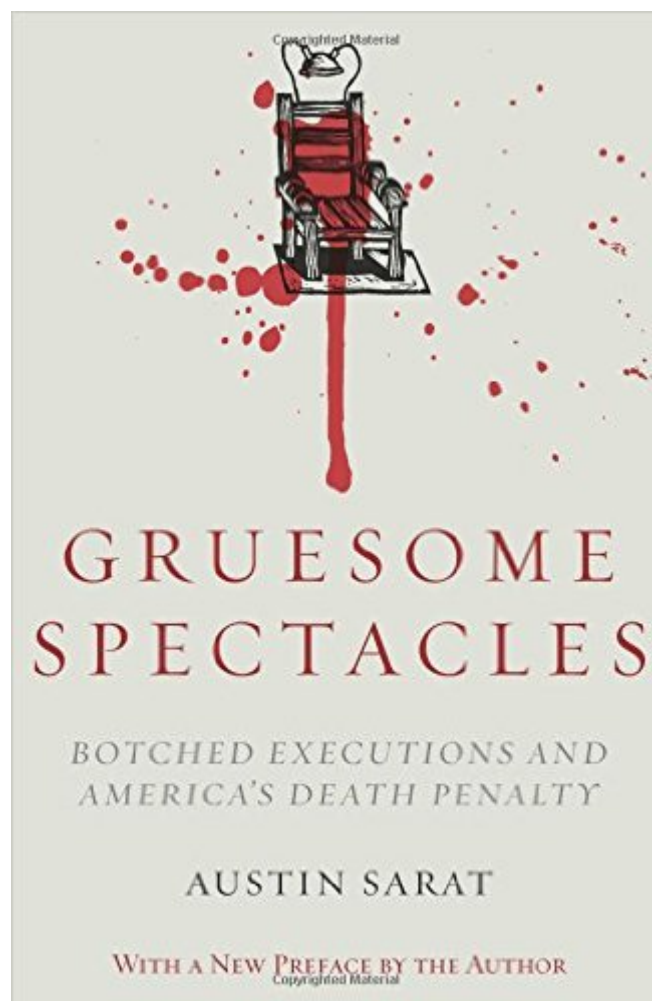


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# Gruesome Spectacles: Botched Executions And America's Death Penalty



## Synopsis

Gruesome Spectacles tells the sobering history of botched, mismanaged, and painful executions in the U.S. from 1890 to the present. Since the book's initial publication in 2014, the cruel and unusual executions of a number of people on death row, including Clayton Lockett in Oklahoma and Joseph Wood in Arizona, have made headlines and renewed vigorous debate surrounding the death penalty in America. Austin Sarat's book instantly became an essential resource for citizens, scholars, and lawmakers interested in capital punishment—even the Supreme Court, which cited the book in its recent opinion, *Glossip v. Gross*. Now in paperback, the book includes a new preface outlining the latest twists and turns in the death penalty debate, including the recent galvanization of citizens and leaders alike as recent botched executions have unfolded in the press. Sarat argues that unlike in the past, today's botched executions seem less like inexplicable mishaps and more like the latest symptoms of a death penalty machinery in disarray. *Gruesome Spectacles* traces the historical evolution of methods of execution, from hanging or firing squad to electrocution to gas and lethal injection. Even though each of these technologies was developed to "perfect" state killing by decreasing the chance of a cruel death, an estimated three percent of all American executions went awry in one way or another. Sarat recounts the gripping and truly gruesome stories of some of these deaths—stories obscured by history and to some extent, the popular press.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Intriguing historical accounts provide the context for current events - a great choice for everyone wishing to be well informed. This is a timely text that manages to remain neutral on a controversial topic while still providing plenty of very readable content. Whatever your stance on the death

penalty, this is a must read.

Publication of this thought-provoking and challenging account could not have been timelier given the recent headlines reporting the "horrific" execution of Clayton Lockett in Oklahoma. The book questions the legitimacy of capital punishment in the United States given a 3 to 7 percent rate of gruesomely botched executions. It carefully records the various complications experienced with executions whether by hanging, electrocution, gas or lethal injection, and emphasizes that botched executions have accompanied each supposed technological "enhancement" to method. Anyone contemplating the future of the death penalty in our changing times should read Sarat's book and ask themselves if it is ever acceptable for a society to risk the gruesome spectacle of a botched execution.

No book can adequately express the horror of state sanctioned killing. This book tries but pictures are worth a 1000 words and for the squeamish there are none. What is here is a fascinating and scholarly approach to our barbaric customs and rituals. The author explains that the rituals are of recent origin starting in the middle of the 19th Century. The middle class was first coming in to its own and sought to demonstrate a moral superiority over the lower classes by distinguishing themselves from the "common mob". To appeal to this set of voters Governments began experimenting with more "painless" methods of killing (none work). Other cosmetic touches including doing away with "public" executions, forbidding pictures or any other method of recording the barbarity and putting the killing behind prison walls were all designed to take the "heat off the official killers, and turn the scrutiny, not on the killing itself but rather on the process, the crime details and the imagined "retributive" benefits when an execution takes place. As Mr. Sarat and his team of researchers show the State has a stake (pardon the expression) in these sanctified killings. Politicians fall over each other to show that they are "tough" on crime and criminals. But the key question that Sarat and his team wanted answered was whether an execution benefitted the penalty proponents or their opposition. Until we end state sanctioned killing the question will remain unanswered.

Although a bit dry in some instances, descriptions of botched executions and desperate prisoners literally fighting their captives to stave off their deaths were at once chilling and sobering. This text also did a fair job of detailing the miserable childhoods and legal troubles of those who succumbed. Reading about a prisoner's violent crimes and seeing his mugshot on TV or in the paper elicits little

sympathy for the pains they suffered during their executions, but reading accounts of some of the condemneds' abuse (including one man who suffered such severe brain damage after shooting both a policeman and himself in their head, whereupon he suffered severe mental breakdown and could not have comprehended either why he was in jail or why he would be executed) was an low-power....to say the least.

This book raises some really important questions about the death penalty and its meaning in a civilized first world country. Sarat draws from historical cases and philosophical texts on power, justice, and sovereignty to problematize the moral and ethical conditions for the state killing its own. In presenting these cases, Sarat does a fair job of trying to remain objective and fair, though the questions he asks somewhat allude to his position--a position I personally agree with. This book is clearly written and accessible without compromising the complexity of the issues being addressed. A delightful read.

A vivid and unsparing history of the Death Penalty told in blood and burnt flesh. And while you can't miss the scream for abolition silently building behind its dispassionate surface, Sarat and his co-authors are after something more ambitious - an examination of how our culture struggles to maintain a coherent understanding of itself, how it tortures language and constructs specious conceptions of pain to avoid facing the fundamental incompatibility of the Constitution's prohibition of state cruelty and the business of state killing.

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