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Book Review

Grace Sindell

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Reviewed by Grace Sindell*

A SINGULAR FURY. By Howard L. Oleck. World Publishing Co., New York & Cleveland (1968). 246 pp. \$4.95.

Could shy socialite Janet Porter have bludgeoned her law professor husband, Kevin, to death in their home, after years of seemingly happy married life? And if she had, what were the reasons why this cultured lady was catapulted into headlines, for murder?

She could give San Francisco lawyer Sam Benedict no reasons, if she was guilty, because she told him that she could not remember anything prior to the time when she was found standing over her husband's body. But lawyer Sam told Janet, "The D.A. has a complete case—absolutely complete! Motive—quarrel; opportunity—perfect; weapon—in your hand; . . . unless . . ."

"I am insane?"

"Unless you are insane."

"But I am not. I'm as sane as you."—The preliminary psychiatric examination had revealed no suggestion of insanity.

With this provocative introduction, Distinguished Professor (and, formerly Dean) Howard L. Oleck of Cleveland-Marshall Law School, the author, plunges his reader into his mystery, *A Singular Fury*. From here on in you fly with Sam Benedict, literally and figuratively, to the varied places of the early life of Janet, her father, and her husband, in an attempt to defend her against this fatal accusation.

Your interest races along with Professor Oleck's story, because you have no alternative once you've launched into the book. He pursues his objective relentlessly—visiting key people, who in answer to direct questions, at first hedge, then eventually come up with some hard truths. He interviews a variety of colorful personalities, who add spark and vitality to the chase. One associate of Kevin's describes the Porters as resembling the figures in Grant Wood's famous painting *American Gothic*, as "self-righteous, grim and dour—people of strong puritan strain."

A former neighbor in Cleveland, who knew them in the early months of their marriage, for example, comments about what dining out with the Porters meant. If Janet ordered, husband Kevin said, "She doesn't really want that. *I'll* tell you what we'll have—both of us."

The interviews read like living legal depositions, in the rapid fire exchange of questions and answers. Lawyer Sam loses no time, either, in going from his carefully mapped plan of investigation of Janet and

* B.A., Western Reserve Univ. [Editor's Note: Mrs. Sindell is prominent in Cleveland civic and social service work, and is the wife of David Sindell, head of one of the leading law firms of the area, and himself one of the leading trial lawyers in the nation.]

her father and her husband, to personal contacts on Long Island, at Harvard, at New York University, in Cleveland, and at two San Francisco area law schools. Lawyer Sam's initial hypothesis seems to be justified.

Although they are not aware of it, everyone he contacts sheds some light on his hunch that his client was suffering either from actual feminine physical problems (severe premenstrual tension), or from a strong psychotic condition created by her father and husband in their obsessive research into the legal theories of Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. Harvard law Professor Duffield, Janet's father, looked on Holmes as a paragon of liberalism. Her husband, Kevin, a law professor at Berkeley, California, was devoted to Holmes, whom he viewed as a conservative. Sam Benedict's own view is evident when he comments: "If Holmes had had his way we would have dumped the Bill of Rights, double jeopardy would be legal, and we would be living in a police state today. Was this the Great Liberal?"

Author Howard L. Oleck, a legal scholar of considerable reputation, has achieved a masterful coalescence. He writes an exciting mystery story, complete with accurate legal annotations, but done with such subtle restraint that the pace of the investigation and the hot pursuit of evidence is never bogged down by dull recitals of the rules of law. There is plenty of law, but the law is so skillfully woven into the fabric of the tale that it makes Sam Benedict's moves all the more meaningful and fascinating. The legal and medical embellishments are rich and rewarding, and add great strength to the portrayal of Sam Benedict as a famous and colorful trial lawyer. The feminine physical phenomenon with which Professor Oleck deals has actually been an area of extensive study and writing on Oleck's part, and his actual legal article in an actual journal is quoted by Benedict.

