

Reviews of John Bessler's Books

(as of December 2012)

Cruel and Unusual: The American Death Penalty and the Founders' Eighth Amendment

(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012)

- Silver, 2012 *Independent Publisher Book Award* (U.S. History)

“A searing indictment of capital punishment, this pioneering history of the Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause is destined to reframe America’s death penalty debate. As a definitive account of the Eighth Amendment’s origins and the Founding Fathers’ own ambivalent views on executions, it will forever change our perceptions of cruelty and penal reform in the founding era.

This book, which exposes the brutality of state-sanctioned killing, is a must-read.”

–Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking* and *The Death of Innocents*

“John D. Bessler, an expert on capital punishment who teaches at the University of Baltimore School of Law, argues in his most recent book on the death penalty (he's written four) that, since its founding, the United States has become a more civilized place. We outlawed duels a long time ago. We no longer whip or torture inmates. We no longer place offenders in stocks. We stopped public hangings. As Mr. Bessler points out in his excellent history, *Cruel and Unusual: The American Death Penalty and the Founders' Eighth Amendment*, we've made all kinds of progress since the time of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and the adoption of the Bill of Rights. . . . So how does a society that shed many of its old cruelties—slavery, floggings, lynchings, executions of the criminally insane—still cling to the ultimate punishment? This is what Mr. Bessler's book seeks to answer, and in so doing, it argues persuasively that the death penalty, infested with randomness and bias, is a violation of the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishments.” –Dan Rodricks, *Baltimore Sun*

“Bessler offers a thought-provoking examination of the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition of “cruel and unusual punishment” in the ongoing debate over the constitutionality of capital punishment. . . . As a starting point for reasoned discourse, this is a remarkably thorough, compelling achievement. . . .

Highly recommend.” –*Choice*

“Bessler’s book reflects thorough research and understanding of the modern law of capital punishment, but his unique contribution to the literature is his historical scholarship. He avoids the unfortunate tendency of lawyers and legal authors to rely almost solely on case law, and he explores quite well key sources from philosophy, criminology, political science and history. *Cruel and Unusual*’s analysis of the documented meaning of the Eighth Amendment will be immediately significant to the ongoing challenges to the death penalty in courts and legislatures.”

–Victor L. Streib, professor and former dean, Ohio Northern University College of Law

“*Cruel and Unusual: The American Death Penalty and the Founders’ Eighth Amendment . . .* [t]races influences on the Founders’ views of capital punishment and argues for the penalty’s abolition.” —*The Chronicle of Higher Education*

“A new book by Professor John D. Bessler, titled *Cruel and Unusual: The American Death Penalty and the Founders’ Eighth Amendment*, challenges the conventional wisdom that the country’s founders were avid death penalty supporters, and explores their various views on capital punishment. Prof. Bessler discusses how the indiscriminate use of executions gave way to a more enlightened approach that has been evolving ever since. He sheds new light on the Constitution’s ‘cruel and unusual punishments’ clause by exploring the early influence of Cesare Beccaria’s essay, *On Crimes and Punishments*. Bessler examines the Supreme Court’s Eighth Amendment case law and concludes that the death penalty may well be declared unconstitutional in time.”—Death Penalty Information Center

“*Cruel and Unusual* is Bessler’s fourth book on the subject of executions and his most scholarly. It documents the United States’ complicated relationship with capital punishment from the time of the Founding Fathers through today and argues for its end.”
—*Minnesota* magazine

“John D. Bessler’s fourth book, *Cruel & Unusual: The American Death Penalty and the Founders’ Eighth Amendment*, presents a careful, well-researched study of the death penalty in American history. The book demonstrates that the Founding Fathers held conflicting and evolving views about the death penalty After detailing the history, meaning, and application of the Eighth Amendment, which was designed to protect prisoners’ rights, Bessler questions why, for example, the amendment bars corporal punishment yet condones executions. . . . Throughout his book, Bessler demonstrates that the originalist approach to constitutional interpretation is too simplistic for use in the Eighth Amendment context and that a ‘*principled*’ approach’ to the Eighth Amendment is necessary and militates in favor of the abolition of the death penalty.”
—*American Criminal Law Review*

“Bessler forcefully argues that the time is right for the death penalty’s abolition.”
—*Law Library Journal*

