

## OCCASION FOR THOUGHT

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*Thine Alabaster Cities Gleam* is an 818-page quartet about America's post World War II slide from global prominence into a pariah nation characterized by dishonesty, greed, incompetence and aggression. It was published recently by Doukathsan Press.

The quartet includes the new, final volume of law school Dean Lawrence R. Velvel's unsparing fictionalized memoir about what he terms a moral meltdown in both the legal profession and the nation at large. This fictionalized memoir is the work of the co-founder and dean of the Massachusetts School of Law (MSL) at Andover, a man "The National Jurist" has called "a modern day crusader" and "one of the most influential people in legal education over the past 15 years." Critics say Velvel's memoirs read like a novel.

There are several reasons why you probably have never read a book like Dean Lawrence Velvel's quartet. Like Siegfried Sassoon's work 80 years ago in *Memories Of An Infantry Officer*, Velvel's work is fundamentally all true, although identifying names and other details have been changed. Like the books of C.P. Snow in the '50s and '60s, Velvel's work presents truths applicable in any walk of life but does so in the context of a particular professional setting. Snow did this in the setting of government and English university life, Velvel does it in the setting of law schools and big law firms.

Velvel did not set out to emulate Sassoon and Snow, both of whom he has read extensively, but the result inevitably is similar, which makes his book different from most.

Velvel's book is also different because it is a memoir of a career. As critic Lorraine Adams said just a few years ago, "[t]here are extremely few memoirs of careers."

As well, Velvel's book is different from what you have read because, in the context of law schools and big law firms, he shows what America became in the last half of the twentieth century and continues to be today. It has become a place where dishonesty is rampant and disastrous, fake celebrityhood is worshipped, and competence and modesty take back seats. It is a place where, as Velvel puts it, "you can depend upon most people to do the wrong thing most of the time."

And because he is a lawyer with much experience in big cases, Velvel discusses and is unsparing towards the federal judiciary. He regards it as a group which intentionally fails

to protect crucial rights against the deprivations of the rich and powerful, to whom it is in many ways beholden and of which it is a part. His views will resonate with anyone who has ever been treated badly in any court, federal or state, e.g., the millions of people who have been treated shabbily in family law cases like divorces and child custody cases.

In the context of a career, in the setting of law schools and big law firms, and with crucial judicial events sometimes in the forefront, Velvel's book shows the moral and legal corruption that has become endemic in our society. Readers will find his points to be relevant to their own walks of life, from business and the professions to the educational world to government and politics. It is hard to imagine that any reader, whether a literary critic or the man in the street, will not see parallels within his or her own personal experience.

Velvel is also a reformer. Believing in traits that have too often been lost in our welter of systemic corruption (e.g., honesty, competence, diligence), he shows how a small group of working class people used those characteristics to advance in the world. Usually the first in their families to go to college, they created their own law school in order to go farther by becoming lawyers. They had to fight off brutal opposition from persons who were powerful in politics or law, but they succeeded by following principles that used to be aspirations in this country, before the corruption of the last half of the last century. Velvel's work shows that he would like to see those principles come to prevail again.

As Father Kurt Messick, an Indiana chaplain and one of Amazon's top reviewers put it, "Lawrence Velvel is a great storyteller...This quartet is the kind of series which compels the reader to keep reading...."

The paperback quartet may be purchased for \$18 from Amazon, from Ingram through local book stores, or directly from MSL at (978)-681-0800. "Thine Alabaster Cities Gleam" describes the experiences of the Chicago-born Velvel from his frat house days at the University of Michigan, where student cheating was endemic, to his work in the Department of Justice, as a law school professor who sued Presidents Johnson and Nixon over the Viet Nam war, in private practice litigating huge cases for large Washington law firms, and finally as co-founder of a law school whose affordable tuition gave minorities and working-class students entry into the legal profession.

Writing about the quartet's first volume, "Misfits in America," historian Howard Zinn said Velvel "delivers a scathing critique, based on personal experience, of the pretense and corruption that pervades the world of academe, of law schools, and the legal profession...Coming from a dean of a law school, this bold refusal to 'play ball,' to 'play it safe' is especially refreshing."

Describing both the narrower and broader aspects of Velvel's work, Amazon reviewer Daniel Jolley adds, Velvel "attempts to show what has gone terribly wrong in the American legal system in the latter half of the twentieth-century and how the problem has spread throughout American culture." His work "gives us crooked lawyers, business scandals of the worst sort, judges who ignore their constitutional duties, a government

that can no longer be trusted, and presidents who commit immoral acts and ‘lawyer’ their way out of them when they get caught.”

As Velvel puts it in “Misfits” when describing his protagonist, a lawyer who had been rebuffed in attempts to achieve reform: “It was only then that he finally knew in his gut, where it really counts, not just in his head, where it does not, that most people, most of the time, do not care a whit for social justice, care only about betterment of their own selfish interests, are impervious to reason no matter how objectively persuasive it may be, and will dissemble or sometimes even lie outright at the drop of a hat.”

Velvel adds, “You can depend on most people to do the wrong thing most of the time. Velvel, 67, devotes part of his fictionalized memoir to the bitter, decade-long fight of the fledgling “North New England Law School”(NNLS) for accreditation by the “U.S. Bar Association”(USBA), a veritable guild for law school professors to inflate their salaries, reduce their work hours, and thus price law school tuition beyond the reach of working-class and minority students. Because NNLS refuses to “play ball,” it never does get the USBA’s blessing but several State governments, including Massachusetts, allow NNLS graduates to take bar exams and 85% pass.

