



An American Tragedy

Dan Flanigan

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The public's adamant adherence to their snap decisions impedes the justice process in the harrowing novel An American Tragedy, about a teacher accused of sexual abuse.

A preschool scandal leads to a clash between outrage and justice in Dan Flanigan's fourth installment of the Peter O'Keefe mystery series, *An American Tragedy*.

Virginia is a preschool teacher of seven years with a positive reputation, loved by children and parents alike. This changes when an accusation leads to a chain reaction of children claiming that Virginia sexually abused them and forced them to participate in satanic rituals. Soon, the case receives national attention and enraged spectators flock to the courtroom. The opposing lawyers, judge, and jurors seem determined to act based on bias, not truth.

Peter, a veteran turned private investigator, is drawn into the conflict by his daughter, a former student of Virginia's and the only child claiming that the teacher is innocent. Peter takes the case on with the help of Scott, a friend who's a lawyer. Meanwhile, Peter also struggles to maintain an amicable relationship with his ex-wife for the sake of his daughter, with whom he's not able to spend much time during the case.

Peter's perspective is centered most. He analyzes the scene of the alleged crimes, questions the experts brought in to coax testimonies out of the children, and stands by Scott during the courtroom proceedings. Every few chapters, other characters' voices factor in, including those of the children as they are probed for information, the opposing lawyers and experts, and Peter's friends and colleagues. Their voices are consistent and responsive: parents of the accusing children speak with aggression; the children themselves speak with simplicity, revealing their ignorance about the situation they're in. As a collective, the cast wrestles with the unreliability of people's perceptions and the dangers of mob mentality, including that the accusations turned most parents and children against Virginia in an instant, rendering others unwilling to stand with her for fear of the backlash.

The book follows a linear timeline, from the moment of the first accusation to the ultimate courtroom verdict. The chapter-by-chapter switches in narration mean that the conflict is explored from different viewpoints in real time. But headlines and highlights from similar cases appear between the chapters, along with quotes from experts regarding the sexual abuse of children, pulling attention from the story to its real-life corollaries to distracting affect.

The prose is sometimes graphic, as with scenes focused on therapy with the children. Elsewhere, as with courtroom scenes, it is more procedural, straining to encapsulate the full progression of the trial. Suspense is somewhat diminished by the book's forceful focus on justice: throughout, characters make it clear they have already decided on the teacher's guilt, and her sentence seems to be fast-tracked. Such stubborn mindsets prevail even in the face of multiple discrepancies and fresh evidence, with neither side willing to change their mind or look past the original allegations.

An American Tragedy is a dark mystery novel in which a private investigator works to clear the name of a reputable

preschool teacher who's been charged with heinous crimes.

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