly,” the farmer represents society. The fly of which he is trying to rid himself represents the many outcasts and miscreants whom society imprisons, out of a desire to swat them away. The flies breed on society’s attitude of callous revulsion and reproduce in ever greater quantities. The flies, like crime, are the centerpiece of a vicious recurring cycle. All of this is clearly stated. While one might have expected more from a writer with Hassine’s considerable gifts, his simple allegory successfully ensures that readers will, at the outset, grasp one of the central theses of the book.

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In his second story, "Circles of Nod," Hassine opens with a man robbing a grocery store. There is a confrontation between the grocer and his robber. This escalates, eventually resulting in the robber killing the grocer. Later, police break down the door of the man's home, arrest him, beat him savagely, and bring him to prison where he is soon raped and abused by fellow inmates and guards. Hassine has every character deliver an extended monologue, which explains at length the forces that shaped the characters into their current forms. The robber was neglected and abused by uncaring parents. He was exposed to drugs at a very early age and had no competing positive influences. Society was uninterested in helping him or treating him like a human being. The grocer sees himself as a hard-working man and wants the police to protect his family against dangerous thugs by locking them up, irrespective of the reasons behind their actions. The police and prison guards know that the top priority is to ensure that middle-class taxpayers feel safe. They believe that their charges are the scum of the earth and deserve every possible measure of bad treatment. Indeed, they believe that an occasional execution is helpful in maintaining public confidence. They express bewilderment as to the reasons why crime does not abate in the face of these tactics. Lastly, the rapist attacks his prey in order to fulfill unsatisfied sexual urges, obtain a sense of power over his environment, and against the abuse meted out by the guards. All of this is true to life, sadly.

"Jail Bird" continues Hassine's relentless efforts to demonstrate his assertion that society is in large measure responsible for the current state of the prison system and is invested in maintaining the status quo. When an inmate discovers that certain acorns have the capability of providing true knowledge, he brews them into coffee and distributes them to his fellows. When the prisoners become happy, productive, and motivated individuals, they are thrown into solitary confinement on the assumption that they must be using drugs. The ruthless warden will stop at

nothing to eradicate this new behavior. When somebody suggests that the inmate's actions might demonstrate that the system is actually working, the warden angrily exclaims that the system is designed to punish inmates, rather than help them reform. He further notes that if the prisoners continue to display positive behavior, all those who work in prison would lose their jobs. The warden eventually succeeds in his efforts to maintain the status quo, by savagely destroying the tree from whence the acorns came. The interesting plot of the story serves to elevate Hassine's arguments.

"The Crying Wall" is by far Hassine's most successful story in this section in terms of message and style. It centers on a young boy's encounter with an old man who is diligently washing a prison wall. In answer to the boy's snide inquiries, the man explains that the once pristine wall is marred by the blood of inmates, shed as they were viciously killed by guards or ravaged by other prisoners for no reason at all. The wall becomes a powerful symbol of the prison experience. The blood upon its surface represents the lost lives taken by the prison system, either by force, or simply through the torture of living in it. The old man's determined efforts to cleanse the wall represent both an attempt to bring purity to an institution that is forever debased by human failings and a monument to every prisoner's constant effort to cling to something meaningful in order to keep from going insane behind bars.

The section ends with Robert Johnson's story, "Bad Actor." Johnson buttresses many of Hassine's arguments. He demonstrates how society needs to have a dangerous looking, thug like, criminal on which they can fixate. By disproportionately incarcerating such people the masses can obtain a false sense of security regarding crime prevention. Johnson uses humorous satire to present his arguments, without putting readers on the defensive. His technique renders the story approachable and easy to comprehend, without being patronizing. Bad Actor is a

perfect summation piece for the chapter. Overall, this section provides an illuminating introduction to the prison system and the societal forces that influence it. For first-time readers, it presents an excellent foundation of knowledge with which one can appreciate the rest of the book.

Section 2 Summary

Section 2, “Variations on Violation,” starts off beautifully with Charles Huckleberry’s “Gumbo.” “Gumbo” centers upon a smalltime criminal, named Frankie, who has been through the mill of the justice system without ever finding inspiration to change his lawless ways. After escaping from prison at the height of Hurricane Katrina, he takes advantage of the general chaos in New Orleans to forage for valuable property. In this endeavor, he breaks into the apartment of a stately African-American woman, named Etta Marquis. In many ways, Frankie and Etta are quite similar. Etta has been abandoned by her family as they flee the monstrous hurricane. Frankie has essentially been abandoned for his entire life. Both are cast aside as burdens to be disavowed. Neither sees any real reason to live. Indeed, Etta is preparing to commit suicide by deliberately overdosing on prescription medication. However, Frankie and Etta handle their similar situations in markedly different ways. While Frankie is angry, resentful, and violent, Etta is serene, maintaining a manner of quiet dignity and grace. She maintains her composure as Frankie rifles through her home and purloins her best, if objectively meager, possessions. Her only request is to be left alone and die in peace. She does not make mitigating excuses for Frankie and even calls him “white trash.” Yet, she shows him that it is still possible for him to make good in life. Incredibly, Frankie lists Etta as one of only two people who ever truly cared about him.

