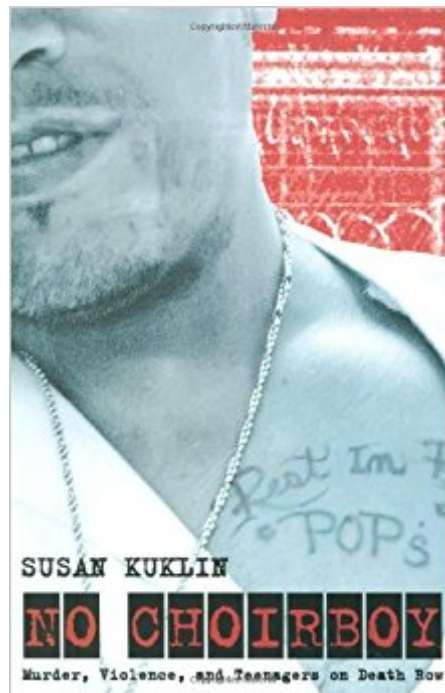




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# No Choirboy: Murder, Violence, And Teenagers On Death Row



## Synopsis

No Choirboy takes readers inside America's prisons, and allows inmates sentenced to death as teenagers to speak for themselves. In their own voices—raw and uncensored—they talk about their lives in prison, and share their thoughts and feelings about how they ended up there. Susan Kuklin also gets inside the system, exploring capital punishment itself and the intricacies and inequities of criminal justice in the United States. This is a searing, unforgettable read, and one that could change the way we think about crime and punishment. No Choirboy: Murder, Violence, and Teenagers on Death Row is a 2009 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 224 pages

Publisher: Henry Holt and Co. (BYR); 1 edition (August 5, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0805079505

ISBN-13: 978-0805079500

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 9.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 30 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #736,964 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #43 in Books > Teens > Social Issues > Violence #192 in Books > Teens > Education & Reference > Social Science > Politics & Government #1814 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > Crime & Criminals

## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Grade 9 Up—Kuklin tells five stories here; four are about young men who committed murder before they reached the age of 18, and one is the story of a victim's family. Each narrative presents a picture of a troubled youth who did something he later regretted, but something that could not be undone. Within these deftly painted portraits, readers also see individuals who have grown beyond the adolescents who committed the crimes. They see compassion, remorse, and lives wasted within the penal system. Some of the stories tell of poverty and life on the streets, but others are stories of young men with strong, loving families. One even asks readers not to blame his family for his act of violence. Most of the book is written in the words of the men Kuklin interviewed. Their views are compelling; they are our neighbors, our nephews, our friends' children, familiar in many ways, but unknowable in others. Kuklin depicts the penal system as biased against

men of color, and any set of statistics about incarceration and death-row conviction rates will back her up. She also emphasizes that being poor is damning once a crime is committed. She finally introduces Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who has worked on the cases of two of the interviewees, who talks about his efforts to help those who are on death row. This powerful book should be explored and discussed in high schools all across our country. —Wendy Smith-D'Arezzo, Loyola College, Baltimore, MD Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In previous books for youth, Kuklin has explored harrowing topics such as AIDS (*Fighting Back: What Some People Are Doing about AIDS*, 1988) and child slavery (*Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders against Child Slavery*, 1998). Her latest title, about individuals who received death-row sentences while they were teenagers, is another direct, compassionate, and eye-opening inquiry. The prisoners' words, drawn from Kuklin's interview transcripts, form the bulk of the narratives, but Kuklin's voice frequently cuts in with details about the events leading up to the alleged crime, legal issues, and the prisoners' backgrounds. Some chapters also include commentary from the prisoners' lawyers and the prisoners' own writing (one, Nanon Williams, is a published author). The mix of voices makes for a somewhat chaotic but riveting whole that combines powerfully with the occasional photos and hand-drawn portraits of the subjects. Kuklin presents, with signature frankness, the men's memories of their young lives; the murders, for which some claim innocence; and the brutal realities (including rape and other acts of extreme violence) of incarcerated life, first on death row and then in maximum-security prison, where most of the prisoners are now held. In unforgettable later chapters, families of prisoners and victims both speak about their grief and loss, and the closing section focuses on a world-renowned anti-death penalty attorney. This isn't a balanced overview of capital punishment. Instead, it is a searing and provocative account that will touch teens' most fundamental beliefs and questions about violence, punishment, our legal and prison systems, and human rights. An author's note and extensive resources conclude. See the adjacent "Story behind the Story" feature, *Life on Death Row*, for Kuklin's comments about the project. Grades 10-12. --Gillian Engberg

I learned about this text from a colleague who read about it. We created an entire unit with *No Choirboy* as our anchor text amid articles, podcasts, documentaries, etc., and it was the perfect way to end the year! My 10th graders were so engaged, especially my intensive group. They made so

many connections to previous texts we've read and were astonished to learn about our penitentiary & judicial systems. I had students who said they had not read an entire book in years actually read this one cover-to-cover. The structure of the text (lack of interview questions, use of text features like italics for Kuklin's commentary, etc.) was slightly more complex than I anticipated, and provided interesting discussion because it encouraged my students to conduct more thorough close readings. I couldn't help but chuckle every time some one of my lower-level babies made comments about grammar or corrected the text when they read aloud. The content and style affords No Choirboy a place on my "must read" list, especially because students WANTED to learn, read, write & discuss after enduring a brutal testing season. I ended the school year feeling proud of how equipped & prepared my students are to intelligently & respectfully participate in such a crucial dialogue.

I will be using this second semester for my 9th grade English class. It is captivating and very engaging. A great look into the real lives of people that have gotten in too deep and are paying with their life.

Good book with some information that is new to me. Sad, yet interesting.

This is a book that brings you face to face with the reality of the legal system, the oppression of poverty, and the realities of lives gone wrong. It puts humanity into inhuman acts and force the reader to see what society does to not only the victims but the offenders. Written with the voice of the condemned the book allows readers to see where bad choices lead you and how justice may not be as justified as it looks. Good for young adults who can't see or need to see the realities of consequences from a first person perspective.

Couldn't put it down.

I bought this for my 7th grade son who is not a big fan of reading. The stories are told in the words of the convicts, so the language can be intense. I strongly recommend that you read this along with your child and talk about what your child is reading. The book opened the door for us to have some really wonderful conversations.

Love this book, especially for teenagers. My students are eating it up right now in independent

reading! I suggested it to one student, and then she loved it so much that she suggested it to some other students. Next thing you know they came by to see if I had any other copies to give out! I may need to buy some more!

A thoroughly riveting and insightful look at death row teen inmates. Would have liked a little more information as to what happened to some of the teens in their later years on death row. Good book for young teens.

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