



American Mother, by Colum McCann with Diane Foley
(Bloomsbury, 2023)

Kylie Day

You may remember James Foley. He was a young American journalist who was kidnapped and held hostage while reporting on the war in Syria. After two years, members of ISIS executed him. To the horror of the world, they then uploaded photographs and footage of his beheading to social media. The image of James, kneeling in an orange jumpsuit in the desert in the moments before his execution, went viral and became iconic.

Diane Foley was his mother. When she received the first intimation of James' death, it was an ordinary Tuesday afternoon, and she was having coffee with her sister. She was about to prepare lunch and attend a celebration for her granddaughter's birthday. Diane is a committed Christian and she had prayed and worked hard for her son's safe return. Surely it couldn't be turning out this way. Her initial reaction was one of disbelief.

Seven years later, when the book opens, Diane is meeting with Alexandra Kotey, one of the group of men who murdered her son. When they meet, Alexandra has already pleaded guilty. In fact, he has pleaded guilty to eight counts of conspiring to murder James and three others. Each count will lead to a mandatory life sentence. As part of his plea bargain, Alexandra has agreed to speak with the families of his victims before sentencing. Diane is the first (perhaps the only) to say that she will meet him. She goes on to meet with Alexandra more than once, and for hours at a time.

This book is Diane's story. It describes how she, as a person of faith, navigated such a confronting and personal experience of evil. Precisely because she has taken the tenets of her faith so seriously, her journey is unexpected and inspiring. She is a great example of perseverance in the midst of suffering. Her decisions to meet Alexandra, to listen to him and to read his letters, and her compassion towards his wife and small daughters (stuck in a camp in Syria), are all gracious and extraordinary moments.

As Rachel Cooke wrote in The Guardian on the weekend (3 March):

“When critics talk of writerly daring, I’m pretty sure they don’t have in mind the kind of book in which the Holy Spirit is written about with no less conviction (or fuss) than the seasons, or a journey to an airport. But it is daring, isn’t it? If Christianity is the opposite of fashionable, devout Catholicism, at least for many liberals, is absolutely beyond the pale. ... I found her faith bracing, for the very reason that it’s unusual, and it’s also the scaffolding on which she balances ideas that should matter to us all: of compassion, of forgiveness, of understanding. ...

I’m very glad to have read it, especially at this moment, the news from Gaza bleak and unrelenting. There is consolation in these pages”

There is a lot to be learnt from this book about the difficult things that matter in life. To say that Diane’s wisdom has been hard earned is an understatement.

Read her story – it will amaze and encourage you with what is possible in the Lord.