Through compelling dialogue, one gets a definite sense of the oddity of the situation. It is a story of the unusual means by which two previously unrelated lives can cross paths and have a profound impact upon one another. In the end, Frankie shoots Etta and eliminates the evidence of his crime. He justifies this action by claiming that it will increase the guilt felt by family members who callously left her behind. After pocketing her wedding ring, Frankie shows some tenderness toward the old woman by kissing her cheek and saying “we’re married now, Gran, so it’s all right if I keep the ring.” Then, he leaves the premises and covers his tracks. The story ends with the observation that “it was getting late.” The reader is left to ponder whether the whole mesmerizing encounter was simply another night’s work in the life of a petty thief.

Susan Nagelsen teams with Huckleberry to pen the next story, “Unavoidable Annie.” This heartbreaking story emphasizes the familial cost of society’s War on Drugs, as well as the heartlessness of the American penal system. Although Annie has a lengthy rap sheet, her crimes seem to have arisen out of desperate efforts to care for her daughter after Annie is abandoned by her lover and left to raise the child alone. These crimes include solicitation and drug possession. As the story opens, Annie is on parole for her offenses. Her daughter, Jen, is now a teenager, but has long been forced to bear the burden of an adult. After her mother endures a near fatal overdose, Jen is horribly frightened and has nowhere to turn. She is forced to beg her mother’s parole officer for help. Rather than providing treatment for Annie, the parole officer facilitates the revocation of her parole and adds an additional 7 1/2 year term of confinement to the rap sheet of this frail woman. Jen’s pleas for mercy and appeals to reason fall on deaf ears.

The rigid imposition of penalties without individualized consideration has long deprived Jen of her mother’s company. Now, away from her daughter’s loving care, Annie fatally overdoses on heroin while in prison. By doing the “right” thing, Jen essentially facilitated the

death of her mother. By pursuing “justice” instead of compassion and treatment, Annie was thrust into a place that could only make her bad habits worse. Most egregious of all, the parole officer sees nothing wrong with his handling of the case and is essentially dismissive of Jen’s arguments. He has stolen her mother and learned nothing from the experience. This is justice. It would make a lovely horror story, if it were not all too real.

Robert Johnson’s “Settling Scores,” written with Victor Hassine and Ania Dobrzanska, is brutally honest. It unapologetically demonstrates that a prosecutor’s only goal is to establish convictions, “settle scores,” and build up a respectable batting average in America’s war on drugs. It is obvious that prosecutors do not care who is ensnared within their monstrous net, or whether the captives are actually guilty. In reality, no proof is required for conviction in drug cases; one need only name names. The prosecutor has all the cards and she uses them only for personal gain. Almost all of the participants in this sordid drama seem cynically immersed within the system. The only exception is the attractive stenographer. Her observations demonstrate that the pursuit of personal gain is so enmeshed within the system that it is impossible for compassion to mitigate it. Even a wheelchair-bound man, knocking at death’s door, is deserving of a 20 year prison sentence, which is, remarkably, a heavily discounted sentence at that.

Rachel Cupelo’s tale “Streets of Crystal, Glass, and Diamond” transcends any narrow focus on criminalistics or the prison world. Anyone can understand the situation of a boy who has never known any real love in his life. He is alone and lonely. He is gay, but rarely able to act upon his sexual urges. He resents authority and desires to live on his own terms. One can completely understand the pleasure and fulfillment he feels in his relationship with Ben. Ben gives this boy someone to be with. He accepts him as he is and enjoys exhilarating sex with him.

Most importantly, Ben claims to love the boy and care about him. How is this boy supposed to distinguish between true love and simply being used? What decent role models has he ever had in life? For him, the relationship is a source of money, validation, and excitement from a wonderful man. The protective Grandfather Warren ultimately cuts this detour short. Yet, even after this boy becomes a mature man, the memories of his experiences with Ben continue to affect him profoundly. Thus, the section ends with a riveting examination of human love and the depths – including criminality – to which we will go to fulfill that need.

