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Public Secrets & Justice: A Journal of a Circuit Court Judge

Reviewed by John W. Steele

Laura Melvin, dutiful daughter of an esteemed circuit court judge and of the Deep South, followed the path prescribed for her by her heritage: marriage, a son, the law, and ultimately the bench. But after ten years as a judge, she felt a great void in her life and a yearning to break free of the strictures that held her prisoner in a world that she felt had turned into a war zone. So, at age 53 and at the peak of her career, she resigned her judgeship and embarked on a journey to find her true self and “justice.” Having divorced her husband several years earlier and with her son now grown and newly married, she felt free, for the first time, to pursue lifelong interests of travel and writing. After acquiring a 30-foot RV trailer and sturdy pickup to pull it, she sold her house, gave away all of her belongings (except for the bare essentials), and hit the road, homeless, rootless, totally liberated, and with only Bruin, her loyal German Shepherd, for companionship. This book is an account of her yearlong travels around the country, punctuated by frequent retrospective looks at some of her more memorable experiences on the bench. The result is a fascinating memoir of a colorful, multifaceted, and adventurous woman and her search for meaning and a measure of truth.

Most of the stories from her judicial career come from her experience sitting in juvenile, family, and criminal parts of the circuit court (despite ten years of service she apparently never attained sufficient seniority to sit in the more sedate civil part), and they are described in candid and sometimes brutal detail. They are not for the squeamish or faint of heart, but they are nonetheless an accurate portrayal of real-life scenes occurring every day in our court system. Some of the accounts are heartbreaking, especially those dealing with abused and neglected children who obviously occupy a special place in her heart. Melvin is at her best, however, in helping us understand the challenge a judge faces in maintaining a neutral demeanor and state of mind in these difficult cases in order to insure fairness to all parties. She accomplishes this often by pulling back the curtain to reveal her actual thought processes during trials and hearings. One cannot help but be impressed with how conscientious she was in her efforts at evenhandedness despite frequently strong emotions that might have pulled her in an opposite

direction. We can only hope that other judges do likewise, but one must wonder whether years of constant exposure to the inhumanity they see leave many of them jaded and cynical.

Indeed, it was a fear of developing such imperviousness that compelled Melvin to her odyssey in search of herself and for what it means to do justice. Her journey takes us into some of the less familiar, more remote parts of the country and into close contact with the natural world (or, at least, as close as one gets in an RV). Along the way, we meet old friends and casual acquaintances, all with interesting stories of their own. Her zest for adventure takes us along with her on skydiving outings, a sport at which she has some experience and enjoys immensely. For her, it is yet another form of freedom and the breaking of bonds. As a single female usually traveling alone (but for Bruin), she finds herself in some difficult situations which anyone (male or female) might find daunting, but she always manages to summon up her reserve of grit and courage to at least meet the challenge head-on even if she does not always overcome it. Most of her romantic relationships ended in failure, and she was left on her own to navigate by herself, but she seems to have always been able to draw strength from the self-reliance each one required of her in the end.

The birth of her first grandchild called her back (not necessarily home, for by then she was homeless in a real sense). She had learned something about hope, courage, stubbornness, and above all the importance of listening. But the meaning of true justice was still elusive, perhaps, as she says, because the legislature continues to move the target at the behest of special interest groups that benefit financially from changes in laws. It was not until some years later that she discovered that she had always been a Quaker, but “just did not know it.” Those of us who are Friends may have picked up clues earlier on: her minimalism; self-reliance; listening skills; strong sense of equality; and quest for truth, peace, and justice did much to point her in that direction. And, like William Penn and his sword, she wore her robe as long as she could.

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