This *singular fury* which the author nails down as the main plank on which to rest the defense of his client, is brought to the test in a most dramatic court scene, which is the climax and conclusion of the book. The story ends on a surprise note—like an O. Henry short story.

A Singular Fury is a wonderful law-mystery yarn, for mystery story addicts, for members of the legal profession, and for women in all walks of life. It is great reading for psychologists, psychiatrists, and anyone else interested in a fascinating case history of what can happen to a woman who year after year subjugates her emotions. Certainly every member of the legal community will have a special empathy for the setting of much of the story—the courts, the law schools, and the personalities of their professors. We suspect that the law professor, the author, is expressing his own feelings through Sam Benedict. His feelings and expressions are delightfully interesting.

Woven into the fabric of the Porter case are his grim dreams based on the war experiences of lawyer Sam, which strangely relate to

his thinking about the Porter case. Again, we suspect that the author's war experiences have furnished materials for his story. Oleck was a Major in World War II. He writes that the "experiences of battle seem to leave an indelible mark on the human brain. War was the supreme test of man's courage, people said." Maybe it was true of *all* harsh conflict, Benedict thinks, as he contemplates his particular problem at hand. These dream sequences, printed in italics, are beautifully written, sensitive, and enriching the story. The uneraseable, recurring memories of the American soldier killing his enemy, his entrance into horrible Buchenwald Concentration Camp, the soldier ducking in the face of an oncoming German fighter plane, while fearless General Patton rides out in open view, are all scenes you share with Sam Benedict. Sam compares a general to a trial lawyer in the way he sets his goal and sees his problem through.

The hurrahs for the book include yet another aspect. Touches of humor enliven it. One of the funniest, ribald legal cases in any lawyer's files is recounted here. This is the story of the Pumpkin Case, and you will get a real belly laugh out of it.

With great adeptness, Professor Oleck has enriched his book with another case. This one is entirely different in mood and tone, but he is nevertheless able to include some of his incisive thinking on other topics here. He tells of the former client, Belle Larkbey, who operates a bar. The bar is padlocked because drinks are served to three minors holding forged ID cards. Lawyer Sam's handling of this case, assisted by his faithful aide—lawyer Hank—is included, I think, for several reasons. It is humorous, gusty and sexy. Besides demonstrating that famous lawyers are servants of the public and help all types of clients, it allows him to express his strong feelings about where the onus lies in the Juvenile Delinquency situation today. The reader can almost see client Belle swinging her shabby mink stole in the court, and hear her bawdy street language, in strong contrast to the cultured words of inhibited Janet Porter.

Professor Oleck does something else, too. He pays great tribute to the American trial lawyer and his tireless pursuit of truth and facts. His complete immersion in his case, and his tireless drive to ferret out psychological and medical facts, really makes the trial lawyer an often-unsung hero. The author's subtle humor about a lawyer's life comes through when Sam Benedict's only contact with his home at this time is his "call in" report, to see that all is well, knowing that an understanding trial lawyer's wife's response will always be "yes," for she will never intrude while he is at work on a tough case.

A Singular Fury has all the ingredients for a best seller. It is a first rate story, written with excitement, drama, and depth. A tormented soul's life is unfolded, but it takes a human being with concern for his fellow man to bring intelligence and understanding to help her. As Jus-

tice Holmes once said: "Insanity is often the logic of an accurate mind overtaxed." A lawyer dealing with psychiatric imponderables can become mired and ineffective. Sam Benedict is earthy and real, not a fictionalized Superman. But Sam Benedict, unlike the phony trial lawyers so often depicted in the mass entertainment media, is the *real* trial lawyer—scholarly, concerned, and effective—a great combination of idealism and pragmatism. He is the scholarly legal mind, and at the same time a relentless and brilliant investigator, who can shape and clarify the chaotic mass of law and facts, in the heat of a complicated lawsuit, in order to achieve a just result despite seemingly impossible odds.