Reviews of John D. Bessler’s Books
(as of January 2012)

Cruel and Unusual: The American Death Penalty
and the Founders’ Eighth Amendment
(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012)

“A searing indictment of capital punishment, this pioneering history of the Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause is destined to reframe America’s death penalty debate. As a definitive account of the Eighth Amendment’s origins and the Founding Fathers’ own ambivalent views on executions, it will forever change our perceptions of cruelty and penal reform in the founding era. This book, which exposes the brutality of state-sanctioned killing, is a must-read.”
–Sister Helen Prejean, author of Dead Man Walking and The Death of Innocents

“Bessler’s book reflects thorough research and understanding of the modern law of capital punishment, but his unique contribution to the literature is his historical scholarship. He avoids the unfortunate tendency of lawyers and legal authors to rely almost solely on case law, and he explores quite well key sources from philosophy, criminology, political science and history. Cruel and Unusual’s analysis of the documented meaning of the Eighth Amendment will be immediately significant to the ongoing challenges to the death penalty in courts and legislatures.”
–Victor L. Streib, professor and former dean, Ohio Northern University College of Law

“Cruel and Unusual is Bessler’s fourth book on the subject of executions and his most scholarly. It documents the United States’ complicated relationship with capital punishment from the time of the Founding Fathers through today and argues for its end.”
–Minnesota magazine

Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living
(Minneapolis: Bottlecap Books, 2007)

• Winner, Independent Publisher Book Award (Writing/Publishing)
• Silver, ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Award (Writing)
• Midwest Book Awards finalist (Reference/How-to)

“This has got to be one of the best books ever published on how to become a writer. How I wish I had had it before I ever sat down to write my book on drawing! From simple matters of paragraphing and punctuation to deep probes of what writing is and why we value it, John Bessler's book informs and inspires the new writer. He illuminates every point with quotations from our greatest authors, providing a rich feast of new and old thoughts on writing. For the person who longs to fulfill that uniquely human urge for self-expression in writing on whatever subject, this book is the place to start.”
–Dr. Betty Edwards, best-selling author of Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain and Drawing on the Artist Within
“Writing for Life is filled with wise counsel and sound advice. Reading John Bessler’s well-researched book will help those setting out on the writing trail reach their destination more surely.”

–Ralph Keyes, author of The Courage to Write and The Writer's Book of Hope

“Bessler’s book is part inspirational guide and part how-to manual for anyone who has ever encountered a blank page. He demystifies the writing process by breaking it down into manageable steps and offers would-be writers valuable techniques for improving both their writing and their enjoyment of it. He draws liberally upon the wisdom of the world’s best writers to inspire the everyday writer.”

–Minnesota magazine

“In Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living, two-time Minnesota Book Award finalist John D. Bessler succinctly demystifies the writing process by breaking down and illustrating each step of the process from pre-writing preparation to final publication. Writing for Life is a thoroughly ‘user friendly’ instruction guide covering all of the tools and expertise needed to improve anyone’s writing skills and abilities. Informed and informative, Writing for Life is also engaging and even inspiring. . . . Writing for Life is skillfully written, comprehensive, practical, and especially recommended for anyone who has an aversion to writing, as well as those seeking to improve the quality of their own written work.”

–Midwest Book Review

“In his inspiring and passionate book on writing, Bessler tackles the often intimidating subject like a true scholar and expert. . . . Think of the book as a more intellectual Bird by Bird. A writing bible that’s inspirational, honest, and beginner-friendly . . . .”

–Molly Priesmeyer, freelance writer

“Bessler . . . dispels the notion that writing is just for literary figures or professional writers and reveals the writing process as a thinking process, breaking down and illuminating each step, from pre-writing to publication. The book demystifies the writing process for beginners and experienced writers alike.”

–Reference & Research Book News

“Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living . . . takes us through a complete process of writing . . . but it's the substance within his chapters that makes one realize that this isn't just another book about writing.”

–North Dakota Quarterly

“Bessler’s book breaks down the writing process for people who think they can’t write or aren’t comfortable writing.”

–The Free Press (Mankato, Minn.)

“Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living, the fascinating new book by John Bessler, was published by Bottlecap Books. . . . Anyone who writes anything will love this book, especially discouraged writers, and who isn’t?”

–Carol Connolly, St. Paul, Minnesota’s Poet Laureate (Law and Politics)
“I was pleasantly surprised by John D. Bessler’s *Writing for Life: The Craft of Writing for Everyday Living* because, while it touches on the same topics that similar books touch upon, [it] does it with more depth and detail. . . . Using lots of interesting quotes from some of the great writers and offering helpful tips, the author meticulously discusses a long list of topics such as the importance of daily practice, perseverance, discipline, style, editing, polishing and revising, storytelling, and freewriting. He also writes about procrastination and writer's block—what it is and how to cure it. . . . [T]hese are the same topics that pop out in any writing book, but the difference here is that Bessler goes much deeper and examines the issues in more detail. . . . *Writing for Life* is a smart, insightful and sophisticated book. It is also well researched and would serve as a fine addition to any writer's reference bookshelf.”

