

WOULD

YOU

SAVE

A

MURDERER'S

LIFE?



This woman does. In fact she's dedicated her life to it. As a death row investigator, Rene Denfeld, 46, works with the most dangerous criminals in America. She tells *Stylist* about life on death row

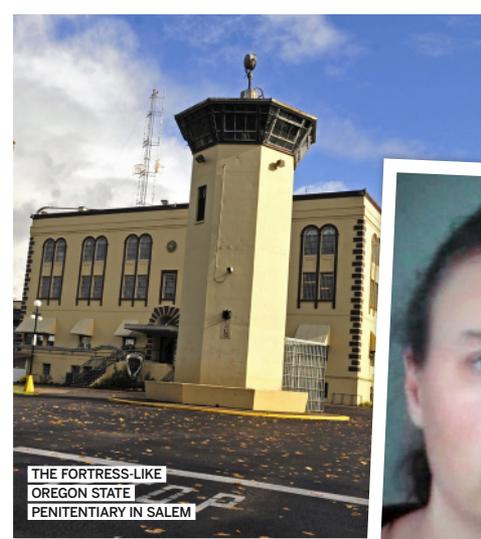
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A prison is a fetid place. The air hangs thick and foul-smelling; the uncirculated scent of sweat, untreated gum disease and the fug of thousands of men living in close quarters. Sickness is rife – there's a daily battle against staphylococcal infections (conditions like impetigo and MRSA), hepatitis and tuberculosis. Every time I enter, it hits me like a thick blanket.

I've always thought people have the ability to find joy in the most despairing circumstances. But there is a deep-seated sense of hopelessness that is unique to prisons. I remember meeting one death-row inmate. He was inside a cage, several feet away, and I could *sense* he was angry. I asked him why, and he simply said: 'You brought the outside in.' This man had spent decades trying to forget another world existed outside his dank stone prison, then I came in and he could smell the fresh air on my clothes.

I'm a private criminal investigator, hired by defence attorneys who are representing someone facing the death penalty at trial, or someone already on death row. My job is to conduct an investigation into their client's life in order to reduce their sentence. I spend most of my time out in the field gathering information; running a fine tooth comb over everything – their background, their childhood and events leading up to their crime to uncover why the client is the way he is. The attorneys will then use my findings; new witness statements from long lost family members, or documents that I've found in stuffy attic rooms, to argue for mercy. My goal is not to win them freedom or 'get them off'; the best possible outcome is that a man will spend the rest of his life in prison, without parole. It rarely happens, but that's considered a victory.

In Oregon where I work, there are around 20 investigators like me. Mostly women. Largely mothers. Most in their 40s or 50s – little women with a lot of life experience. People always expect us to be men, but actually it's much easier for people to confide some of their most shameful and



THE FORTRESS-LIKE OREGON STATE PENITENTIARY IN SALEM



ANGELA DARLENE MCANULTY IS THE ONLY WOMAN ON DEATH ROW IN OREGON

scarring memories to women as we're seen as the more accepting sex. We need to be seasoned enough to be able to handle what we discover, though, because it can be truly painful.

## BEHIND BARS

The Oregon State Penitentiary is a maximum security prison, which looms above the streets of Salem. It houses 2,200 men and women, 34 of whom are kept on the prison's U-shaped death row. Some of the men have been here for up to 26 years – including Randy Lee Guzek, the longest serving man on death row, who was sentenced to death four times in 1988 for the murder

## “IT TAKES TIME TO GET A KILLER TO OPEN UP. BUT OFTEN, THEY’VE BEEN WAITING THEIR WHOLE LIFE FOR SOMEONE TO LISTEN”

of a husband and wife during a robbery. The youngest inmate is 35, the oldest 66. There is only one woman awaiting execution, 44-year-old Angela Darlene McAnulty, who was convicted in 2011 for torturing and eventually killing her 15-year-old daughter. But female death row inmates are rare. In the field people talk about the 'gender discount'. A woman is far less likely to get sentenced to death, even if her crimes are more horrific, because jurors will rarely sentence a woman to be killed; they have a hard time stomaching it. [Of the 3,125 people currently on America's death row, 63 are women; 13 women have been executed since 1976.]

