

I'm not robot!

Feb 02, 2020 Ned rated it it was amazing Just what I was looking for, a factual account of just what the hell happened in Flint MI where the water was found to be contaminated with lead. Sadly, it is a familiar tale of a poor and minority community being put at risk from the most basic need (water) which most of us assume to be safe without thought as it flows into our homes. This book was just perfect, because it shows what one individual, with love and compassion, can do. Ultimately this tiny Iraqi immigrant took down multiple govern Just what I was looking for, a factual account of just what the hell happened in Flint MI where the water was found to be contaminated with lead. Sadly, it is a familiar tale of a poor and minority community being put at risk from the most basic need (water) which most of us assume to be safe without thought as it flows into our homes. This book was just perfect, because it shows what one individual, with love and compassion, can do. Ultimately this tiny Iraq Immigrant took down multiple government officials, in an impassioned war for justice. As a pediatrician from an activist family, doctor Mona, chose to serve in the post-industrial Flint, striving to build community for her "kids", all 8000+ of them. When she found out they were being exposed, she went on the warpath and her journey was brutal, rough and confounded with obstacles. Yes, this is a sad, sad tragedy where poor children were harmed, but there is a hero, and hope, in the fiery "doctor Mona" (Hanna-Attisha) and this true story is riveting as any imagined fiction you could conceive. I happen to be an analytical chemist, with 30+ years experience in testing for trace impurities, so I understood the technical aspects of this. But the book is not overly technical, it gives the narrative of the Flint crisis and resolution, interwoven within Mona's own immigration story. She gets support from Marc Edwards, the champion for the similar DC water crisis, that happened earlier - with less of a positive outcome. Marc is battle scarred, weary, yet indefatigable as he joins the fight, realizing that Mona is the perfect spokesperson. Regarding the safety of lead, it is know to be particularly neurotoxic, especially to the very young whose brains are developing. It is insidious in that it accumulates gradually and the effects not manifest for years. "Drinking water...was like drinking through a lead straw...into the bodies of our children....I was the maddest and saddest I'd ever been in my life. These kids literally had every adversity possible. It was like the world was conspiring to keep them down" (pp. 322-323). What happened, exactly? First some background: Flint enjoyed the post-war boom when GM manufacturing attracted workers, even drawing from the deep south. But even before that, the area was polluted with racism, as in Father Coughlin, who "promoted the racism and nationalism of Hitler and Mussolini, offering weekly installments of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion...His newspaper, ironically name Social Justice, evangelized for America First-ism, a rudderless economic populism mixed with isolationism...Years later I learned that the pretty Catholic church on Woodward Avenue...had served as Father Coughlin's headquarters. And I was stunned to discover that the large post office...had been built to process the crazy amount of fan letters Coughlin received...more than ten thousand pieces a day...I learned from my parents not to be afraid to dig deeper and not be afraid of what I might find." (p. 72). I'm optimistic that our current day racism is much less, but this story reminded me of just how prevalent it still is, in less visible but perhaps even more toxic ways. What exactly happened? Flint, impoverished due to myriad racial issues going back decades, as a city could not pay its bills (lack of business, tax base, etc...) and the "solution" proffered by the governor was to appoint an "Emergency Manager", essentially neutering the mayor and local government. The intent was to drive a policy of austerity, i.e. to cut costs - the EM then made the fateful decision to save on municipal water costs by switching from the cleaner Detroit river source to the Flint river source. The problem was the water was fouler and needed more conditioning (essentially treatment with a corrosive chlorine chemical), yet had not been neutralized. This might be forgiven, except Washington DC had experienced a similar problem and a federal regulation for "corrosion control" had been ignored. Consequently, the older water pipes (with lead) were exposed to the more "corrosive" water and leached lead. This is where the story really picks up, and Mona, in her spare time, collaborates with a subordinate to follow the story. It is a tawdry one where the government covered its liability, demanding "proof" before taking action, and as a consequence allowed exposure of children for over a year. The typical victim blaming was a tactic (e.g. it must be the fixtures or pipes in homes). Only through severe pressure, and support from Marc Edwards, the environmental activist who exposed the DC water crisis (largely forgotten in popular media), did Mona have the courage to call her own press conference and "out" the officials. Ultimately, she got attention only by proving blood levels of lead had increased after the water switch was made (painstakingly conducting her own small study, as she was blocked from state data after many requests). This is what can happen when "regulations" are ignored or de-valued. They simply failed to protect the most vulnerable Americans, poor children, disproportionately black. Thank goodness we have fighters, people who do this out of a sense of moral justice, and care. In this regard the book inspires hope, but it also challenged me to become more active, and aware, and to use my particular skills and knowledge for the greater good, and for those less fortunate. I loved the book, it was well written and so very personal for this Iraqi immigrant and her family who provided the love and support and moral imperatives to do the right thing, regardless of outcome. And it was scary, doctor Mona fretting over press conferences and she was nearly destroyed in the process. Thankfully the media gave voice to her concerns, and the political pressure was brought to bear on the accountable. I have no doubt, even today, there are deniers out there who are still trying to discredit her for likely motivations I won't bother to go into right now. Mona expresses why she chose to remain (p. 118): "I came to Flint for its hope, but also for its lessons, both terrible and beautiful. Flint from its beginnings has been a place of extremes, where greed meets solidarity, where bigotry meets fairness, and where the struggle for equality has played out. Flint is where many people have been pushed down and many have risen. And where many have fought the good fight - and won." The Flint suburbs were not annexed with the city, so familiar elsewhere, which turned out to be fateful to the crisis to come many years later (p. 127): "...the residents in Flint's new suburbs, happily ensconced in their new houses and all-white neighborhoods, voted overwhelmingly against the referendum...Flint was left isolated and abandoned." The author weaves in the story of leaded gasoline, and how it was driven by industry in America long after the hazard was known in other parts of the world, and the "Safe Until Proven Dangerous" mantra ruled (p. 152). This same philosophy we see in Climate Change denial - prescient today. Powerful forces were arrayed against the truth. The rancor in today's debate, and lack of scientific education in the public, and I can relate to what was in the mind of the author as the blood level data was checked and rechecked (p. 200): "One minor error, even one that didn't affect the findings, would give critics the ammunition to undermine me. One minor error and all our efforts would be for nothing, and Flint kids would go on being poisoned." It would be easy to blame government (they failed here), but the author articulates it well (p. 306): "If I had to locate an exact cause of the crisis, above all others, it would be the ideology of extreme austerity and 'all government is bad government'. The state of Michigan didn't need less government; it needed more and better government, responsible and effective government... For decades the city and state infrastructure had been neglected to save money. State and environmental health agencies had been defunded, and great public servants had become disillusioned and retired, leaving these agencies a shadow of what they used to be...a rubberstamping of bad ideas, a gross underfunding of environmental enforcement, limited understanding of and expertise in public health, and a disregard for the poor." This was a well written story, it will stoke your moral outrage and push you to awareness and activism for your fellow man, and woman, and (especially) the world's children. They don't deserve our apathy ...more



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