NNLS also strikes back by inspiring the Department of Justice to bring a case against the USBA’s monopolist practices. USBA signs a consent decree in which it promises to change, but by the use of its political power it insures that most of the decree’s provisions are meaningless and it reneges on most of those that are meaningful. Observes Professor Jules Lobel, of the University of Pittsburgh Law School, of the third volume (“The Hopes and Fears of Future Years: Loss and Creation”), “This terrific book tells the captivating tale of a group of dedicated people who wage a determined and heroic struggle against the odds to create a law school serving working people.”

How closely the quartet parallels reality may be inferred by preface quotations from John Langbein, Sterling Professor of Law and Legal History at Yale Law School, who states, “I tell no secrets when I mention that modern American law schools are obliged to be part of an accreditation cartel...”and from Judge Richard Posner: “Legal education is a cartelized and regulated industry, rather than one in which the consumer is sovereign.” Or as syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell has written, “The American Bar Association has used its powers of accreditation to penalize law schools that do not do all the costly things that the ABA would like to see done. The most recent victim is the Massachusetts School of Law, which the ABA refused to accredit, even though 89 percent of the school’s graduates pass the state bar examination.”

Asked why he did not write a straight, non-fiction work, Velvel would say only, “I’ve got a lot of friends and colleagues involved who never dreamed years later I’d write a book about my career - - I never dreamed it myself - - and I don’t know how they would take it if they found themselves described and quoted. I do use a few real names, though, such as (former U.S. Appeals Court Judge) Robert Bork. I knew him in a way few people do and want to illuminate some of his good personal and professional qualities even though I strongly differed with him politically. There are other people who are not publicly known

but deserve to be publicly known whose names I do use.” Velvel would not comment on the statement by reviews Fr. Kurt Messick that “... it is almost certain that the incidents described are true (some read such that one simply can’t make this up ...perhaps simply the names have been changed to protect the innocent (or the not -yet-proven-guilty).”

In the quartet, Velvel does not spare the federal judiciary, as per this sample from “Misfits”: “Judges are, after all, the last bastion of pure authoritarianism in the United States. They act as they want, they do what they want, they are very rude and very belligerent to lawyers and parties, and it is vanishingly rare for anyone to bring them to book.” Lawyers, he continues, “are socialized from their first day of law school onward to be deferential towards judges to the point of being servile, to bow and scrape before them and to tug at their forelocks, to answer ‘how high’ when a judge tells them to jump.” Velvel believes that “One must never depend on judges to do the right thing, to fairly consider facts, to do justice, or to even try to do justice.”

Although a liberal, Velvel is bipartisan in his criticism of Democratic and Republican presidents alike for usurping the right to fight wars without prior consent of Congress. “Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, for practical purposes Reagan, the first Bush, and Clinton all claimed that they could fight wars whenever they wanted to, regardless of whether Congress had authorized war.” Writing of President Kennedy, Velvel says that at the time of his assassination “few people knew...(he) was 90 percent a skirt chasing fake.” Throughout the quartet, Velvel’s protagonists repeatedly get the idealism knocked out of them.

Terming the “American Dream” largely a fantasy, Velvel writes: “What Lincoln so aptly called ‘the race of life,’ did not necessarily go --- perhaps did not go at all --- to the talented and hard working who acted to help others as well as themselves, or who thought that in the long run right can make might. It went instead to those with very different qualities: it went to the purely greedy and to those who were always and only looking out for number one, to the incompetent, the venal and the evil who would play the game the company way (in any and all walks of life, not just in companies), to the thoroughly dishonest and the fraudulent, to the immodest, the celebrated and the self celebrated, to those who, in government or business, did not stickle at doing evil.”

A prolific writer, Velvel has authored scores of professional legal articles, magazine articles and newspaper columns on a wide variety of topics from civil liberties to foreign policy. In addition to the four books of the quartet, he has also authored two other books. They are: “Undeclared War and Civil Disobedience: The American System in Crisis” (Dunellen) and “Blogs From The Liberal Standpoint: 2004-2005”(The Doukathsan Press). The latter is a compendium of his frequent Internet column spacing “VelvelOnNationalAffairs.com,” which enjoys wide redistribution on numerous blogs such as OpEd News, Black Commentator, Counterpunch, and Harvard Square Commentary.

Velvel’s involvement with books is also expressed as host of an hour-long television book review show, “Books of Our Time,” produced by MSL and seen on Comcast

throughout New England and the mid Atlantic states. There have been nearly 100 book shows since the series began, and many of his most prominent guests have said Velvel is the best prepared interviewer they have ever met.

Velvel's thriving MSL, founded in 1988, today has a student body of 600 students whose \$13,300 annual tuition is much less than half that charged by other New England law schools, which often is as high as \$35,000 or more a year. Recently, MSL applied to open a new undergraduate program in history and law that will compress the traditional four-year pre-law curriculum into three years, saving students large sums of money. In words that fairly sum up Velvel's literary achievement, Supreme Court correspondent Lyle Denniston wrote, "Amid all the enervating blandness and sameness of McDonald's America, there still runs a deep proletarian strain—a smoldering resentment of everything that is big, powerful, insensitive, elitist. Its most provocative laureate may be Larry Velvel. Through a vibrant life, chronicled here in sometimes breath-catching bluntness, Larry has tilted at every windmill—and windbag—that crossed his revolutionary path." Denniston added that Sam Adams, Tom Paine and other American founders must be having "a devilishly good time reading how he has carried on the tradition, marching—no, stomping—across the landscape littering it with punctured balloons and egos and the shredded remnants of stuffed shirts."

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