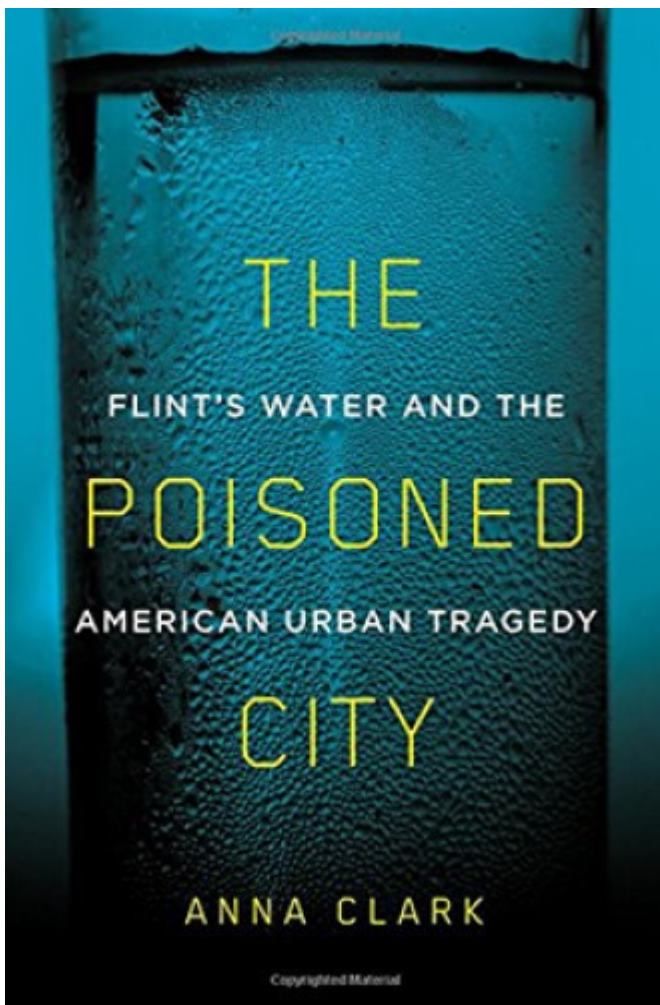


What created the unnatural disaster in Flint

Mona Hanna-Attisha and Anna Clark explore the crisis from inside and out.

by [Tommy Airey](#) in the [December 19, 2018](#) issue

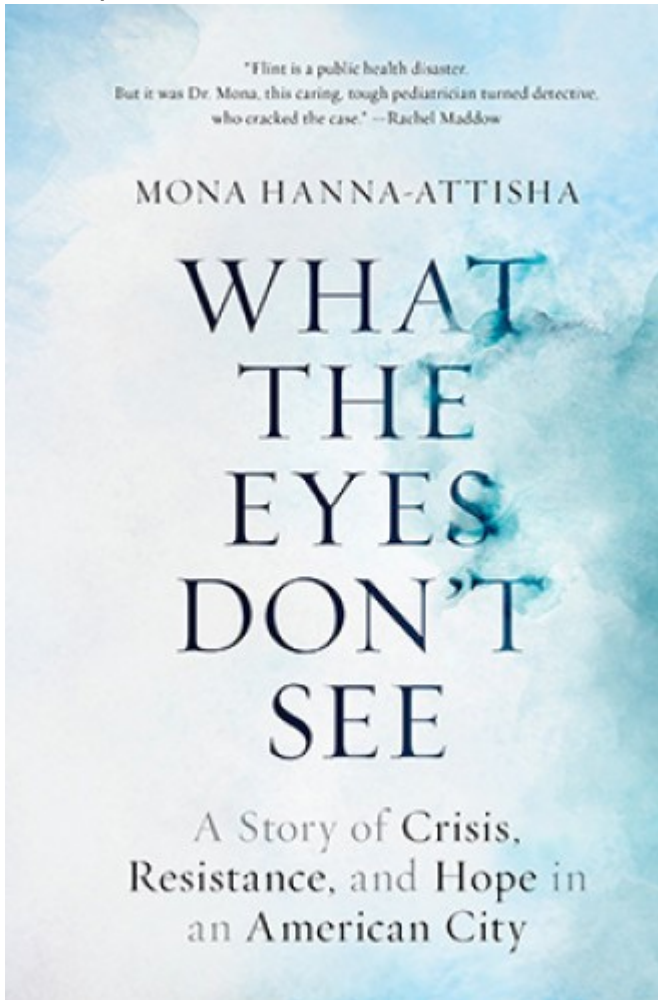
In Review



The Poisoned City

Flint's Water and the American Urban Tragedy

By Anna Clark
Metropolitan Books



What the Eyes Don't See

A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City

By Mona Hanna-Attisha
One World

In early 2016, the world awoke to news that for two years residents of Flint had been drinking water tainted with lead and deadly bacteria. Complaints and cries for help were legion. An epidemic of Legionnaires' disease erupted. While the people of Flint recruited journalists, water engineers, doctors, and lawyers to address the situation, they had to haul their own water each day. Their plumbing and pipes were ruined, and their homes were devalued. They got sick, lost hair, broke out in rashes, endured miscarriages, suffered memory loss, and were portrayed by those in power

as confused, crazy, or foolish. Some of them died. Meanwhile, local, state, and federal leaders poured out denials, distortions, distractions, rebukes, and justifications that would eventually be exposed as lies.