Section 3 Summary

This section, “Living in Prison,” brings the beauty of language to a very depressing subject. From a purely artistic standpoint “Dances with Dragons” by Ania Dobrzanska is a beautiful piece of work. The story is almost entirely comprised of descriptive writing. It is difficult for a writer to sustain purely descriptive writing in a story of this length. It is even more challenging for most readers to sustain a level of respectful attention for a work that is almost purely descriptive. Yet, Dobrzanska makes her work mesmerizing. She seduces the reader with the beauty of her language. It is accurate to call it descriptive writing, but this entry does so much more than describe the scene. It lives it and makes the reader feel it the pains of solitary confinement. Dobrzanska uses similes and personification quite well. She balances the literal and the figurative in describing the scene so that any reader can understand it. You feel the pain, the despair, the humiliation, the torture, and the impending insanity. By treating these concepts in the abstract, Dobrzanska manages to capture every detail of the experience of solitary confinement, holding nothing back. As she suffers, she tries desperately to cling to a memory of happiness and comfort with someone long gone. The image of the snake serves multiple roles within the story, a constant tormentor and symbol of pain. The essence of the story is

summarized in its concluding paragraph: “I hear the sharp rap on the cell door. Who comes for me? I think of condemned men waiting to die, and wonder how often they cry...I am one of them, I am one with them. They are the living dead; I am alive but wish I were dead. Their life is my life; their fate is my fate.” As the story ends, it is all revealed to be a dream. That is the only way in which most people will ever be able to experience it. They will have the reassurance of waking up and returning to their own lives, made wider by a haunting glimpse at reality.

Victor Hassine gives his perspective on solitary confinement, in “The Hole,” a story that depicts the struggle of a man to remain sane in solitary confinement and his humiliation at the hands of the prison guards. Later, we learn that anger at this abusive treatment is put forward as an excuse for murdering others in cold blood. The story is interesting on its own terms and rendered in a vernacular dialect that rings true to the prison world, perhaps because Hassine is both a long-term prisoner and a not-infrequent guest of solitary confinement.

In a few short paragraphs, “Christmas in a Prison Visiting Room” manages to convey the complete isolation of prison. The mere fact that it is Christmas does not warrant a suspension of the prison’s efforts to completely isolate the inmates from the outside world. Still, one would think that the prospect of holiday visits would be exciting for the prisoners. Yet, the irony is that nobody really enjoys them. The children do not truly know their fathers and cannot relate them to their own lives. The mothers and ex-wives do not really want to see their former relations or expose children to them. Even the prisoners do not enjoy the experience. They have so little contact with their loved ones that it is disconcerting to remove the façade of prison toughness and experience true emotion. Ultimately, the experience is more rewarding for the prisoners as a means of getting contraband drugs than as a bonding experience. One gets the impression that

this is not how they would choose to have things play out. Yet, it is seemingly the inevitable result of forced disconnection from the people in their former lives.

In “The Beast,” Hassine achieves the remarkable feat of creating a metaphor that can refer to any aspect of the many menacing elements of the prison experience. The Beast is never explicitly defined. It could be an animal ravaging the weakest prisoners. It could be the evil of callous men, who take each other’s lives without a second thought. It could be the glistening silver shanks that pierce the body and sap its stock of blood. It could be the feeling of utter despair that floods through a prisoner’s mind when he knows that he will die in grievous pain, very much alone at the end, even in a crowd of prisoners. It could be the insanity of prisoners who cannot escape the perpetual, insanity-threatening monotony of prison life. The Beast is never defined. We simply know that inmates will go to any lengths to avoid it and live in great fear of it.

In this last respect, Buck is different. His greatest wish is to find the Beast, confront it, and destroy it. Yet, Buck’s quest to vanquish the Beast succeeds only in proving the impossibility of this task. Buck learns that the Beast is amorphous. The form it takes is dictated by a victim’s fears. It can become whatever we least desire and most dread. Thus, the Beast can never be destroyed. As long as human beings exist, they will have a Beast to fight. After witnessing the shanking of a fellow inmate, Buck wonders if the final look of desperation in his eyes represents the work of the Beast. Essentially, the Beast represents the toll that prison takes on the souls of its occupants. For some, death may be the final outcome of a war with the Beast. Yet, when one is imprisoned, death is often the only means of escape from the Beast and indeed from the prison itself.

The title “Prison Man” could conceivably apply to any male character in Victor Hassine’s story. It encompasses the innocent child, promptly succumbing to the ways of the hardened criminal, merely to survive and fit in. It covers the veteran thug attempting to seduce the young boy, initially an innocent newcomer to the prison. Most of all, the prison man is the boy’s father, who has spent 17 years in jail being corroded by the system, but somehow still understands what it means to love and care for another human being.

