

BOOK REVIEW

Something Is Rotten in Fettig

By Jere Krakoff

Anaphora Literary Press (2016)

Reviewed by James W. Carroll Jr.



Jere Krakoff was not born to write this book. Rather, he lived his professional life to write this book. Krakoff worked as a civil rights lawyer for 40 years, primarily representing clients who had no other

voice and whose lives were beyond difficult. Krakoff spent much of his career working for organizations like the ACLU, National Prison Project, and Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. In those jobs, he principally litigated cases on behalf of prisoners challenging conditions that were so dreadful that they could be deemed unconstitutional. These are serious issues, but Krakoff surprises us with a hilarious, deeply satirical book.

Something Is Rotten in Fettig tells the grim story of Leopold Plotkin, a kosher butcher living in an absurdly dystopian place known as the Republic. Its main characters include Plotkin's family, a friend or two, and various individuals who populate the Republic's government and legal system. Krakoff has provided drawings (scattered throughout the book) of many of the main characters.

As the story begins, we learn that while Plotkin has inherited a butcher shop, he is not very successful. Despite his dearth of customers, Plotkin is a skilled meat carver. He grows to resent, however, that people admire his butchering skills but do not buy his meat. He responds by covering his shop window with mud, denying the window shoppers the thrill of observing his remarkable butchering skills. His actions, while self-satisfying, set the

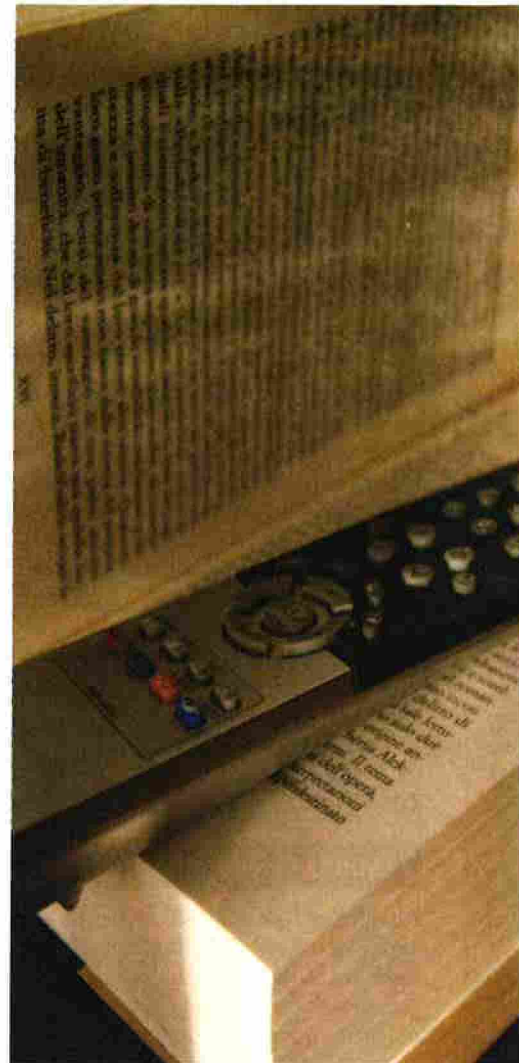
Republic on its head and are called "an affront to capitalism."

Demonstrations rage outside the butcher shop, editorials pop up in the local newspapers, and petitions demand that Plotkin be charged with crimes against the government. After a spirited investigation, the chief prosecutor reluctantly concludes that Plotkin has violated no law by covering his butcher shop window, but he demands that the Republic's legislative body enact anti-window covering legislation.

Not surprisingly, agreeing that this abomination must be addressed, lawmakers accede to the prosecutor's demand. Armed with the newly passed statute, the government has Plotkin arrested, confining him in the Purgatory House of Detention. In short order, Plotkin is labeled a troublemaker and confined to the darkest corners of the penitentiary. The balance of *Something Is Rotten in Fettig* describes Plotkin's confinement, his interactions with a lunatic lawyer in the next cell, Plotkin's efforts to find a lawyer, and his trial.

Plotkin first meets with Felix I. Bleifus, who is employed by the Society for the Apparent Representation of Indigent Criminal Types. This is a poorly funded government agency whose charge is to provide apparent representation for indigent defendants. Once he understands that Bleifus is a fraud, interested solely in having his client plead guilty, Plotkin realizes he is in big trouble.

Quite fortuitously, an old friend from Plotkin's childhood cajoles a prominent lawyer into representing him at trial. Unfortunately for Plotkin, this lawyer becomes ill during the first day of his trial; the only replacement that can be found is a reclusive lawyer who has never tried a case or even been in court. Krakoff describes Plotkin's trial in all its glory, and the details are hilarious. The legal system in the Republic bears great similarity to the court system in the United States, except the many flaws in the



American court system are exaggerated in ways that are quite funny.

Webster defines satire as "biting wit, comedy, irony, or sarcasm used to expose vice or folly." Krakoff's book is classic satire. It uses a deranged legal system to demonstrate the folly that is often inherent in the U.S. legal system.

Many a truth can be revealed through satire. On the other hand, satire can be so rich that the underlying truths are lost. Krakoff's great talent is that even while we are laughing at the comedy he presents, the real truth is close to the surface and impossible to miss. *Something is Rotten in Fettig* is that rare treat that is not only great fun to read, but also it teaches us much. In this case, we learn about the dark side of the American legal system. ■

About the Reviewer

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The opinions expressed in reviews are those of the reviewers and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of NACDL.