

Susanne Davis Extended Commentary for “The Appointed Hour” NDR

I began writing “The Appointed Hour” ten years ago, after one of my high school classmates was executed on Death Row in Connecticut. His name was Michael Ross and he was killed by the State on May 13, 2005, the first person executed on Death Row in the State since 1960. Michael Ross admitted to killing eight young women, raping seven of them and in the end advocated for his own death to alleviate the suffering of the families who had lost loved ones to his violent acts. The first victim was a fellow student at Cornell. Violence casts its effects far and wide, and while this story is fiction, many elements of it are true. Michael Ross and I were enrolled together in a vocational agriculture program in high school. He was a star Ag student and we lost touch when I left that program to concentrate on college prep and writing. After Michael Ross was executed, I tried and failed and tried again to write about it all. We both grew up on farms and came from the same small corner of CT. I felt in some way, that I understood the solitary and sometimes violent nature of the environment. But as I wrote, I understood only that I understood nothing, so over time I wrote short stories set in that corner of the state but never touched this story again until last spring when an incident in my college classroom coincided with more real danger and violence on college campuses nationwide. I came back to this story at the same time that my story collection got some recognition in a national prose series and my agent asked me to see if my stories were linked. Previously seemingly disparate elements started weaving together. I thank Rena Rossner for that.

Michel Ross will end up being the last death row inmate executed in CT. In May of this year the State Supreme Court upheld the legislature’s 2012 ban on capital punishment and sent the 11 men given death sentences before the 2012 ban to life in prison instead. But we still have so much work to stop violence on campuses, in our culture, and elsewhere.

Everytown for Gun Safety has been [tracking every school shooting](#) since the 2012 incident at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., which claimed the lives of 20 children and six adults. Since then, there have been more than 149 shootings at schools in this country. And, the statistic is that one in four young women in college classrooms are victims of rape. I don’t claim to have answers but as I see more and more violence in student writing, I only hope that discussion may shed light and some help. I believe in a story’s power to help us see and understand and feel things we might not otherwise allow ourselves to see, feel and understand and that each act of seeing, feeling and understanding becomes an intervention of sorts. Michael Ross found his Catholic faith on Death Row and his remains were buried in a Benedictine Grange Cemetery in CT. In the last story of my collection, a fictional family of one his (Reggie Rawlins) victims, confronts the Benedictine priest who buried him. Obviously, for me, the writer, I needed to write more than one story to understand anything about the subject of violence and forgiveness. That story, “Merciful Like the Father” is inspired by this Jubilee year of the Church.