“John D. Bessler’s *Cruel and Unusual* is a meticulously researched and clearly written treatise on the Eighth Amendment and capital punishment. Through an extensive description of the influence of Cesare Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments* on American legal thinkers, this book offers a compelling normative argument that the death penalty violates the Eighth Amendment.”
—*Law and Society Review*

Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living

(Minneapolis: Bottlecap Books, 2007)

- Gold, 2008 *Independent Publisher* Book Award (Writing/Publishing)
- Silver, 2007 *ForeWord* Magazine Book of the Year Award (Writing)
- Finalist, Midwest Book Awards (Reference/How-to)

“This has got to be one of the best books ever published on how to become a writer. How I wish I had had it before I ever sat down to write my book on drawing! From simple matters of paragraphing and punctuation to deep probes of what writing is and why we value it, John Bessler's book informs and inspires the new writer. He illuminates every point with quotations from our greatest authors, providing a rich feast of new and old thoughts on writing. For the person who longs to fulfill that uniquely human urge for self-expression in writing on whatever subject, this book is the place to start.”

–Dr. Betty Edwards, best-selling author of *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* and *Drawing on the Artist Within*

“*Writing for Life* is filled with wise counsel and sound advice. Reading John Bessler's well-researched book will help those setting out on the writing trail reach their destination more surely.”

–Ralph Keyes, author of *The Courage to Write* and *The Writer's Book of Hope*

“Bessler’s book is part inspirational guide and part how-to manual for anyone who has ever encountered a blank page. He demystifies the writing process by breaking it down into manageable steps and offers would-be writers valuable techniques for improving both their writing and their enjoyment of it. He draws liberally upon the wisdom of the world’s best writers to inspire the everyday writer.” –*Minnesota* magazine

“In *Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living*, two-time Minnesota Book Award finalist John D. Bessler succinctly demystifies the writing process by breaking down and illustrating each step of the process from pre-writing preparation to final publication. *Writing for Life* is a thoroughly ‘user friendly’ instruction guide covering all of the tools and expertise needed to improve anyone’s writing skills and abilities. Informed and informative, *Writing for Life* is also engaging and even inspiring. . . . *Writing for Life* is skillfully written, comprehensive, practical, and especially recommended for anyone who has an aversion to writing, as well as those seeking to improve the quality of their own written work.”

–*Midwest Book Review*

“In his inspiring and passionate book on writing, Bessler tackles the often intimidating subject like a true scholar and expert. . . . Think of the book as a more intellectual *Bird by Bird*. A writing bible that's inspirational, honest, and beginner-friendly”

–Molly Priesmeyer, freelance writer

“Bessler . . . dispels the notion that writing is just for literary figures or professional writers and reveals the writing process as a thinking process, breaking down and illuminating each step, from pre-writing to publication. The book demystifies the writing process for beginners and experienced writers alike.”

–*Reference & Research Book News*

“In today’s tech-savvy world, even in the midst of short-form emailing, text messaging and online chats, the ability to write, and write well remains paramount to both career and life success. In *Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living*, author John Bessler gives tips on how best to craft thoughts into effective pieces of written communication, advice that he says could help even the most writing-adverse people write well.” –WYPR, *Midday with Dan Rodricks*

“*Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living* . . . takes us through a complete process of writing . . . but it's the substance within his chapters that makes one realize that this isn't just another book about writing.” –*North Dakota Quarterly*

“Bessler’s book breaks down the writing process for people who think they can’t write or aren’t comfortable writing.” –*The Free Press (Mankato, Minn.)*

“*Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living*, the fascinating new book by John Bessler, was published by Bottlecap Books. . . . Anyone who writes anything will love this book, especially discouraged writers, and who isn’t?”
–Carol Connolly, St. Paul, Minnesota’s Poet Laureate (*Law and Politics*)

“I was pleasantly surprised by John D. Bessler's *Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living* because, while it touches on the same topics that similar books touch upon, [it] does it with more depth and detail. . . . Using lots of interesting quotes from some of the great writers and offering helpful tips, the author meticulously discusses a long list of topics such as the importance of daily practice, perseverance, discipline, style, editing, polishing and revising, storytelling, and freewriting. He also writes about procrastination and writer's block—what it is and how to cure it. . . .

[T]hese are the same topics that pop out in any writing book, but the difference here is that Bessler goes much deeper and examines the issues in more detail. . . .

Writing for Life is a smart, insightful and sophisticated book. It is also well researched and would serve as a fine addition to any writer's reference bookshelf.”