Along with a mother desperately trying to save her son, fighting from the outside looking in, these characters combine to present a realistic portrayal of the consequences of spending life in prison. Billy enters prison as nothing but a scared child. From the very beginning, he perceives the need to be tough and aggressive, in order to preserve his own skin. An older convict sees a shadow of himself in the boy and grows to love him like a son. He mourns Billy’s rapid degradation into the corrupt ways of the “Prison Man.” He tries to protect Billy, but faces an internal conflict between his fatherly feelings and the prison ethos that every man must fight for himself. His heart’s lingering tender impulses must fight to break the crust of toughness that has become necessary to survival. Love and affection are not feelings to which this man is typically accustomed.

After speaking with Billy’s mother, the convict learns his true place in the boy’s life. This is the turning point for him. He embraces his love for Billy and vows to kill the man who is the greatest threat to the goodness of this young boy. He is too late. The transformation is complete. The well-meaning convict is felled by a shank, thrown by Billy in defense of his newfound mentor. The surviving inmate taunts the convict: “You were too late. He’s my son now.” The declaration might as well have come from the prison system itself. It ate up a child and spit out a monster.

Robert Johnson's "Cell Buddy" cannot fail to move the reader. At a basic level, it demonstrates how desperate prisoners are for any sort of companionship or affection. Ironically, the story demonstrates that inmates may be more likely to fulfill these needs with inanimate objects than with other human beings. The virtue of the Cell Buddy is that it does not mislead or double-cross. It has rituals attached to it, which give it a sort of legitimacy. It gives prisoners someone to care about and protect. Yet, affection does not come at the price of rape or enslavement. The Cell Buddy gives prisoners someone with whom to share their journey. For many people, solace can be derived from simply having a good listener. When one is deprived of almost everything else, an inanimate object can fill this role. Indeed, as countless children prove, it is entirely possible to love an inanimate object.

The story is very endearing and reveals much about the social context in which prisoners live. However, I wish that readers could simply accept this story in its simple, literal sense. I wish that Cell Buddies could become mainstays in every prison. I realize that any self-respecting warden could contrive of a million reasons why these lovable objects should be declared "contraband." If people never bother to consider the perspective of a prisoner, they will likely scoff at the assertion that such a thing is necessary. However, Cell Buddies seem relatively easy to make and very inexpensive to provide. Nevertheless, the rehabilitative properties of this simple object are extraordinary. In a way, it is counterintuitive. After all, prisoners are mean, evil, and tough. However, I submit that the warden who takes the leap of faith and endorses Cell Buddies will be amply rewarded. Even if he or she cares nothing for the prisoners, they will find Cell Buddies to be a worthwhile investment, simply as a means of easing control of the prisoners.

Jocelyn Pollock's "Prison Lullabies" manages to be both a major anthropological work and a fascinating short story worthy of expansion into a novel. More than anyone else, Pollock fully succeeds in humanizing prisoners. You do not think of them as prisoners; you think of them as characters. The prison comes alive as a dynamic social community. Obviously, life in prison is not easy. Nevertheless, this story gives the impression that you can survive within it without going insane. The prisoners support each other and form friendships. People are tough, but there is a sense that they still have hearts. Astonishingly, the guards actually care about the prisoners. While bureaucracy remains, it is tempered by common sense. Compared to other images of prison, this seems idyllic. There is more than enough evidence to suggest that this is not the dominant type of penal institution utilized in this country. Still, it is heartwarming to know that the existence of such a prison is possible.

This positive image is counterbalanced by a discussion of the problems faced by the inmates. Tic's cellmate was brought to prison after killing her infant daughter. It is clear that this was not an act of cold blood. Rather, it was a desperate reaction to the extra human stresses of living on the streets as a teenage mother, abandoned by the child's father. Furthermore, Tic is struggling to keep her teenage son from following in her footsteps. She is hampered in her efforts by her enforced separation from her son. In this story, this all too common problem has a happy outcome. In a depressing collection of stories, Pollack reminds us that, in some rare instances, it is possible to derive positive outcomes out of negative situations.

Section 4 Summary

From a plot standpoint, section 4, "Working in Prison," contains some of the most intriguing stories in the entire text. Each of the stories could easily stand alone as fascinating fiction, without needing to be part of an anthology seeking to make a larger point. This is a

laudable achievement and cannot truly be ascribed to every work within this book. The section starts off with Johnson's hilarious work "Yard Sale." Given the reader's knowledge of prison up to this point, the very concept of a prison yard sale is comical. Yet, a type of outdoor bazaar in which prisoners could sell their wares undoubtedly has some rehabilitative benefit. At the very least, it would give prisoners something to in which they may take pride. Therefore, the main comedy of the story comes not from the circumstance of the yard sale, but instead, is derived from the character's reactions to it.

