Life without Parole: Living and Dying in Prison Today (5th Ed.).

By Victor Hassine. Edited by Robert Johnson and Sonia Tabriz.


Victor Hassine went to prison in 1981 to begin serving a sentence of life without parole; he died there in 2008. The popular first four editions of Life without Parole have been considered to be important contributions to the criminal justice sub-discipline of corrections or penology. The first editions were written by Hassine to chronicle his life, observations, and perspectives of penal confinement. This fifth edition completes the circle, telling of both his life and his demise in prison.

The fifth edition, edited by the noted penologists, Robert Johnson and Sonia Tabriz, includes at least five new features: First, the editors, with the unique advantage of hindsight, have added a new sub-title to the book, namely Living and Dying in Prison Today. Secondly, the chapter introductions have been eliminated and replaced by two essays which serve as parenthesis to the entire text. This replacement frees the chapters from the accretions of the four previous editions; and allows for excellent overviews as introduction and afterword by the editors.

Thirdly, the chapters of the book have been rearranged, with materials ordered to chronicle the author's life before confinement, to and through incarceration, and beyond to his death. Fourth, the later chapters also include some of Victor Hassine's well-written and stirring fiction which is intended to convince the mind or to compel the emotions.

Finally, in a new appendix, the latest developments in penology are explained and discussed by the editors. These correctional developments are contrasted and compared by Johnson and Tabriz with the observations of Hassine. The appendix offers a satisfying conclusion to the book, binding the introductory sections, the chapters of narrative, and the works of fiction into a single, complete informational package.

At first glance, the use of the first 25 pages, of a volume which is only 194 pages in total, for introductory material appears excessive: Yet in those introductory sections, Johnson and Tabriz create the setting for the development of the entire work. Without the complete introduction, the reader might become lost in the chapters of the book's body. To begin with, the development of the book's varied and antecedent generations is prefaced and explained. These served as the building blocks which the editors first dismantled, then rebuilt with additions, deletions, and refinements.

The editors next offer an introduction of the author, Victor Hassine, in a rather short, retrospective portrait. This is followed by short biographies of the editors, highlighting their expertise and work, their perspectives on Hassine and his notions of prison life, and the forces which drive their
scholarship. In the midst of the introduction, the reader discovers the poem *Prison* by editor Robert Johnson.

The final element of the introduction is the new essay by the editors, *Life Without: Opening Reflections on Living and Dying in Prison Today*. This is in essence the front bookend for this work; and serves as a valuable guide that the reader might know what to expect from the body of the text. Johnson and Tabriz include a similar bookend near the end of the book to summarize the material contained within the text: This bookend is aptly entitled, *Death Without: Closing Reflections on Living and Dying in Prison Today*.

Among the most fascinating inclusions in *Life without Parole* are chapters 14 and 15 which include four works of the author's fiction writing. Victor Hassine felt, and taught those he tutored, that the prison author could best express his innermost thoughts by writing fiction; and the four stories included in these chapters give strong support to his assertion. The book would be less valuable for understanding the perspectives of the author were these four works omitted.

Victor Hassine expands upon the three human emotions or sentiments he has singled out as common to men in prison: The first is fear, a mind-numbing dread which weighs upon an inmate every moment of his existence. Fear was greatly multiplied through the gross overcrowding the author and his fellows experienced in Pennsylvania prisons up into the 21st Century. The second common human emotion is an overwhelming sense of loss: Upon commitment to prison, the convicted felon is stripped of all belongings; and in the case of someone serving a life sentence (or death through incarceration) the inmate begins to lose contact with all those people and organizations which were important to him in the free world. Ultimately, even ones closest friends and loved ones either die or cease coming to visit; thus the sense of loss is greatly intensified.

The third universal human sentiment among inmates tends to be hope: After Hassine worked through fear and loss, he hoped that his living a life of helping others in prison and dedicating himself to prison reform would ultimately cause the board of pardons and paroles to consider clemency on his behalf. When, after more than 20 years, the author sent an appeal to the parole board, the members of the board voted to reject it without consideration. That night, Victor Hassine checked himself into solitary confinement after he heard the news that his appeal had been ignored by the board. He body was found in his cell the next morning, hanging by the neck.

*Life without Parole* in each of its four previous editions has proven to be a valuable addition to the literature of penology. The fifth edition is certainly a new and improved version. It may be best used in the undergraduate or graduate classroom to inform students of the perspectives of the prison inmate -- perspectives which are so often disregarded or overlooked in the leading correctional text books.

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