



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CORRECTIONS , MURDER AND MAYHEM

Murder and Mother's Day

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Other than the annual struggle to find a thoughtful gift for the mother of my children, and besides the last minute panic when realizing that all the decent For my Wife greeting cards have been bought up by other men who planned ahead, the approach of Mother's Day is a joyous time. It is, at least in my family.

On occasions like this, I also think about the mothers and their children torn apart by tragedy -- homicide, in particular. I imagine the broken hearts of those mothers whose murdered children will never again buy them a Mother's Day card, as well as the children of murdered women whose only gift to mom are flowers laid at her grave.

I also think about the mixed emotions of women and their children who spend Mother's Days within the stark confines of a prison visiting room. As of 2007, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were over 65,000 mothers of minor children serving time in state or federal prisons. Alternatively, there were almost 150,000 children under the age of 18 whose mothers were behind bars, a disturbing 122% increase since 1991.

Many Americans, of course, see the plight of incarcerated moms -- being separated from their children, often permanently -- a just punishment for their criminal irresponsibility. Whatever one's sympathies in this regard, we can agree that the truly innocent victims are the children whose mothers are locked away, often permanently, and who must endure the stigma and embarrassment linked to crimes for which they had no responsibility.

Consider the plight of Jackie W. Now in her early 20s, Jackie was only 7 when her parents separated. Her mother Catherine had fallen helplessly in love with a co-worker at the nursing home where they both were employed as nurse's aides. However, the devastation and shame associated with the affair were nothing compared to the ghastly revelations that would soon surface after her mother's arrest for murder.

Catherine would apparently do anything for her girlfriend Gwen, engaging in a sordid lovers pact designed to bind them together and seal their relationship forever. Catherine stood at the door as a lookout while Gwen forcefully smothered elderly patients with a washcloth. The victims, five in total, were chosen because of their frail state -- each candidate for death was tested first by holding her nose, to see if she resisted. The partners in killing discussed the pathetic idea of spelling out the word MURDER with the initials of their victims given names, but had difficulty finding a U.

It was hard enough for Jackie to grow up without her mother at home, but she confronted constant teasing and mistreatment at school and in the neighborhood because of her infamous parent. Additionally challenging was having her friends prohibited by their parents from playing with her anymore. Jackie was marked as the offspring of a killer. But the most distressing part of her position were the occasional visits to prison -- passing through the steel gates, being frisked and searched for contraband even as a young girl, and trying to maintain some sort of a relationship with mom, the serial killer.

So now, while browsing through what's left on the rack of Mother's Day cards, I contemplate the fact that Hallmark hasn't created a line of cards for incarcerated mothers. Â At least on this Sunday, however, I will be thinking of the thousands of children whose mothers have been taken away in one way or another.