

'The Man Who Emptied Death Row: Governor George Ryan and the Politics of Crime' by James L. Merriner

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The Man Who Emptied Death Row: Governor George Ryan and the Politics of Crime

By James L. Merriner

Southern Illinois University Press, 240 pages, \$29.95

At the outset of "The Man Who Emptied Death Row," his biography of George Ryan, James L. Merriner astutely identifies the challenge faced by a writer trying to chronicle the life and political career of the now-imprisoned former governor: reconciling "a petty and ruthless grafter who was also a moral entrepreneur against capital punishment..."

By the end, Merriner excuses none of Ryan's well-documented corruption, but seems to come down on the side of the man who, in his last days in office, estranged from his own party and a target of federal prosecutors, refocused the nation's long-running debate over capital punishment by pardoning four Death Row inmates and commuting the sentences of all the others.

But to get there the reader must endure what feels like a rehash of Ryan's well-known political career and eventual downfall. Ryan's beginnings as a small-town pharmacist. His deliberate climb up the ladder of state politics to the governor's mansion. His trial, conviction and prison sentence that may leave him to die behind bars. All without revelations that might drive a reader through this book.

"The Man Who Emptied Death Row" reads little differently from the deep coverage of Ryan's career by Chicago's newspapers and lacks the dramatic and tragic arc that the story holds.

To be sure, Ryan is no easy subject. Although he agreed to speak with Merriner, the charges at his trial were off-limits. And because he is not by nature an introspective man, or at least one who can or cares to articulate any emotions, Ryan in the end is of little help to the author, except for some tired anecdotes about the many political and legislative deals he helped to craft, or the ordinary people he aided.

What's more, there is little sense that Merriner plumbed Ryan's motivations through those closest to him, other than former Gov. James Thompson, whose law firm provided Ryan's multimillion-dollar trial defense at no cost, and a handful of other Illinois politicians.

Instead, Merriner spends far too much time on Ryan's months-long federal corruption trial without a behind-the-scenes look at it. There is little if anything we did not already know.

For a book that suggests it is about Ryan's work on the death penalty, that fascinating aspect of Ryan's career is handled far too briefly and with too little reward for the reader.

Merriner does ask the question that many observers asked: Was Ryan's stance on capital punishment just a way to deflect attention from his legal troubles? The author concludes Ryan's commutations were a genuine response to his discomfort at having to be the last gatekeeper before an inmate's execution, particularly when the system was so prone to error.

But Merriner fails to dig deeper, to examine how Ryan was influenced by the law professors and others at Northwestern University's Center on Wrongful Convictions, and how his struggle over whether to commute all the state's death sentences overwhelmed the governor's staff in those final days.

Merriner also makes some simple factual errors. At one point, he says the Tribune investigated the death penalty case involving Steve Manning for a January 1999 series. The Manning case, in fact, was part of the newspaper's November 1999 investigation of Illinois' capital punishment system.

There is a great human drama in Ryan's life and career. A story with real sweep. As one of the reporters who investigated the state's death penalty and Ryan's handling of it for the Tribune, I have eagerly awaited a penetrating look at the man who left such a lasting mark on that troubled system.

Sadly, "The Man Who Emptied Death Row" is not that book.

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