The warden's wife, Anna Marie, is the classic southern belle. She has come to accept the notion that dozens of armed guards are all that is needed to maintain safety at a prison. Therefore, she treats the prisoners and their products as cute curiosities. Her manner towards them is reminiscent of how a narrow-minded, prejudiced person might treat a mentally retarded person. In Anna Marie's world, the prisoners are akin to exotic pets. This would be insulting if it were not presented in such an incredibly over-the-top manner. The reader has little choice but to find it laughable.

The humor is all the more compounded when the prisoners use the money they make from these ignorant women to finance the prison's sex trade. When they are treated in an incredibly patronizing manner, the prisoners simply play on the prejudices of their naïve tormentors and use them to their advantage. I would do the same thing in similar circumstances. In this story, the prisoners have the last laugh, which is incredibly refreshing.

Christopher Dum, author of "The Monument," captures the status of prisoners as reviled and disregarded entities. Phillip Morris (note the ironic name) maintains a sense of humor and dignity despite dying of cancer. Our glorious government did not grant him release on

compassionate grounds, despite his physical inability to harm anybody or anything, even if he wanted to. Morris's reaction to this decision represents the fear, despair, and anger felt by those who must die alone in prison. That is his fate. He must die alone, a shell of his former self, unnoticed, denied even a simple bedside vigil.

This would have been poignant in and of itself. However, most of the emotion of the piece comes from Dum himself. At the outset, he admits that he initially believed the commonly accepted truth that inmates were dangerous monsters and should be treated as such. For most COs, the brainwashing techniques used to impart this message are quite successful. Yet, Dum retains the emotional ability to see the inmates as human, to treat them with kindness, and to empathize with their pain. His exposure to the story of Philip Morris serves to heighten these traits. He realizes that even the worst inmate has a good side and supports the creation of a monument to those who died in prison. This is extraordinary, as evidenced by the fact that other prison officials react to his attitude with scorn. Dum's story represents the triumph of humanity in a system designed to oppress it.

Sonia Tabriz collaborated with Hassine to produce "The Prison Librarian," Hassine's last work of fiction before he took his life in 2008. Sadly, this is a tale of redemption, a redemption beautifully described by Tabriz and Hassine in this artful story but denied Hassine in real life; indeed, denied most if not all prisoners in these punitive times. Jack, perhaps a stand-in for a serious offender who, because he is human, remains amenable to reform even though he is the quintessential "Prison Man." Jack was perpetually enraged and blamed the rest of the world for his problems. He hated his treatment in prison and expressed this feeling by killing others. His stated goal upon release from prison was to murder anyone he could. As a result, he was called

M&M, short for murder and mayhem. Everyone he encountered was either terrified of him or taunted him with derision.

The sole exception to this misery was the prison librarian, Sophia. When everybody else went out of their way to avoid him, Sophia took an active interest in Jack. She treated him as though he were a dignified human being, entitled to respect and kindness. She showed him love and used books to provide a constructive outlet for his feelings. For reasons known only to themselves, prison officials limited these invaluable interactions in the library to two hours each week, just as they limit family visits in most prisons. Yet, for those two hours in the library, in the company of the librarian, Jack was allowed to experience a better world. A world where he was respected. A world where he could experience his dreams. The prison librarian reinforced the message of a classic tome, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which taught Jack that a good and decent heart beats even in the worst of individuals.

Books were not merely a means to pass time in prison. Jack took their lessons to heart. When released from prison, he did not make good on his promise to kill additional people. Instead, he worked diligently and opened a successful bookstore. This enabled him to finance the construction of a public library in his old, crime-ridden neighborhood. He was eventually voted “Citizen of the Year.” Jack’s story demonstrates that giving love and providing positive outlets for their personal feelings has the potential to change even the most hardened of “Prison Men.” It is a lesson that our prison system should take to heart

Hassine’s “Three Boys and a Dog” demonstrates in no uncertain terms the catastrophes that can occur when a sadist is placed in a position of authority over other human beings. The story generally validates the theory that many guards are uneducated, simple minded, and

inclined toward sadism or at least to power trips at the expense of their captive charges. In this story, a prison official subjects a living inmate to the same fate as an over excreting dog he had abused as a child. However, in my view, this is not the worst part of the story. It is logical to assume that if a child evinces sadistic tendencies, these influences will become more pronounced in adulthood, absent a conscious, calculated effort to eradicate them. To me, the most shocking part of the story comes when the abused inmate's lawyer and physician choose to allow him to suffer in order to protect the guard. Granted, all three parties are childhood friends, yet this sort of collusion strains compassion to the limit. Sadly, it seems as though all participants in the system are so used to violence and abuse that they simply accept it. This is an unfortunate reality for far too many people in and out of prison.

