

# Riveting best seller is sleek thriller on screen

By Gerri Pare  
Catholic News Service

A novice lawyer walks a tightrope when he discovers his clients are mobsters and the FBI wants him to deliver the goods on them in *The Firm* (Paramount).

Recruited by prestigious Wall Street law firms, callow Mitch (Tom Cruise) can't refuse the more lucrative offer from a small Memphis firm specializing in tax law — and secretly laundering money for a Mafia family.

Soon after, however, the FBI warns him the mob is their chief client and he will undoubtedly be indicted along with the firm's corrupt lawyers if he doesn't cooperate by copying their incriminating files.

Just quitting the firm is not an option. No one ever left — alive. But copying the files — just as risky — would mean automatic disbarment for violating client confidentiality and having to start a phony, undercover life with his wife (Jeanne Tripplehorn) under the uncertain safety of the witness protection program.

As he stalls to find a way out of this morass, the firm begins to suspect him, the feds pump up the pressure and his

wife takes a walk. Director Sydney Pollack takes firm control of John Grisham's riveting best seller and turns in a sleek, taut thriller with only minor plot problems.

This is truly an actors' film. Cruise delivers a fine, lean performance at the movie's center, but viewers are also in for a treat from a terrific supporting cast.

As Mitch's mentor, Gene Hackman blends corruption and redemption in a crafty interpretation of the story's most intriguing character.

Not on the screen long enough, Gary Busey still makes a splash as the cagey ex-con turned private investigator — not to be outdone by Holly Hunter as his saucy secretary. David Strathairn, playing Mitch's jailbird brother, adds dry, wry humor to his every scene.

Sinister firm security head Wilford Brimley and frustrated FBI agent Ed Harris round out the untrustworthy characters Mitch must circumvent.

On the downside, Mitch's moves to play both ends against the middle are sometimes confusingly rendered. The climax, too, is less convincing than the novel's denouement — although tension is not sacrificed, thanks to convincing performances.



Tom Cruise (right) and Gene Hackman star in the legal thriller, *The Firm*.

Visuals are crisp as they jump around from Boston to Memphis, the nation's capital and the Caribbean over the course of a long two-and-a-half-hour running time.

The moral of Mitch nearly being done in by his typically '80s yuppie materialism is clouded by the pat resolution of his personal and professional problems.

Yet, for nifty summer escapism, *The Firm* looks to be keeping company with more than one mob.

Due to brief violence, some sexual innuendo and intermittent rough language, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.



Jeanne Tripplehorn stars as Abby McDeere in *The Firm*.

# Timely book offers ominous message on death penalty

*Dead Man Walking. An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*, by Helen Prejean, CSJ; Random House (New York, N.Y.); 278 pages; \$21.

By Father John J. Philipps  
Guest contributor

The late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall once remarked that "informed public opinion" about the death penalty was, in fact, anything but informed. "The American people," he said, "are largely unaware of the information critical to a judgment on the morality of the death penalty ... if they were better informed, they would consider it shocking, unjust, and unacceptable." Studies from the Yale Law School empirically tested the "Marshall hypothesis" and found it correct.

Sister Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking* provides that information in a gripping story about her experience as spiritual adviser to two convicted murderers sentenced to be executed by the State of Louisiana. What began

as a simple agreement to become a pen pal to death-row prisoners became for Sister Prejean an apostolate, a vocation, a cause, a passion — first, for the abolition of capital punishment, and then for the support of families of murdered children.

Her fast-moving narrative describes her visits to prisoners on death row, her involvement and confrontations with the prison establishment and legal systems, and vivid, if gruesome, depictions of the "death house" and eyewitness accounts of death by electrocution.

But in no place does the sister/author come across as a soft-on-crime "bleeding heart liberal." She can be tough in her conversations with her doomed clients, even in their last moments of life before their walk to the death chamber, as she helps them to see and acknowledge the heinousness of their crimes and the pain they have inflicted upon the families of their victims. At the same time, however, she enables them to discover their dignity as human beings.

Sister Prejean skillfully weaves into her story not only the arguments against the discriminatory and expensive death penalty, but many insights into capital punishment's history from biblical times to the present, some of the more notable miscarriages of justice in carrying it out, court rulings, and methods of executions.

"Kings and Popes and military generals and heads of state have killed, claiming God's authority and God's blessing," she writes. "I do not believe in such a God. If I were to be murdered, I would not want my death avenged. Especially by the government — which can't be trusted to control its own bureaucrats or collect taxes equitable or fill a pothole, much less decide which of its citizens to kill."

Perhaps the most suspenseful pages for this reviewer were those that tell of her encounters with the victims' families. She struggles in dealing with the anger, the vengeance, the deep-seated hate, and the frank, brutal resentment they hold against herself and her co-workers ("sob sisters" for "befriend-

ing" their children's murderers). And Sister Prejean becomes not only an eloquent advocate for abolishing the death penalty but also for the support of murdered children's parents.

*Dead Man Walking* is a timely book. With the grim prospect of efforts to restore the death penalty in New York each year, with the empty rhetoric of "tough-on-crime" politicians, with the resurgence of the falsehood and absurdity that we can reduce violence and killing with more violence and killing, our state legislators and would-be legislators — and those who elect them to office — would do well to hear this fascinating story's ominous message.

Father Philipps is pastor of St. Bridget/St. Joseph Church in East Bloomfield.

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