–Mayra Calvani, *California Chronicle*

“Bully for Mr. Bessler! He’s written a well-argued brief for the craft and joy of writing His advice is both practical and persuasive. The jury of readers should adjourn fast to their notebooks with pencils poised to begin the adventure of writing clean, accurate, and literate prose because that’s what human beings do at their best.”

–Bill Holm, essayist, poet, and *A Prairie Home Companion* contributor

“This book gives readers the know-how and tools they need to write more effectively. This inspirational guide unlocks the secrets of the craft, excites readers about the possibilities of language, and will help both beginning and experienced writers alike better navigate the writing process.”

–*Writers’ Journal*

Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003)

• 2004 Minnesota Book Award finalist

“The collective confusion of blood sacrifice for justice is the largely unacknowledged subtext of John D. Bessler’s history of lynching and execution in Minnesota. He also untangles the strange drift of Minnesota’s capital punishment laws, which can be summed up as a determined effort to sanitize state-sanctioned murder.” –*City Pages*

“The author argues that the death penalty does not reduce the murder rate; rather, as Minnesota’s historical experience presented in this book indicates, use contributes to an atmosphere of violence. . . . By ending the death penalty, Minnesota has been able, in the author’s view, to overcome its ‘legacy of violence,’ and this is an important reason for its relative low murder rate.” –*Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*

“Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the history of violence in the South and in the West, but the collective violence that was also a significant part of the midwestern past has been left relatively unexamined. John D. Bessler’s meticulous chronicle of lynchings and legal executions in Minnesota helps to remedy this neglect. . . . Bessler’s research is extensive, his descriptions are richly detailed . . .” –*Michigan Historical Review*

“In *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota*, Minneapolis lawyer John D. Bessler sets forth with remarkable scholarship, clarity, and objectivity the history of Minnesota’s failed attempt to make peace with capital punishment.”

–*William Mitchell Law Review*

“Strengths of the book include the detailed explanations of the crimes and the author’s strong arguments, grounded in fundamental fairness, about why capital punishment should be abolished. Bessler is also good at exploring common myths surrounding the death penalty.” –*Criminal Justice Review*

“Mr. Bessler is at his best when he provides in-depth coverage of individual events. *Legacy of Violence* . . . is a worthy and interesting book. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested in the subject . . .” –Laura Wilkerson, *Open Salon*

“Carefully researched. Bessler covers lynchings from the mass executions in 19th century Mankato to the Duluth lynchings of three black circus workers in the 1920s.” –*Dave Wood’s Book Report*

“John D. Bessler’s compelling and important history of execution by hanging in Minnesota . . . brings an unnerving relevance to the charged atmosphere of our times. . . . Well worth the read.” –*Minnesota History*

“Bessler takes us on a compelling journey through the history of lynchings and state-sanctioned executions that dramatically shaped Minnesota’s past.”
–*The Crime Victims Report*

“The author is a skilled storyteller who grabs readers’ attention. *Legacy of Violence* is an important addition to a growing historiography that focuses on regional variations of lynching outside the American South.” –*The Annals of Iowa*

“Minnesota was not immune to the rage of lynch mobs. Minneapolis lawyer John Bessler examines the execution of black men in Duluth in the final chapter of *Legacy of Violence*, a book primarily focused on Minnesota’s death penalty years, officially ended in 1911.”
–*StarTribune* (Minneapolis)

Kiss of Death: America’s Love Affair with the Death Penalty
(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003)

“Bessler’s intentions and stance are unequivocal as he unfolds his critique of the death penalty in the United States. The main thesis is that violence begets more violence, and the death penalty contribute to the cycle of violence. . . . Exploring Americans’ love/hate (more love than hate) relationship with violence and the death penalty, Bessler argues that vengeance provides the main support for executions. But this form of vengeance has transformed from being up-close and personal to distant and invisible. The vengeance is now remote, unconnected from our lives and sense of responsibility [H]is passion about violence in American society and the death penalty’s role in that violence come across effectively.”
–Prof. Adelaide H. Villmoare, Vassar College

“Highly recommended”; “‘The kiss of death’ is how attorney Bessler describes state-sanctioned executions as they are carried out in America today, and he reasons that this ‘kiss’ is morally ruinous to our nation. In this small, well-crafted volume, Bessler presents a no-holds-barred argument against capital punishment mixed with stories of death row inmates in Texas. . . . What sets his book apart is Bessler’s style and personal intensity.” –*Library Journal*