–Mayra Calvani, *California Chronicle*

“Bully for Mr. Bessler! He’s written a well-argued brief for the craft and joy of writing . . . . His advice is both practical and persuasive. The jury of readers should adjourn fast to their notebooks with pencils poised to begin the adventure of writing clean, accurate, and literate prose because that’s what human beings do at their best.”

–Bill Holm, essayist, poet, and *A Prairie Home Companion* contributor

“This book gives readers the know-how and tools they need to write more effectively. This inspirational guide unlocks the secrets of the craft, excites readers about the possibilities of language, and will help both beginning and experienced writers alike better navigate the writing process.”

–*Writers’ Journal*

**Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota**

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003)

• 2004 Minnesota Book Award finalist

“The collective confusion of blood sacrifice for justice is the largely unacknowledged subtext of John D. Bessler’s history of lynching and execution in Minnesota. He also untangles the strange drift of Minnesota’s capital punishment laws, which can be summed up as a determined effort to sanitize state-sanctioned murder.”

–*City Pages*

“Scholars have devoted considerable attention to the history of violence in the South and in the West, but the collective violence that was also a significant part of the midwestern past has been left relatively unexamined. John D. Bessler’s meticulous chronicle of lynchings and legal executions in Minnesota helps to remedy this neglect.”

–*Michigan Historical Review*

“In *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota*, Minneapolis lawyer John D. Bessler sets forth with remarkable scholarship, clarity, and objectivity the history of Minnesota’s failed attempt to make peace with capital punishment.”

–*William Mitchell Law Review*
“John D. Bessler’s compelling and important history of execution by hanging in Minnesota . . . brings an unnerving relevance to the charged atmosphere of our times. . . . Well worth the read.” –Minnesota History

**Kiss of Death: America’s Love Affair with the Death Penalty**  
(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003)

“Bessler’s voice, language, style, and confidence are convincing, and make the book an effective indictment of our culture.” –Rain Taxi Review of Books

“Highly recommended”; “What sets his book apart is Bessler’s style and personal intensity.” –Library Journal

“Kiss of Death is well crafted, in a comfortable, anecdotal style. It presents a thoughtful, comprehensive assessment of capital punishment in the United States . . . .”  
–Minnesota Law & Politics

“Highly recommended”; “Bessler presents a passionate and concise case against the death penalty . . . .” –Choice

**Death in the Dark: Midnight Executions in America**  
(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997)  
• 1998 Minnesota Book Award finalist  
• Honorable Mention, Outstanding Books – The Gustavus Myers Program for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in North America

“Some of the best books about capital punishment as a legal and cultural phenomenon have been published in the past few years. *Death in the Dark* . . . belong[s] in that good company.”  
–Michael Mello, *The Nation*

“Hugo Bedau’s revised ‘The Death Penalty in America’ is a crash course in the subject—a clear guide through the mountainous research data and commentary on the constitutional and legal issues. John Bessler presents . . . arguments even more succinctly.” –The Economist

“*Death in the Dark* . . . is an extended and subtle argument for opening the execution process up to public scrutiny. . . . The book is addressed to lawyers, law students, and the legally sophisticated, but the discussion is easily accessible to a general public now familiar with legal technicalities from cases such as O.J. Simpson’s. . . . [I]t is a useful work for those teaching and learning within a variety of disciplines.”  
–Leigh B. Bienen, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*

“*Death in the Dark* will definitely cause one to ‘rethink’ the issues associated with capital punishment.” –Choice
“[H]istory is told exceptionally well in *Death in the Dark.*” – *St. Petersburg Times*

“Bessler’s arguments are not to be dismissed lightly.”
– *The Times Literary Supplement* (London)

“In view of the increasing politicization of capital punishment in the United States and the aggressive efforts by both federal and state governments to severely restrict the availability of post-conviction appeals to death row inmates, John Bessler’s recent examination of this age-old polemic comes at an opportune time. . . . For those who believe that the debate over capital punishment is either settled or passé, this book will prove enlightening. . . . Indeed, the book is persuasive and important, precisely because it is couched in the concrete language of actual policies impacting real lives. The book does not indulge in abstract ruminations about capital punishment, rather, it attempts to move us to action.”
– *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*

“Bessler . . . argues convincingly for reform of U.S. execution laws”; “he debunks common death penalty ‘myths’ and calls persuasively for a return to openness and accountability.”
– *Publishers Weekly*

“This chilling and well-argued work is highly recommended . . . .” – *Library Journal*