

## BOOK REVIEW

FLOOD OF LIES: THE ST. RITA'S NURSING HOME TRAGEDY. By James A. Cobb, Jr. Pelican Publishing, 2013. 320 pp.

*Reviewed by Vernon Valentine Palmer\**

This is a larger-than-life true story in which frail justice and simple truth triumph over overreaching government and prejudiced popular opinion. It is a gripping tale that takes the reader back into the vortex of Hurricane Katrina's devastating path, but more precisely back into the deadly aftermath of that tragedy when finger-pointing public officials searched for scapegoats and found them, incredibly, among the innocent victims themselves.

Enter James Cobb who comes to the defense of nursing-home operators Sal and Mabel Mangano, a decent, honest, hard-working couple now charged with the deaths of their thirty-five bed-ridden residents who drowned in the wall of water which engulfed their establishment when the federal levees broke. For failing to evacuate the inmates of the nursing home before Katrina struck, the Manganos are placed on trial for murder. In the media frenzy there are wild distortions of the facts and false rumors. Hardly anyone believes Sal and Mabel could be innocent. Clearly if the verdict is guilty, they will spend the rest of their lives behind bars. No one would want this case, except perhaps James Cobb, who has never tried a criminal case before.

How Cobb and his small defense team secured a not guilty verdict in a small courthouse in St. Francisville, opposed by an obsessed and powerful Attorney General, is both a feat of lawyering and a testament to the strength of the judicial system. Because all is related in an almost existential recitative flowing through Cobb's irreverent, amusing, and sometimes profane brain, the reader becomes an extension of the narrator's thought process, a confidante with a rare inside view of the unfolding drama, the dilemmas of the defense, the Louisiana personalities, the pain of the defendants and intrigue of the witnesses, not to mention some very interesting legal problems and insights along the way. The reader is privileged, as it were, to be inside David's calculating mind

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as he sizes up an armored, nine-foot Goliath, before taking out the frightening giant with a single blow.

For this reviewer, this superb book is a glaring reminder of what is often forgotten. Despite all the cynical lawyer jokes going around, lawyers have a noble and necessary role in society. Cobb's defense of Sal and Mabel ranks as one of those gallant and courageous acts of public service which few are actually prepared to make. It may not be as famous, but certainly it is not different in kind than John Adams' defense of the British in the Boston Massacre. It takes great courage to associate one's honor with the plight of the "obviously" guilty, when, as in the case of Sal and Mabel, they have been roundly demonized in the media, prejudged by the public and pilloried by an abuse of process. In many ways, *Flood of Lies* is about the highest calling of a lawyer and the very ends of professional responsibility. This reviewer has read many law books and many books about law, but he has not read a more uplifting and better-written book than this one. True, it is exciting in the sense of a screenplay, but it is something more than just a good story. It should be required reading for every entering law student in every law school in the United States.