“Bessler stresses that, if all states had the option of life without parole, there would probably be fewer death sentences. . . . Strengths of the book include the detailed explanations of the crimes and the author’s strong arguments, grounded in fundamental fairness, about why capital punishment should be abolished. Bessler is also good at exploring common myths surrounding the death penalty.” –*Criminal Justice Review*

“Bessler’s voice, language, style, and confidence are convincing, and make the book an effective indictment of our culture.” –*Rain Taxi Review of Books*

“*Kiss of Death* is well crafted, in a comfortable, anecdotal style. It presents a thoughtful, comprehensive assessment of capital punishment in the United States”

–*Minnesota Law & Politics*

“Highly recommended”; “Bessler presents a passionate and concise case against the death penalty” –*Choice*

Death in the Dark: Midnight Executions in America

(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997)

- 1998 Minnesota Book Award finalist
- Honorable Mention, Outstanding Books – The Gustavus Myers Program for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in North America

“Some of the best books about capital punishment as a legal and cultural phenomenon have been published in the past few years. *Death in the Dark* . . . belong[s] in that good company.”

–Michael Mello, *The Nation*

“Hugo Bedau’s revised ‘The Death Penalty in America’ is a crash course in the subject—a clear guide through the mountainous research data and commentary on the constitutional and legal issues. John Bessler presents . . . arguments even more succinctly.” –*The Economist*

“*Death in the Dark: Midnight Executions in America* . . . explores why Americans, despite their enthusiasm for the electric chair, have passed laws insuring that its operation occurs far from public view.” –*The Chronicle of Higher Education*

“*Death in the Dark* . . . is an extended and subtle argument for opening the execution process up to public scrutiny. . . . The book is addressed to lawyers, law students, and the legally sophisticated, but the discussion is easily accessible to a general public now familiar with legal technicalities from cases such as O.J. Simpson’s. . . . [I]t is a useful work for those teaching and learning within a variety of disciplines.”

–Leigh B. Bienen, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*

“*Death in the Dark* is . . . a thought-provoking treatment of our love-hate relationship with state-imposed killing.” –*The American Journal of Legal History*

“*Death in the Dark* will definitely cause one to ‘rethink’ the issues associated with capital punishment.” –*Choice*

“[H]istory is told exceptionally well in *Death in the Dark*.” –*St. Petersburg Times*

“Bessler’s arguments are not to be dismissed lightly.”

–*The Times Literary Supplement* (London)

“*Death in the Dark* is an historical treatment of when and where state killings in the USA have taken place, either by custom or by the force of law. . . . For anyone with a desire to learn more about American death penalty procedures, *Death in the Dark* provides great edification. . . . [I]t should also interest the historian, the layman, the lawyer, and the jurist. Bessler has managed to compile the significant statistics and to arrange them descriptively and in such a fashion as to educate even the most erudite reader. As does any good writer, he does not offer inflexible answers to the questions expressly raised by the book. Rather, he presents the reader with sufficient information at arrive at his own conclusions, or at least to ponder the facts surrounding capital punishment. It is indeed a book which it is difficult to put aside, and impossible to read without contemplating anew its contents.” –*Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*

“Bessler . . . argues convincingly for reform of U.S. execution laws”; “he debunks common death penalty ‘myths’ and calls persuasively for a return to openness and accountability.”
–*Publishers Weekly*

“In view of the increasing politicization of capital punishment in the United States and the aggressive efforts by both federal and state governments to severely restrict the availability of post-conviction appeals to death row inmates, John Bessler's recent examination of this age-old polemic comes at an opportune time. . . . For those who believe that the debate over capital punishment is either settled or passé, this book will prove enlightening. . . . Indeed, the book is persuasive and important, precisely because it is couched in the concrete language of actual policies impacting real lives. The book does not indulge in abstract ruminations about capital punishment, rather, it attempts to move us to action.”
–*Columbia Human Rights Law Review*

“John D. Bessler provides a detailed history of the movement in the nineteenth century that transformed capital punishment from a public spectacle (sometimes solemn, more often raucous) to a procedure performed behind prison walls from which the general population is excluded. . . . This exercise in legislative and administrative history constitutes a substantial contribution to capital punishment scholarship. Bessler has avoided facile psychologizing even though the materials he explores seem vulnerable to such attempts. For this we can be grateful.”
–*Law and History Review*

“This chilling and well-argued work is highly recommended” –*Library Journal*