What took so long? Independent journalist Anna Clark, in *The Poisoned City*, laments the cyclical pattern of public discussion:

Journalistically, it kept repeating itself. First came a disturbing news item about Flint's water. Then came assurances from experts who said that it was fine and that treatment would improve. This in turn was followed by resident testimonials, demonstrations, and independent investigations that disputed the official claims. Then the cycle started all over again. It kept coming back to the fact that Flint residents were saying one thing about the water, and city and state authorities were saying another.

Predictably, the cycle usually pitted one poor black woman's testimony against one powerful white man's. Clark's page-turning narrative time line of this unnatural disaster is clarifying.

Three key events cut to the core of the deception that occurred following the city's April 2014 switch from Lake Huron water to the Flint River water:

In October 2014, General Motors petitioned the city to transfer off the Flint River because the water was corroding engines in its Flint factory. They received their waiver immediately.

In January 2015, state officials delivered water coolers to the Flint State Office Building so that employees wouldn't have to drink from the tap.

In March 2015, the governor's office started exploring the possibility of distributing water filters in Flint.

But leaders officially and adamantly denied any issues involving Flint water until the fall of 2015.

While Clark sticks to the conventions of old-school objective journalism, Mona Hanna-Attisha in *What the Eyes Don't See* plays the lead role in her account of the Flint water crisis. Hanna-Attisha is a pediatrician at Hurley Children's Hospital in

Flint, and her personal, vocational, and social narrative overlaps with the politics and economics of the crisis. After experiencing an epiphany on the issue at a family barbeque, she took the crisis personally.

Hanna-Attisha's account is soaked with humility and confession. For a while, she had heard a few concerns—but officials assured her that all was well. Now she is haunted by the fact that, for more than a year, she unknowingly passed along lies to the parents of her patients: young mothers who were mixing baby formula in warm Flint tap water. "I know lead. All pediatricians know lead. It's a powerful, well-studied neurotoxin that disrupts brain development. There is truly no safe level." Her complicity prods her into frantic, obsessive action.

Both Clark and Hanna-Attisha provide historical asides on a variety of related topics. Both grew up in Michigan and bring unique experience and expertise to their respective tasks. Where Clark gives the birds-eye view, Hanna-Attisha describes the tension in the trenches. Where Clark just states the facts, Hanna-Attisha is an open book of friction and feelings, citing dozens of personal texts and emails. Clark introduces all of the main characters: the governor, the mayor, the emergency manager, state and county and federal officials, water engineers, journalists, resident activists, and public health officials (including Hanna-Attisha). Hanna-Attisha calls out these characters directly and bluntly.

Clark's portrayal is more disciplined, more focused, and a hundred pages shorter. Hanna-Attisha's strength is in bearing witness. At some of the most gripping junctures during the crisis, she was there. "My Flint kids" is her refrain throughout the chronicle.

Many others were also there during the crisis, including residents, community organizers, and activists. I suspect some of them would be puzzled to read Hanna-Attisha's sympathetic testimony in the concluding pages of her book: "Admitting your mistakes, and then doing what you can to rectify them, takes integrity and strength. And in the end, I felt the governor cared—and was truly sorry."

It is a peculiar perspective, but it earns a hearing after Hanna-Attisha, page after page, shouts from the rooftop what was whispered behind closed doors. She gives an unfiltered flogging to every leader involved in the barbaric cover-up, including the governor. Fueled by a militant love for the children she treats, her testimony is both appropriate and cathartic. Yet a key question remains in the aftermath of the Flint

poisoning: Can there be a “truly sorry” without true justice?

Both Clark and Hanna-Attisha clearly name the ideologies that created the crisis: extreme austerity and white supremacy. Both authors pinpoint causes and grave concerns. They both explain that if the state hadn’t withheld the statutory revenue shares from local communities, Flint would not have had a budget deficit. They both condemn the unique weapon that Michigan governors wield: emergency management. More than 50 percent of black Michiganders have had their city of residence taken over by an unelected official. Only 2 percent of white folks have, even though many white-majority cities have floundered as much as Flint and Detroit.

Would a white-majority city ever be taken over and then dismissed and shelved by public officials? Hanna-Attisha writes:

Flint falls right into the American narrative of cheapening black life. White America may not have seen the common thread between Flint history and these tragedies, but black America saw it immediately. That the blood of African-American children was unnecessarily and callously laced with lead speaks in the same rhythm as Black Lives Matter, a movement also born from the blood of innocent African-Americans.

An entire book could be devoted to the structural racism embedded in the state. The Michigan Strategic Fund hands out hundreds of millions of subsidies for skyscrapers and stadiums constructed by billionaires but stands on the sidelines while water rates skyrocket and shut-offs are mandated for low-income residents. Meanwhile, just a couple hours from Flint, Michigan charges just \$200 per year for bottled water giant Nestle to withdraw 400 gallons per minute from the state’s groundwater table.

If Flint were a movie script, Hollywood would reject it as unbelievable. For gospel people, however, this story is a litmus test for belief. Flint reminds us that the fierce, unfiltered testimony emanating from the margins is far more believable than the bottled, measured angling of powerful officials elected to protect us. Clark and Hanna-Attisha have made vital contributions to the deciphering of these dueling portrayals of American life. Their words are apocalyptic, unveiling a world where far more than water has been poisoned.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “What happened in Flint.”