

Book Review: Robert J. Norris, *Exonerated: A History of the Innocence Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781479886272 (Hardcover). 288 Pages. \$25.99.

Reviewed by Brittany A. Wood¹

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In the book, *Exonerated: A History of the Innocence Movement*, Robert J. Norris builds a collective history that showcases the difficult journey of the innocence movement. The innocence movement focuses on the wrongful convictions of offenders within the criminal justice system and provides platforms for improvement within that system. Robert J. Norris, a professor who recently joined George Mason University in the Fall of 2018, is a researcher whose background includes examinations of wrongful convictions, public opinion, and criminal admissions. He holds a Ph.D. from the School of Criminal Justice at SUNY. Norris' book provides one of the first historical reflections of how the innocence movement has come to play a critical role in highlighting the problems surrounding wrongful convictions.

The author begins the book by providing a background of early wrongful convictions and provides an in-depth discussion of the very first organization that tackled the subject of exoneration. Readers are introduced to the topic with a look back at the criminal justice system before current reforms or regulations were established. Norris (2017), in a previous article, argued that wrongful convictions and death under these circumstances has been going on for close to 200 years. Readers are given a glimpse of how exonerations were attempted before the

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actual creation of an organization to fight for innocence. Once readers absorb the historical background of cases (examples include the Sacco and Vanzetti case and the “Hurricane” Carter case), they are provided with a breakdown of how the book will examine the delicate issue of wrongful convictions. Norris separates the book into two parts: narratives that explain the creation of the innocence movement and the social movement of the concept. In the conclusion, the author analyses the problems surrounding the innocence movement going forward and offers solutions to problems that may arise in the future.

The author also moves into one of the biggest components of the innocence movement: DNA. DNA did not jump to the forefront of the movement until the last part of the 1980s—upon its discovery by Sir Alec Jeffreys. Interestingly, Centurion Ministries, one of the first organizations to tackle wrongful convictions did not focus on capital punishment cases. The two most important names that the author references in the book are Peter Neufeld and Barry Scheck, who are responsible for founding The Innocence Project in 1992. The Innocence Project is the organization that was created to focus on wrongful convictions in capital punishment cases. While the author makes it clear that these two men had plenty of influence from Centurion Ministries, he does make distinct references to the differences between their focuses.

The author begins the third chapter of the book, still included in Part I, with the history of the innocence movement becoming an awakening for the public. There book has wonderful narratives which capture the human component of wrongful conviction cases. The lack of compassion is one thing the author contributes to the resistance of the innocence movement. Norris and his colleagues say that without a face, there was no way to make the public aware of how dire the need for the innocence movement was for the criminal justice system. The author supports the claims that had the first conference involving exonerees in Chicago not happened, the innocence movement would not have gained momentum. The testimonials mentioned in the chapter are moving, and they leap from each page, as though the reader is actually in the presence of the conference listening to the exonerees cry and struggle with the idea of justice in a free society. Norris is quick to point out that it is the people involved with the movement that make it significant, and he contributes that element to its success.

Part II of the book moves into the social aspect of the movement. The author again provides an in-depth discussion of relevant criminal cases (such as *Miranda v. Arizona*) to illustrate the need for reform within the system. The author, once again, brings up the importance of DNA in

connection with the overturn of a wrongful conviction. In this portion of the book, the author discusses the background of the advocates that joined the fight to combat wrongful conviction. According to Konvisser and Werry (2017), individuals are participating in such activities of reform in order to engage an active example of how to correct injustice. Norris asserts that about three-fourths of cases submitted to innocence organizations are turned down, but the important element that roots the movement are the narratives that are involved with each case that is accepted. The author rejects the notion that narratives alone can put reform into action. Simply, Norris believes that it is a combination of elements: advocates, players, narratives, public opinion, and the political environment that can push reform. He transitions into a deeper issue, one of the most controversial topics involving the innocence movement, civil rights. In *Exonerated: A History of the Innocence Movement*, it is clear the author does not agree that this movement is even close to that of a civil rights movement. Instead, Norris looks at it as an extension of a social movement that is needed to reform criminal justice policies. The author reminds the reader that criminal convictions are not easily overturned. There is a very complicated and often lengthy process to the overturning of a wrongful conviction.

Norris begins his conclusion portion of the book with the challenges that lay ahead for the movement. While reminding readers of the success of the movement (the creation and the players involved), he points out that improving the system has only started. The author states that there is still much resistance toward the innocence movement. While there are political figures, such as, former Illinois Governor, George Ryan, who support the innocence movement, there is still much resistance that must be overcome to enact policy reform and garner overwhelming support for the innocence movement. Norris contends that the public (including students) should become more involved with exonerating innocent people who have been wrongfully convicted. He also reminds readers that different avenues are now needed for the movement to grow. Social media is now the new outlet and should be utilized by the movement to gather support, inform the public, and aid in the movement's growth. The author calls for more public outcry for the movement to receive attention. One of the biggest obstacles the movement faces is the lack of faith that wrongful convictions are happening. Norris argues that most people believe this to be a myth. The author asserts that while the real number or

percentage of wrongful convictions may never be known, it is the responsibility of the public to voice their concerns.²

Norris closes his book with a discussion about the decline of DNA exonerations. Readers should understand that DNA exonerations exclude federal cases listed on the Innocence Project website (Findley 2017). The author was previously cautioned about the decline by his colleague. The decline of DNA usage on post-conviction cases will have an impact on the movement. Norris states that the organizations and the people involved must be able to adapt to the changing social and political environment. There is currently a climate of political and social resistance to change which produces a lack of protection against wrongful convictions (Acker 2017). Nevertheless, the author assures the reader that the movement will not vanish soon.

Exonerated: A History of the Innocence Movement is a riveting book filled with narratives that will make readers question their viewpoints and begin to think about the reforms needed to protect the innocent. This book is a must-read for researchers, students, as well as anyone else interested in wrongful convictions and policy reform.

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² It is believed that around 20,000 individuals sit, innocently, behind bars out of the over 2,000,000 people serving time (Kent & Carmichael 2015).