

# FINANCIAL REVIEW

## Books | A case of deception by numbers

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Dickens, Balzac, you name it. The classics are littered with stories of evil revenge. The obsessive foe that won't go away is also a well-worn Hollywood theme. From the two movie takes on *Cape Fear* – first starring a menacing Robert Mitchum and the second a psychotic Robert de Niro – to the yuppie-tailored *Pacific Heights*, they play on the terror we have of an unhinged opponent bent on revenge.

In their book *One One Five*, first-time authors Alan Manly, Julian Day and Graeme Brosnan trace a terrifying story of a South African-born charlatan who falsely invoiced their stony broke, fledgling software users' association for \$115,000, was prosecuted, and then pursued them in the courts for 11 years.

How could he do that? Well, according to the book, through a combination of guile, perverted ingenuity, appearing for himself, and – once again, according to the book – the gormless nature of the justice system in NSW, particularly barristers and courts.

Along the way there is a confusing miscellany of appearances in magistrates' courts, the District Court, the Supreme Court of NSW, the Court of Appeal, and even the High Court, as the charlatan turned the lives of his legal opponents into a living hell. Along the way we are treated to a rollicking yarn about marriage, relationships, jobs, being in the same primary school as Peter Carey, the computer industry, company parties, scientists hitting the grog big-time in the Philippines, life at the wrong end of a country town, takeovers, start-ups, bankruptcies, corporate femme fatales and mood swings.

Despite the fear and loathing, there is something Rabelaisian about this book. Just as Gargantua and Pantagruel had their share of crudities, violence, accidents, parties, and jokes, so, too, do the protagonists in this yarn. And just as Francois Rabelais said the philosophy of his fictional giant, Pantagruel, is rooted in a "certain gaiety of mind pickled in the scorn of fortuitous things", Alan Manly's bizarre journey through the courts, jobs, marriages, success and failure, is laced with jokes and wry observations. Like this description of the charlatan as he was being skewered by Channel Nine's *A Current Affair*: "[he] just sat there in the pastel patterned chair with his hand on his forehead. Beside him was a fake pot-plant, well no more fake than he was."

But despite the bizarre lengths the charlatan went to in his determination to destroy the lives of his opponents, the real bad guys are legal practitioners. "Each time we went to court," Manly writes, "I noticed that we were more organised than our solicitor and that the legal arguments became more puerile and trivial ... Everything we were told couldn't happen, actually happened."

At another point, he writes: "It's only when you start to become part of the system and observe it from the inside that it slowly dawns on you that the whole impressive apparatus of the justice system is there for them, not you."

Judges get special short shrift. The "illusion" that courtrooms were full of "wise and learned men" who "delivered considered and prudent" judgments had been "well and truly shattered. I realised you could ignore judges, even be rude to them and it never made any difference. They reminded me of union shop stewards, always keen to look after the interests of their comrades."

In this Rabelaisian world of the NSW law, "the criminal, the fraudster, the scammer has a second choice, a third and a fourth choice. The victim doesn't have that."

The problem is that the reader is obliged to give the authors a second, third or a fourth chance. Much of the story is taken up with direct quotes, raising questions about their provenance and reliability. This pattern of scanty documentation pervades the rest of the book. And while there is a refreshing lack of political correctness in the stream of pot-shots taken at the law, barristers, solicitors, judges and court attendants, these various opinions lose force through lack of documentation. But *One One Five* is different – and interesting.