Other prisoners call men on death row "blood pudding" or "daisies" (as in pushing up) but they won't be put to death by

lethal injection any time soon. A moratorium was placed on executions in 2011 by Oregon's state Governor, John Kitzhaber. He would not allow any man to be executed while he was in office as he's morally opposed to it. Eventually, though, he will leave and the process will start again [if he's re-elected next year he could serve until 2019].

The men's cells are 9ft by 6ft and hold a small bolted-down bunk, a toilet with no lid and, if the men have money on their commissary books (a prison bank account), they can get a little television. Many materials are banned for fear of them being

turned into 'shanks', or homemade weapons – often made from scrap metal or sharpened toothbrushes. No Polaroid photos are allowed; some inmates found a way to peel them apart, take out the metal inside and create a weapon.

I'll visit every week or two to meet with a client and have two to three cases at one time. I dress modestly and always in black. We're not allowed to wear jewellery (in case it's used against us as a weapon) or particular colours of clothes. At Oregon, it's blue, because inmates wear blue. Every now and again, the prison will break into a riot. Hundreds of red lights start flashing and every single door automatically locks. You *really* don't want to be confused with an inmate and stuck inside when the prison goes into lockdown. That remains, to

this day, my greatest fear.

My clients will be brought out of death row and led – cuffed with their hands behind their back and their legs in chains – by prison guards to a tiny underground room. They sit or stand on the other side of heavy safety glass and I have just enough room for my chair on the other side. Once the door is closed, it's a claustrophobic concrete box. If I need to pass them documents to sign we will meet in a room with a desk, but they will be locked in a cage. These measures are for my safety. The last thing people want is someone taken hostage.

People expect me to be scared, but I tend to be almost supernaturally calm, filled with a sense of peace when working. I'm open to whatever emotions come up inside me, but I try to keep them to myself. Getting emotionally involved is the biggest occupational hazard so I don't let myself get attached. Sometimes it's hard, though. Once I was interviewing a woman who held my hand as she told me, in terrible detail, about being gang raped. I sobbed all the way home.

There's a common misconception that the people on death row have committed unusually violent or horrific crimes. But the majority of my clients on death row have committed aggravated murder (a murder made more serious by its circumstances, such as a drug deal or kidnapping).

It takes time to get a convicted killer to open up to you. But often, these people have been waiting their whole life for someone to listen; 99% of my job is simply that – listening and accepting what I hear. I will sit with the client for at least a couple of hours, and it will be a very formal interview, but I never push them to make a disclosure. Most people are eager to impart some part of themselves anyway. They might reminisce about food their mum used to make or a teacher they had in second grade. They talk a lot about the hard things too; it might be how their father used to beat them and lock them in the closet – the colour of



the wallpaper, the musty smell of the old coats. The moments they tell me about their actual crime are some of the most difficult and heartrending.

Society is still very enamoured with the idea that death row is populated by absolutely brilliant sociopaths or serial killers. We call it 'The myth of Hannibal Lecter'. But that is simply not my experience. Virtually every client I've had has a background of terrible childhood abuse and neglect. Most experienced unimaginable horrors as children. They are often born to mothers who used drugs during pregnancy. I've heard their stories of eating lead paint chips off walls as children because they were hungry. They were beaten, molested or suffered brain damage from traumas, such as being hit around the head with floorboards and baseball bats.

Mental health often plays a large part. I'm legally obliged to never disclose personal details, but one case that I will never forget involved someone who had experienced a psychotic episode. He was a lovely person who had been, up until that point in his life, a very good citizen. Unfortunately, he was experiencing the onset of serious mental illness. He became floridly psychotic and killed a family member. When I was assigned the case, the client was in the grips of psychosis but being treated with medication. I remember going to visit him when the medicine was starting to take effect. At first he was confused as to why he was in jail. It was my job to gently tell him. I will never forget the horror on his face as he started to comprehend what he'd done. He was past the point of tears or screaming – the only way I can describe the sound he made was like an animal crying.

