

## BOOK ANNOTATION

TONI M. FINE, *AMERICAN LEGAL SYSTEMS: A RESOURCE AND REFERENCE GUIDE* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Anderson Publishing Co., 1997). Pp. xix +121. \$15.95 (paperback).

Toni Fine's *American Legal Systems* is designed to introduce law students and students considering law school to American legal systems and to basic legal research and writing techniques (p. xv). The book certainly succeeds on that level, but it will likely find a broader audience as well. Fine's chapters cover an extraordinary range of topics: the structure of legal decisions (pp. 29-46); the relationships of courts to one another in both the federal and state court systems (pp. 16-24); the nature and persuasive force of primary and secondary sources of law (pp. 24-26); administrative and appellate proceedings (pp. 55-60, 71-76); and the variety of research strategies employed by legal scholars and practitioners alike. Having established the institutional background and provided a guide to source material and research tools, Fine then expertly guides her readers through a basic introduction to *The Bluebook* (pp. 85-88) and to the fundamentals of composing legal memos (pp. 89-109).

This is certainly an ideal book for an undergraduate considering or preparing for a legal education, but one of the key advantages of Fine's work is that it provides a starting point for legal research that will prove useful to people who are at very different stages in learning about United States law. *American Legal Systems* is not so elementary that people further along in their legal careers would not benefit from keeping it near at hand. For first-year law students and for foreign law students working with United States law, it is a useful reference guide. The same students will benefit from its tips on legal research during their first and second summers as legal clerks. Students and scholars engaging in interdisciplinary work with a legal component can rely on Fine's text as everything from a guide to appropriate sources to an interpreter of the mysteries of the proper form for legal citations. Experienced legal researchers will return to the book when engaging in unfamiliar types of legal research or when they need to remind themselves of sources of information they may have neglected to consult.

Most importantly, however, Fine's book can guide the uninitiated through the many stages of legal research and through the varieties of legal actions available to litigants. By making such information accessible to pro se defendants or other lay people who want to protect their rights and interests, *American Legal Systems* facilitates the democratization of legal practice.

The book's chief virtues are Fine's unadorned, lively, and direct prose and the numerous charts which summarize each chapter's main points and thus provide a handy reference for the reader. After nimbly guiding her reader through some "basic concepts of American jurisprudence" (pp. 1-27), Fine organizes her chapters according to the major sources of law. The book focuses on case law, and this is probably appropriate, since most readers are going to be concerned primarily with understanding the common law tradition. The book also provides a basic introduction to researching statutes and legislative history (pp. 47-54) and to administrative and executive sources of law (pp. 55-60).

The book's shortcomings are best described as limitations rather than weaknesses. *American Legal Systems* attempts to provide information that cannot be found so economically compiled in other sources. Thus the book does not attempt to perform functions provided by other reference guides. For example, Fine points out in an introductory note that she has not attempted to provide an introduction to methods of legal research involving computerized databases (p. xix). She has good reason for not providing such a service: many students and practitioners do not have access to such services, and those who do also have access to manuals that can help them to use those legal research tools. In addition, Fine focuses on the federal system, since it would obviously be impossible for her to explore the intricacies of each state's court system. As Fine points out, moreover, federal law provides a paradigm for the operation of many state systems (p. xix). Because of the focus on case law, the discussion of statutory and administrative law is necessarily compressed. Researching such law is perhaps the most daunting aspect of legal research, and Fine can provide us only with the beginnings. It is certainly too much to ask from a book such as Fine's, however, that it reveal the unholy mysteries of research into legislative histories and compendia of statutory regulations.

These limitations notwithstanding, *American Legal Systems* packs an extraordinary amount of information into its 115 pages. Although it will certainly succeed in guiding its target audience through the first stages of legal research, more advanced students and practitioners will also undoubtedly benefit from consulting this handy, slender volume. It provides a comprehensive survey of the source material available to the legal researcher. The variety of this material and the idiosyncratic ways in which the material is organized and catalogued can make legal research an imposing task. Legal researchers cannot be expected to memorize the way each research tool functions. Thanks to Toni Fine, we do not need to.

-D.A. Jeremy Telman