

The President's Mortician

Tim Fleming

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www.neverlandpublishing.com/tpm.html

The publication of Tim Fleming's book marks, to my knowledge, the first real attempt to (forgive the phrase) put flesh on the biographical bones of John Melvin Liggett, a shadowy character whose apparent connections to the JFK assassination are discussed in my own 'Doubles and Disinformation' in this issue of *Lobster*.

There is good news and bad news about this book. The bad news is that, despite the author's first-hand research into Liggett's life, his book is so heavily fictionalised as to count as a novel. The good news is that it's actually well worth buying and reading despite this. Fleming is a devoted JFK researcher and writer, and runs a worthwhile blog¹ about US politics from a leftist perspective in general and the JFK killing in particular.

The narrative of *The President's Mortician* is compelling and convincingly unpredictable, despite being entirely based on a completely bogus 'McGuffin' (the murder of a fictional character by the real-life Liggett and the characters' attempts to solve the case). Of particular interest to researchers will be the 'book within the book' setting out one of the characters' interpretation of the assassination and its consequences. It came as little surprise to me when Mr Fleming confirmed in an e-mail conversation that this metatext was an excerpt from his own unpublished writing, and I recommend that he pursues finding a publisher for it. He also told me that he had originally planned a non-fiction biography of Liggett. This is maddening (to me, at least) because it means that we are left to sift through a cast of fictional, composite and real characters and events with no idea of which is which. For instance: Liggett's youthful participation in David Ferrie's Civil Air Patrol outfit and his recruitment by the CIA therefrom. This is plainly of key importance to understanding Liggett's life but I have no idea whether it's real or pretend. Mr Fleming's characters are all equally well-drawn and rounded, making it even more difficult

1 <<http://leftlooking.blogspot.com>>

(although I have a strong suspicion that the wholly-fictitious characters are the ones with a noticeable tendency to 'info-dump' in order to move the plot along in leaps and bounds). And some of his work is plainly a synthesis of his own reading and beliefs. For example, one character anachronistically provides an unattributed précis of David Lifton's *Best Evidence*, fifteen years before it was published.

Mr Fleming has expressed his hope that *The President's Mortician* will stimulate others to carry out their own research. In the sense that it tantalised me so much that I want to pick up the phone and hammer the Internet until I have tracked down his primary sources (whom he declined to identify in any way) and bled them dry of information, he can count his hopes fulfilled. Others will perhaps be more sanguine about the matter: perhaps, at this distance, a novelist has more hope of untangling Liggett's life than anyone else.

Liggett himself moves through the novel like a predatory fish in a muddy river, glimpsed here and there as the action unfolds, but rarely surfacing. The key points of interest to researchers are the two chapters which describe Liggett's alteration of JFK's body and the way in which a second body was used as a 'stand-in' for the dead President while Kennedy's real body was doctored. Mr Fleming plainly knows his stuff on the real-life witnesses and events relating to JFK's post-mortem handling and manages to weave them into a coherent narrative.

While by no means an expert on this aspect of the assassination, I found Mr Fleming's portrayal of proceedings very interesting indeed and (as far as I can ascertain without in-depth research) somewhat credible. For instance the photographer at JFK's autopsy told the Assassination Records Review Board that the pictures she took were not the ones later released by the National Archives and that Kennedy's body had been in a very different state when she saw and photographed it. I asked Mr Fleming whether his reconstruction of the events of that night was based on evidence or imagination. As I had anticipated, he did not respond to this question, and I respect his choice to remain

silent on the matter. I therefore conclude that the 'body alteration' narrative is a mixture of both fact and fiction – and none the worse for that. I enjoyed it so much that I read the whole thing in one sitting. Researchers will find this book at best a thought-provoking and stimulating read and at worst a frustrating hybrid of truth and fiction. Either way, I would say that it deserves to be read by anyone interested in this aspect of the assassination controversy.

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