



# Condemned: Letters from Death Row

*Seán Ó Riain*

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## **Condemned: Letters from Death Row** Seán Ó Riain

Condemned: Letters from Death Row by "Ray" and Seán Ó Riain is a collection of letters between a former Cork teacher and a death row inmate that develops into a unique friendship-one that is in itself a subtle, rallying cry against an American system that still honours the 3,000 year old adage "an eye for eye", serving as a reminder that, as Gandhi observed, "An eye for an eye makes everyone blind". Ray has been convicted of killing a man, a crime he committed as a young man and that he admits and regrets. For his crime, Ray's sentence is death but what he seeks is not a pardon, or pity, or freedom. Simply, he hopes that his sentence will be commuted to life imprisonment without parole. For most of us to hope for a future so bleak seems unimaginable, but for Ray this is the focus of his appeals- a chance to live. Seán Ó Riain has been writing to Ray for several years and, while Seán's careful letters are included, it is Ray's heartfelt depiction of death row life that form the heart and soul of the book. Ray's letters are powerful in their understated descriptions of his difficult life circumstances- from juvenile offender with addict parents and dependent siblings to his current situation. The denied dreams, the unfulfilled desires, the loneliness, and the fear are all brought to devastating reality in his simple words. The men's letters are framed by commentaries, facts, and case-studies from the American death penalty system, clarifying the process of state sanctioned revenge in 36 of the US states: a process directly in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A process currently viewed by 88% of American Criminologists and by most American police chiefs as the least effective deterrent to violent crime- one that costs \$114 million more annually than life imprisonment in one state alone. Since the year 2000, almost 700 people have been executed in the 36 states that still enforce the death penalty in the US. In Condemned, after several years of writing to Ray, Ó Riain makes us question the prevalence of the death sentence in the American legal system and asks- should any state punish the death of a citizen with more death?

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