The section continues with Charles Huckleberry's "I Killed Timothy McVeigh." The greatest compliment I can pay to this work is to say that it seems like nonfiction. This is a well researched, scholarly work, as well as an interesting story. Huckleberry uses all of the correct medical terminology and flawlessly describes the procedures involved with the execution. He even adopts the tone of the articles often found in medical journals. One truly believes that a doctor is telling this story. The fictional McVeigh is also an accurate portrayal of the original. The same can be said of his descriptions of the media coverage and the victims' families. Huckleberry's McVeigh is perhaps lucky that his execution is being carried out by a qualified doctor, rather than an untrained prison official. By making this choice, Huckleberry is able to give us a portrayal of an execution from a detached, professional, thoroughly clinical perspective. This is an interesting contrast to the frequent emotional portrayals of such an experience.

The remaining stories in the section form what I have christened Robert Johnson's "Execution Triumvirate." "The Practice of Killing" and "Convicts in the Attic" are obviously drawn from Johnson's experiences researching execution teams. In "The Practice of Killing" he provides a good introduction regarding the physical and emotional feelings experienced by someone doomed to be executed. The ending, which reveals it to be a mock execution, designed as a bizarre hazing ritual, is both brilliant and thought-provoking. It is instructive to note that Donovan is so easily able to brush off this scary experience. This suggests that he does not understand the full import of it, despite his previously expressed fear. Yet, I suppose no one can truly understand the experience, if they are free to simply get up and depart from it.

My main impression of Johnson's "Convicts in the Attic" was the disgust and depression that stemmed from realizing that the narrator was probably based on a real person. The casual brutality of the language betrays the hardening effect executions have on executioners and, ultimately, on us all.

Clearly, the strongest component of the Triumvirate is "Lethal Rejection." It certainly deserves to be the unifying story of the book. It transcends the act of describing an execution. In reality, a person being executed probably does not care about the exact details of the process and its rituals. "Lethal Rejection" deals with the much more salient issue of what goes through an inmate's mind as they are about to die. While reading this piece, I could not help but hear a rapid classical concerto playing in my head, perhaps something by Vivaldi. You alternate between these reveries and reality with a shockingly rapid ease. Even the comfort of a loving mother and a hearty breakfast are subsumed in memory by metaphors of eviscerated meat and burnt flesh. The physical torment of the execution seeps between reality and warped versions of memories. Old condemnations are relived side by side with memories of happier times. The

present and the past reflect one another with eerie perfection. The feelings become ever more intense, rising to an unbearable crescendo, halted only by death. It seems impossible to portray so much and still remain coherent. This is a compelling tale that will forever haunt its readers.

Section 5 Summary

None of the stories in this section, “Prisons and Pop Culture,” is strictly necessary, if a “necessary” story is defined as one that adds points that cannot be derived from other stories within the collection. However, Robert Johnson’s satire is so delicious and delightful that the stories deserve inclusion simply as comic relief. I love the first story, “Wheel of Torture,” a takeoff on Wheel of Fortune. The story captures the inner lust and sadism that underlies the appetites of many television viewers. The complete sexualization of Veri White is not too far removed from the real thing. In this story, Johnson has created the modern equivalent of gladiator entertainment for the peasants. I have no doubt that if the show were produced, it would be wildly popular, especially among Sarah Palin’s followers. Johnson’s perspective on our popular culture is more valuable and entertaining than the prison-related information, which can be gleaned from other portions of the book.

“Mister Rogers’ Prison” is simply hilarious. Perhaps I feel this way because I hated the actual “Mister Rogers” show as a child. I always found it to be sickeningly insipid, embarrassing, patronizing, and grossly unrealistic. In fact, I later came to conclude that if the world reflected what Mr. Rogers portrayed, I would want to kill myself immediately. It is not a loving refuge. It is an overly saccharine, almost nauseating anesthetic. Even as a young child, I am sure that I would have much preferred the satirical innuendo found in “Mister Rogers’ Prison” to the tiresome fare that was actually presented in the show, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood”. The story takes something horrible – our brutal prisons — and uses dark humor

to help us cope. I have no idea how Johnson came up with all of those wonderful rhymes. Nevertheless, I salute him for his inventive use of biting satire.

The same can be said of all the other stories in the section. For example, I love the idea of a radio station for convicts, as seen in “Songs for Aging Convicts.” Prisoners deserve someone to stand up for them and bring them comfort, although I doubt that prisoners would ever be allowed to play such music. Once again, I am filled with admiration at the lyrics invented by Johnson to adapt classic tunes to the prison context. I could never duplicate this feat. I knew all of the songs and sang along with every one of them. Johnson offers us the perfect mix of Great American Songbook classics and contemporary material.

