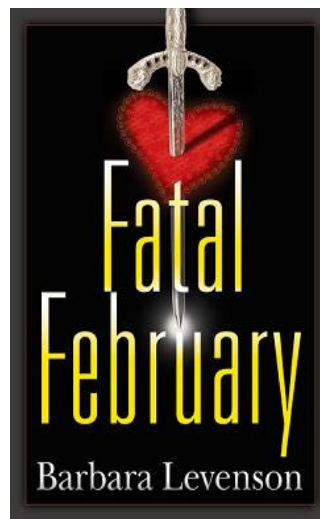


# FATAL FEBRUARY

by Barbara Levenson ISBN 978-1-933515-52-6  
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## Mount Vernon (OH) News

Reviewed by MARK S. JORDAN



What might a snappy, scrappy, half - Southern Baptist, half - Jewish female lawyer tangled up in a romantic affair and a high - society murder case in Miami, Florida, have to do with Mount Vernon, Ohio? Only that these scenes were dreamed up in the mind of Barbara Levenson, who was born here and grew up in Columbus, where she was the first woman elected to the Columbus Board of Education, and later served as the Board's first female president. After a full career as a prosecutor, defense lawyer and judge, spent mostly in southern Florida, Levenson has penned her first book, a mystery called "Fatal February," which is being released by Oceanview Publishing of Ipswich, Massachusetts.

The story introduces the character of Mary Magruder Katz, an attorney about to get swept into the defense of a woman, Lillian Yarmouth, who may have murdered her husband. Starting at virtually the same time on the same day, Mary gets swept off her feet by a handsome stranger, Carlos Martin, who also needs the help of her legal expertise. The book traces these twin threads as they interweave, influencing each other.

Mary is an appealingly feisty character, and much of this mystery's effectiveness comes from Levenson's familiarity with legal wrangling and courtroom antics. She supplies the stories with true - to - life details which help give characters the ring of truth. The overall ring of truth depends on how far from the central character any of the smaller players are. For instance, Mary has an instantly recognizable style and voice, made even more identifiable by having her narrate the novel. But the further out from center we travel, the less distinctive each character voice is. The more generic some of the smaller characters get, the less they offer any texture to moderate the pace of the book, resulting in a very fast read.

One of the more interesting characters is the accused widow, Lillian Yarmouth. Levenson takes her time, slowly revealing the steel backbone of a character who seems vulnerable and in shock after her husband's murder. That intrigue runs counter to how quickly some of the other characters' concerns are dispatched. For instance, Mary's main romantic interest is Carlos Martin, a hunky Hispanic real estate developer. Carlos is more of a woman's perfect fantasy than a realistic character, not that there's anything wrong with that for entertainment purposes. In addition to eye - candy for the imagination, the character of Carlos allows for some effective sparks of cultural tension between Mary and his ethnic family. Those sparks are typical of Levenson's flair for pointing out and finding the humor in the cultural melting - pot of Miami. That observant eye firmly grounds the book in its southern Florida setting.

The plotting is precise and very fast, which will please anyone who doesn't want to devote a lot of time to one book. Those accustomed to curling up with a book for a while may, however, feel that the pace here is too efficient. The characters rarely seem to think things through or reflect on their situations, no doubt because each next plot event is already happening to them. This keeps things moving, though it doesn't leave much room for warming up to the characters. But it does make for a fast, fun read, a page - turner as the plot quickly moves along.

The book ends with a clear - enough invitation to continue along with future adventures of Mary Magruder Katz. If those come to pass, I hope Levenson will allow just a little time and space for her characters to reflect in future books, giving them more impact. But even as it stands now, "Fatal February" scores points for its crisp sense of humor, its colorful sense of place, and its lively plotting.