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# The Last Execution

By Jesper Wung-Sung



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Called “brilliantly devastating” in a starred review from *Kirkus Reviews*, this award-winning, mesmerizing novel, based on the chilling true story of the last execution in Denmark’s history, asks a question that plagues a small Danish town: does a fifteen-year-old boy deserve to be put to death?

On February 22, 1853, a fifteen-year-old Niels Nelson is prepared to be executed on Gallows Hill.

The master carpenter comes to measure Niels for his coffin.

The master baker bakes bread for the spectators.

The messenger posts the notice of execution in the town square.

The poet prepares his best pen to record the events as they unfold.

A fly, Niels’s only companion in the cell, buzzes.

A dog hovers by his young master’s window.

A young girl hovers too, pitying the boy.

The executioner sharpens his blade.

This remarkable, wrenching story is told with the alternating perspectives of eleven different bystanders—one per hour—as the clock ticks ever closer to the moment when the boy must face his fate. Niels Nielson, a young peasant, was sentenced to death by beheading on the dubious charges of arson and murder. Does he have the right to live despite what he is accused of? That is the question the townsfolk ask as the countdown begins. With strong social conscience, piercing intellect, and masterful storytelling, Jesper Wung-Sung explores the age-old question: who determines who has the right to live or die?



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## The Last Execution By Jesper Wung-Sung Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Gr 10 Up—This fictionalization of the tragic life of Niels Nelson, 15, who was executed for arson and murder in Denmark in 1853, is startlingly grim. Before being convicted of murder and sentenced to death, Niels lives a marginal existence with his homeless and ailing father. When authorities drag Dad to a poorhouse, he urges Niels to run—so he does. But survival is even tougher alone, leading to a barn fire and a wrongful accusation of arson. The murder charge, however, is true: Niels admits that, in a rage, he killed a sheriff's son with a rock, although not intentionally. Each chapter alternates perspectives from different characters in the village; the hands of a clock move an hour closer to execution in each successive chapter heading. Trapped in his cell, Niels befriends a fly—who sympathizes with the teen—but who is, after all, just a fly. Gallows Hill, the location of the execution, is in the author's hometown of Svendborg, Denmark, in the neighborhood of his sons' school: a chilly reminder of a painful history. VERDICT There may be a place for this short novel in a discussion about capital punishment.—Georgia Christgau, Middle College High School, Long Island City, NY  
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Unknown

This haunting slip of a novel reflects on the final day of a 15-year-old boy slated for execution. Like a refrain, each chapter begins by counting down the hours until Niels' beheading for "arson and the murder of the sheriff's little son with a stone." The lyrical text then meanders, sometimes through Niels' mind and recollections, sometimes through the thoughts of other townsfolk connected to the execution. The baker prepares raisin bread to sell to the crowd on Gallows Hill; the messenger posts the official notice of execution; the master carpenter takes measurements for the coffin; the priest tries to save the boy's soul; the poet scribbles impressions of the morbid scene. Popular Danish YA author Wung-Sung embroiders upon the true story of the last execution performed in Svendborg, thereby offering a fascinating glimpse into the city in 1853. The mix of poetry and prose with shifting perspectives, all told beneath the looming shadow of death, is reminiscent of Masters' Spoon River Anthology. As Niels' story gently unfurls, readers come to know the unfortunate—but undeniably guilty—boy. His harsh, itinerant life with his father, his dreams of seeing the winding Mississippi River—these things enrich the tale and prick the conscience. Was his death truly justice served? Thought-provoking and beautifully written, Niels' plight will linger well beyond the page. (Booklist STARRED review February 15, 2016)

In the hours before his 1853 public execution, both the young Dane slated to die and various community members reflect on the nature of the punishment, highlighting the social, ethical, and even economic impacts of such displays. With only hours left to live, 15-year-old Niels' final reflections are so strangely calm, so devoid of anger and fear, that readers may at first assume his acceptance signifies guilt. However, the gentle lyricism with which he recalls the love he shared with his father—in spite of their homelessness and desperate fears of workhouse imprisonment—becomes a powerfully stark reminder of the brutality of his current situation. And while readers understand that his role in the sheriff's son's death is undeniable, the carefully paced reveals of the specific circumstances leading up to the fatal incident ultimately suggest Niels' greatest crime might simply have been poverty. Interrupting Niels' reflections are chapters showcasing the townspeople, who primarily demonstrate condemnation of Niels but also curiosity, occasionally sorrow, and even excitement about the very public spectacle of his gruesome death. These vignettes effectively suggest that the town's quest for justice and closure has, in reality, turned many citizens into beings far more monstrous than Niels himself. Altogether, it's an incredibly moving, harrowing, and thought-provoking look at the historical connections between poverty and injustice, made all the more frightening because of the novel's

relevance to current social issues. Brilliantly devastating. (Historical fiction. 14 & up) (Kirkus, STARRED REVIEW 1/15/16)