“The Price Is Wrong” was probably the least amusing story in the bunch. It demonstrated the consequences of the seemingly innate unwillingness of many people to trust those who look different from them. As Miller clearly shows, this tendency is reinforced by the popular media. We are literally conditioned from every angle to accept the current philosophy of corrections. Our fear is forever stoked by bigotry and intolerance. I related to this story because I grew up watching reruns of all the games shows mentioned therein. Clearly, the story is an exaggeration. Nevertheless, it represents the reality of our media landscape.

As for “Death House Barbie,” I found it rather strange. Maybe this is because I have no knowledge about Barbie or her mystique. According to one reviewer of this story, ““Death House Barbie”” riffs on the idea of Ken as a Death Row inmate” with the result being an “entertaining [piece] that addresses societal concepts such as sexuality, celebrity and the death culture.” I liked the language but wasn’t sure what to make of the message. All in all though,

this section presents worthwhile material in a new way. It is a delightful departure from the usual fare.

Section 6 Summary

After reading the rest of the book, readers are treated to the fantasy of an enlightened prison system in the final section, “Visions of Prisons to Come.” There is very little I can say about Johnson’s “Brave New Prison.” Essentially, I agree with his entire vision. If we had the ability to do whatever we wanted with the world, this would be an ideal prison system. Prisoners are calmed and given a constructive outlet for their aggression, through the use of television and video games. The inequality between the “very rich” and “very poor” is remedied by job-training and self-help courses. Prison becomes a place where inmates can actually better themselves and emerge into the world ready to make valuable contributions. Their need for love and companionship is met by the allowance of gay marriage. The prisons have supportive counseling and those who are willing to engage in self-improvement are rewarded and encouraged. These people will leave prison able to take care of themselves without societal assistance. Of course, this will be expensive. Yet, we spend so many millions on useless, harsh punitive measures that it seems as though it might be helpful to spend just as much trying something else. My only concern is that this type of prison system could not possibly be implemented without complementary efforts to eradicate poverty. If the establishment of this type of prison is not preceded by poverty reduction efforts, previously law-abiding people may conclude that it is better to commit crimes and end up in prison with free access to television and video games, rather than simply living on the street. Needless to say, all of this ignores the fact that the entire sociopolitical establishment of our country is invested in the current system. Still, it is a beautiful portrait of what is possible, if we succeed in changing cultural attitudes.

Victor Hassine's last story, "The Final Discharge," continues the theme of improved prison environments by describing a program designed to give prisoners a new life. In exchange for allowing themselves to be euthanized, genetic replicas of the inmates will be born to loving parents and given a handsome stipend with which to live their life. Of course, there are many ethical questions regarding taking the circumstances of life into complete human control in this way. The ethical uncertainty of the situation is underscored by the need to bribe other inmates into tricking euthanasia candidates into voluntarily accepting their fate. Furthermore, the powers that be are paid for every euthanized prisoner. One wonders whether death should be financially rewarded. However, rather than focusing on an ethical quagmire, I prefer to focus upon the utility of this scenario as an alternative to imprisonment.

If you believe the premise of the story, it provides a chance to start anew, without any memory of one's past life. Concededly, much is left to chance. For example, who will serve as the parents for these children? Will they ever be able to disregard the past history of their clone? If not, how will the knowledge of that history affect their parenting style? Will they be so determined not to make a particular set of mistakes that they end up making them unwittingly, or cause different, more serious damage? Will people use their subjective beliefs to remove traits that they consider to be undesirable? What does it say about society when the only way we can render someone socially acceptable is to micromanage every aspect of their being? If euthanasia is desirable under these circumstances, why not extend it to all prisoners? Who chooses the lucky few? The answers to all of these questions involve a certain degree of chance. However, the previous lives of these clones also involved a great deal of chance. Birth into illiteracy and poverty is an accident of fate. Perhaps it would be better to take chances as part of a conscious effort to make better people, rather than continuing to trust in fate. This could be particularly

positive. This could be particularly beneficial if the clones of lower class impoverished people are raised by wealthy or upper middle class families. Victor Hassine clearly likes the idea. Who does not look at many of these prisoners and wish that they could be teleported back in time, to be dealt a better hand?

Yet, despite all of the favorable components of this argument, I remain troubled by it. As with any awesome power, there is no guarantee that its application will be limited to the circumstances in which it was originally conceived. This type of laudable program could easily morph into a government sponsored Holocaust of anybody who is disliked by those in power. If the program were shown to work in prison, what is to stop the government from killing racial or ethnic minorities and manufacturing clones as members of the majority race or ethnicity? As Lord Acton said: “absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Humans have a very poor history of disproving this phrase. I feel much more comfortable leaving the application of absolute power to God or fate, or some other force that we cannot control.

