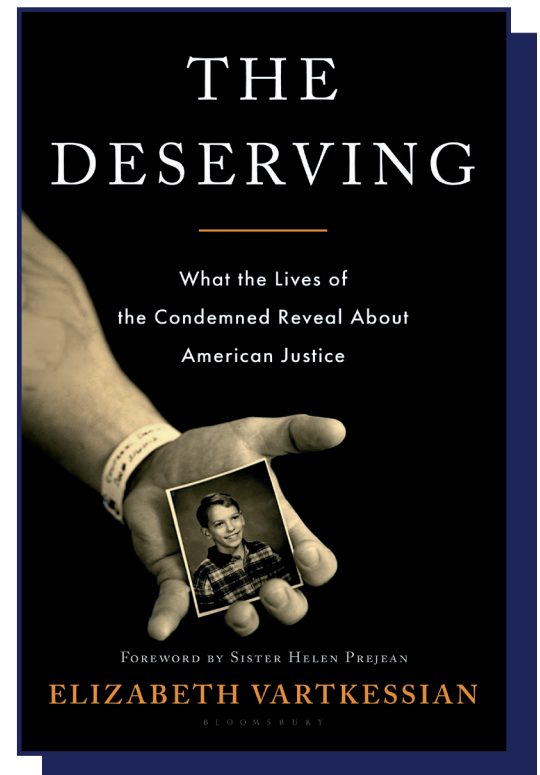




The Deserving by Elizabeth Vartkessian

Questions for Discussion

1. In the foreword to *The Deserving*, Sister Helen Prejean writes that human dignity is “inviolable” and central to justice (pp. xi–xiv). How do you personally define dignity, mercy, and justice, and how do those definitions influence the way you read the stories in this book?
2. The book’s cover image features an incarcerated man holding a childhood photograph of himself. What does this juxtaposition evoke for you? How does it shape your understanding of the question: How does a child become an adult condemned to prison?
3. Early in the book, Vartkessian writes that “the less you know about someone, the easier it is to cause them harm” (p. 15). What forms of othering—across race, class, disability, mental illness, or immigration status—make it easier to distance ourselves from certain people? Who is most vulnerable to this erasure?
4. As we learn more about Edward’s mother, Maria, we begin to see the layers of trauma and constraint shaping her life (chapter 1). Do you blame Maria for the harms Edward experienced? Do you see her as a victim? How does her story illuminate the generational nature of trauma?
5. Vartkessian often hears people say, “your clients had a choice” (p. 13). What do you think people mean when they insist on individual choice in cases of violence? How does the book complicate the idea that choice is freely available to everyone?
6. How does the book’s exploration of “choice” take on new meaning when applied specifically to Edward and Maria? Considering Maria’s migration story, the violence she endured, her economic precarity, and Edward’s childhood within those constraints, do you believe either of them ever had meaningful choices?



7. Much of the early narrative explores how trauma shapes cognition, survival strategies, and decision-making long before a crime occurs (pp. 14–15, 27). How did this information affect your understanding of responsibility, agency, or accountability?
8. Sexual violence appears again and again across the book—in Edward’s upbringing, in Maria’s history, in Connor’s devastating abuse by a trusted adult, and in the life of the woman George was convicted of killing. What does the prevalence of sexual violence in both the lives of the condemned and their victims reveal about the environments and systems that shape these outcomes? Did reading these accounts shift or deepen your understanding of how early sexual trauma influences later behavior?
9. One juror, Roger, insists he can identify a “killer” just by looking at him. What does this belief reveal about stereotypes, fear, and the stories we tell ourselves about danger? Where do you see this assumption reflected in media or public discourse today?
10. What surprised you most about the work of mitigation—its purpose, its methodology, or the depth of investigation required? How does understanding this profession alter your view of how trials and sentencing actually unfold?
11. Vartkessian describes her work as tracing “every system” that has touched a client’s life—education, housing, healthcare, policing, foster care, and more (pp. 11–12). Which systems stood out to you as particularly influential, and what patterns did you notice across different stories?
12. The book presents trauma not only as personal, but as inherited—culturally, environmentally, and even biologically, through emerging research on epigenetics (pp. 28–29). How does this perspective shift your thinking about blame, punishment, or prevention?
13. Throughout the book, Vartkessian emphasizes that many clients grew up in environments that did not foster safety, attachment, or opportunity. What do you think a society owes its children? What childhood experiences and conditions appear repeatedly across the stories told here?
14. Did any individual story in the book shift your emotional or moral understanding of people who have committed violent crimes? Was there a moment that changed your thinking?
15. The young woman George was convicted of killing is described as bone-thin, addicted, living in the same high-rise, and also a product of profound neglect. How does learning these details complicate your understanding of the crime? What does it say that nearly nothing about her was preserved in the record?
16. Teresa—George’s mother—appears only in fragments, yet her exhaustion, instability, and lack of support clearly shaped his childhood. How does her story parallel Maria’s? How does generational trauma look similar or different across the two families?

17. Across multiple cases, Vartkessian observes that death row inmates—and sometimes their victims—come from the same neighborhoods, schools, housing projects, and even the same zip codes. In a country where so few people are ever sentenced to death, what does it suggest that these sentences cluster so intensely in certain places? What does this geographic concentration reveal about structural violence or targeted neglect?
18. During one mitigation investigation interview, a teacher tells Vartkessian that she allowed her students to quietly hand over their illegal weapons—no judgment, no punishment—just so they could feel safe enough to learn. What does this moment reveal about the reality her students were navigating? How does it reshape your understanding of “school safety”? What do you think teachers should be expected to manage in communities where kids arrive already in survival mode?
19. Vartkessian cites Esther Perel’s insight that “you cannot play, take risks, or be creative when you don’t have a minimum of safety . . . survival requires limiting feelings of agony or ecstasy” (pp. 91–92). How does this idea help you understand the children and adults in this book—especially those who grew up in constant danger? What gets lost when a person learns to live entirely in survival mode, and how might that shape their behavior long before the criminal legal system ever enters their life?
20. Connor’s story contains some of the book’s most devastating accounts of childhood sexual violence, including abuse by adults who were supposed to protect him. How did learning the details of Connor’s early experiences shape your understanding of his later behavior? What does his story reveal about the way sexual violence distorts a child’s sense of safety, attachment, and self? And how does Connor’s trauma complicate the line between victim and perpetrator in conversations about accountability?
21. The book implicitly raises a profound question: What do we want punishment to do? Should the justice system be primarily about retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, safety, healing—or something else entirely? How did the stories in this book challenge or reinforce your beliefs about the purpose of punishment, especially in the context of the death penalty and life without the opportunity of parole sentences?