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This relentlessly bleak Danish import imagines the last day of a real-life execution victim, the last (in 1853) to suffer that fate in the town of Svendborg, Denmark. Various townspeople cross his path—the messenger who posts the execution notices for the public event, the priest charged with extracting a final confession, the carpenter who measures him for a coffin—and their unsettled observations are brief windows into the world that led the fifteen-year-old boy to his crime (murdering the sheriff's young son) and his fate. Each views the tragedy through the filter of his own self-interest: the baker gripes that the mayor won't let him raise the price of bread (starving the poor, he believes, would be a cheaper way to execute criminals), while the poet attempting to set the boy's final moments to verse hopes to find romance at the event. Alongside the boy's interspersed memories of poverty, rejection, flight, loss, and finally rage, these sections reveal a society in which his fate is unremarkable and all the more tragic for it. There are some odd anachronisms in the translation (an impatient character wishes the executioner would "cut to the chase"), but all in all, the spare, detached narration suits the subject. Rich with symbolism, historical criticism, and contemporary resonance, this is an unflinching portrait of the barbarism of execution and the collective apathy of observers that the practice inspires. (The Horn Book March/April 2016)

This brief, philosophical novel explores the final public execution in Svendborg, Denmark in 1853 through various perspectives, allowing for a slow build of opinions and cultural leanings that come together to show a moment in history. The book moves through the final hours of the life of fifteen-year-old Niels, who is quietly facing his fate, focusing on his love for the father who tried all his life to keep him and his son safe and fed despite their homelessness. The story then includes narration by the baker (who will make quite a profit this day), the mayor (who is weary of his job, particularly parts like this), and even a fly who Niels imagines wants to be a companion and comfort in his cell. The author wisely dispenses with the facts pretty quickly, allowing for the circumstances of Niels' life to be the true focus, showing incontrovertibly how his death will be the only actual intended murder taking place. Teens tapped into the national discourse on capital punishment will doubtless find this intriguing discussion fodder, but regardless of their opinion on the death penalty, all will likely be haunted by defeated, damaged Niels who deserved so much better than an axe above his neck in front of those who judge him without any sympathy or context. The popular Danish author of this import (originally published in 2010) explains the background and provides a note about what the area looks like now. (BCCB March 2016)

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## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **David Barr:**

The book *The Last Execution* make you feel enjoy for your spare time. You can utilize to make your capable considerably more increase. Book can to get your best friend when you getting strain or having big problem with the subject. If you can make looking at a book *The Last Execution* to get your habit, you can get a lot more advantages, like add your personal capable, increase your knowledge about a few or all subjects. You can know everything if you like open and read a publication *The Last Execution*. Kinds of book are a lot of. It means that, science guide or encyclopedia or other individuals. So , how do you think about this guide?

#### **Arthur Bailey:**

Now a day individuals who Living in the era everywhere everything reachable by match the internet and the resources within it can be true or not call for people to be aware of each information they get. How people have to be smart in having any information nowadays? Of course the answer is reading a book. Studying a book can help folks out of this uncertainty Information especially this *The Last Execution* book as this book offers you rich information and knowledge. Of course the knowledge in this book hundred pct guarantees there is no doubt in it you know.

**Christopher Jaeger:**

The event that you get from The Last Execution is a more deep you searching the information that hide within the words the more you get interested in reading it. It doesn't mean that this book is hard to understand but The Last Execution giving you enjoyment feeling of reading. The article writer conveys their point in certain way that can be understood by means of anyone who read that because the author of this publication is well-known enough. This book also makes your own personal vocabulary increase well. Therefore it is easy to understand then can go with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We advise you for having that The Last Execution instantly.

**Allen Lutz:**

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