I do a lot of interviewing in the field. I might be driving nine hours through remote forests to track down family members to interview, or searching in a hospital basement for documents that could throw up any mitigating factors that a jury might feel merits mercy. My case information is recorded in reports, but these are bound by confidentiality so tend to get

locked in attorney files. I am, however, what's called a mandated reporter, which means if I elicit a horrific confession – from a paedophile, for example – I am legally required to tell the police.

I have to travel to the homes of my clients. It's a joke in the business that we never get to travel any place nice. Our clients generally come from backgrounds of horrific poverty. I spend a lot of time in trailer parks, tenements, towns that have been ravaged by meth abuse. I can be in the middle of the woods trying to find a shack that someone calls home. I inevitably end up at 'the worst house on the block'. But I'm very accustomed to danger – I was an investigative journalist for almost 20 years before I did this job. If my 'radar' goes off – if I get a strong feeling that something's not quite right or if someone is clearly mentally unstable or high on drugs – I'll retrace my steps. And if things get really bad, I'll call in an armed investigator. If I'm in someone's house, I'll always sit in

## “I REMEMBER KNOCKING ON A DOOR ONCE, OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, AND HEARING THE CLEAR COCKING OF A SHOTGUN”

the chair closest to the door and I'm well aware what a meth lab smells like: ammonia and cat urine. So I'll just keep on walking by. I remember knocking on a door once, out in the middle of nowhere, and hearing the very clear cocking of a shotgun inside. My heart froze. I backed slowly away, got in my car and left.

For the most part though, people are not dangerous. And if they are approached with cordiality and respect, they will respond in kind. But I have knocked on a few doors before and got a face-full of spit. People are killed doing the job that I do. I think about that a lot. It makes me feel very vulnerable, but I know I have enough experience to sense when a situation is getting dangerous.

## MORAL QUANDARY

People constantly ask me about the ethics of what I do. They'll ask me, 'Why are you helping those who have raped and killed?' That is something I wrestle with every

day. The day I stop wrestling with it is the day I will quit. I do care what my clients did – part of my job is to confront it, in horrific detail. But I am not 'getting them off'. I am uncovering the truth, no matter how good, bad or ugly. I am ensuring the client has their legal right to an investigation. But deeper than that, my job allows me to understand why people do such terrible things. The heartbreaking thing is that lots of these crimes are preventable. In so many cases, there are times when the ball gets dropped and society doesn't intervene. A phone call isn't made, someone doesn't get medication, a child isn't taken away from its abusive parents. It's easy to judge in hindsight, but so much of this sadness needn't have happened.

I've never witnessed an execution. I wouldn't put myself through it. But the longer I do this work, the more I understand why people support the death penalty. I can see why, if someone's family member was killed, they would

want that person, in turn, to be killed. But I do remain opposed to it. If a client is serving life without any chance of parole, they're never getting out. It allows the victims' families the chance to try and move on and heal the best they can. Putting someone on death row only ensures that those families will go through the trauma over and over again in the courtroom, because the appeals are endless.

To call these men monsters is an oversimplification of who they really are and what they did. People can commit monstrous acts, but does that make them monsters? I don't know. The people I work with are often surprisingly human. I think we struggle to recognise that humanity, without feeling we are diminishing the horror of their acts. But I believe we can recognise both.”

**The Enchanted** by Rene Denfeld (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £12.99) is published on 13 March

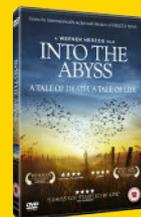
## LIFE ON DEATH ROW

*State execution is a rich source for books and films. Here are three of the strongest*



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This most unlikely love affair between a prison guard and the widow of the prisoner he led to the electric chair is a dark but powerful watch. (£2.99, amazon.co.uk)