“Darwin’s Point,” cryptically if aptly named, is the last story in the book. The world has been annihilated by a nuclear holocaust and the only known survivors are the occupants of an underground maximum-security prison for women, with enough supplies to sustain themselves for more than a decade. Without any further explication, this premise is enough to ensnare readers in the compelling grip of “Darwin’s Point.” It seems quite appropriate that the prison should bear this name. Charles Darwin is associated with the theory of evolution. Similarly, the continuity of the human race is largely dependent upon the reproduction habits of those within the prison. Furthermore, a significant part of Darwin’s theory is his doctrine of survival of the fittest. Under normal circumstances, it is doubtful that the occupants of a maximum-security prison would be deemed the “fittest.” Yet, their circumstances render them the survivors of their

species. In addition, the prison is left with a guard and medical officer. Most of the prisoners died in the nuclear blast, but these two officials remain as the “surrogate parents” of the small prison “family.”

The first thing that struck me upon reading “Darwin’s Point,” is that the prisoners remain confined in their cells, even after a nuclear holocaust. This seemed remarkably unfair to me. The legal system to which they were to be held accountable has been destroyed. In a world where the human race is nearly extinct, do we really care whether certain prisoners complete their sentences? On a more practical level, if they are let out of their cells, where can they possibly run? What conceivable threat do they pose? Yet, for these prisoners life has not truly changed. Their underground world has not changed and they have rarely known anything else. In fact, they may actually be better off in prison than they would be in the post-apocalyptic world. The guard and medical officer have struck a reasonable balance, by allowing some of the prisoners out of their cells to perform daily activities such as cooking meals. Remarkably, most of the prisoners seem to be well-adjusted individuals, capable of making meaningful contributions to the prison “society.”

The one exception is Maria. She can best be described as a feral cat or rabid rat in human form. She cares nothing about human beings and is capable of committing great evil against them. She was sent to the current maximum security prison after setting a boarding house on fire. She is full of irrepressible rage and is dreadfully violent. Her only priority is survival to the bitter end. In this regard, she exhibits an admirable tendency to live on her own terms, even while in prison. This virgin travesty somehow manages to become pregnant. It is ironic that the fate of society hinges upon its least stable or “fit” member. Typically, Maria is enraged that her body is being used to “imprison” another life form and spends her entire pregnancy endeavoring

to kill the baby. She seems utterly incapable of forming any bond of love, even with something emerging from her own flesh and blood.

The medical officer hopes for a boy. This is partially due to the fact that she lost her own son during the nuclear apocalypse. More importantly, though, a boy is a prerequisite for the mating necessary to prolong human kind. Eventually, Maria gives birth to a girl, who is named “Shelley,” after the medical officer’s son. Despite the surprise in gender, everyone within the prison soon comes to love the baby. Maria is eventually released into the world. This is an unusual turn of events. The release is not motivated by any grounds of mercy or compassion. Rather, it is done so that the prison officials will be freed of the constant struggle to keep a demented mother from killing her own child. Arguably, the prison officials are actually committing a grave injustice against Maria. They are cutting her off from the only known source of food and protection. How will she survive in the world? What if the above-ground environment is still unfit for human habitation? There is no evidence that the prison officials can know the answers to any of these questions when Maria is released. However, they do not burden Maria’s mind either.

Freedom is what Maria has always wanted and she is glad to take it. She is used to doing anything necessary to survive and does not seem concerned, or even aware, of the dangers that face her. From a strictly practical point of view, the prison will certainly be better off without her. Through asexual reproduction, she has served her only potential useful function. Moreover, the prisoners may now be better able to form a stable society, without the most troublesome member. Obviously, all of this raises more questions than it answers. What will happen to Maria? How will the society survive, without a male for mating purposes? Even if they had one, how will they survive after their food supply runs out?

The book ends with the poem, “Dreamscape.” It makes an elusively simple point. Those who are incarcerated live like animals; largely because that is how we treat them. Yet, those who are physically free also face a daunting prison built by societal mores. Secretly, and not so secretly, we all desire to escape from these social customs and constraints. Our attempts to liberate ourselves seem entirely worthy of empathy. Nevertheless, they are only slightly removed from behavior we characterized as deviant and punish with severe prison terms. Often, there is only a short distance – imagine a line – separating the intersection between “civilization and chaos.” Thus far, this is an intersection we have not “crossed with care,” but rather have done so recklessly, at the expense of those we lock up and then leave out of our understanding of the world around us.