In a lofty piece of narrative journalism, Sheri Fink — a physician and journalist specializing in health and medical issues — presents the findings of her extensive investigation into the arrests and charges against doctors and staff accused of murdering patients during Hurricane Katrina. In *Five Days at Memorial*, Fink records the events that took place at Memorial Medical Center in New Orleans during and after the hurricane ravaged the city in August 2005. When the hospital staff decided to evacuate patients, some died while being moved, forcing doctors to make a big ethical decision: should they euthanize some patients who would be impossible to relocate — who were incredibly ill and likely to die? In *Five Days*, Fink engages the ethics behind “mercy killings,” especially in a time of unprecedented national crisis.

To write *Five Days at Memorial*, Fink conducted more than 500 interviews with a wide array of individuals involved in the case to present an objective story and allow readers to engage critically with all sides of such a controversial and ethical subject. Fink’s work is divided into two parts, the first about the history of the hospital, storms/storm preparation in New Orleans, and a diary account of what happened in Memorial during the five days after Katrina. Part two, entitled “Reckoning,” begins with examples of loved ones searching for family members in New Orleans. Searchers discovered the largest number of deceased bodies at Memorial, raising questions about why these people weren’t cared for; this find led to an investigation of medical staff accused of mercy killing. Dr. Anna Pou, one
of the accused, claimed that she and her colleagues did the best they could when the United States government abandoned them during this crisis. Later, the case against Pou was dropped. Fink, in her final chapter, recounts the differing public opinion on the verdict. She talked to many of the individuals involved in and affected by the case in New Orleans, illustrating the torn opinion of the American public on issues of euthanasia and mercy killing, and what can happen in midst of chaos and crisis.

Though it is quite a long read, Fink keeps readers engaged with the details of what happened in the hospital and what ethical and moral decisions the doctors faced during the state of emergency. It makes sense to present such a detailed account, as the nuances of the events are important to understanding the pressure and moral choices the hospital staff faced in an unprecedented tragedy. In a note to the readers, Fink also explains her choice of source materials, writing that she used photographs, videos, emails, notes, articles, and transcripts by other reporters, as well as weather reports, floor plans, and court reports to help advise and inform her research and argument. Fink’s work can be considered quite an interdisciplinary read, as it engages different discourses — including history, philosophy, and law — and presents them in a well-written narrative structure. Her inclusion of details of individuals’ past histories and personal lives adds a humanizing element to the story, and shows the struggles that individuals faced during Hurricane Katrina.

Fink thoughtfully explores the ethical questions surrounding euthanasia, and chronicles the crisis following the arrests of those medical professionals accused of injecting their patients to speed up their deaths. Though written eight years after Hurricane Katrina, Fink’s work is relevant, as euthanasia and assisted suicide are hotly contested, controversial subjects in contemporary American society. Furthermore, the
book does an excellent job of raising the question of whether or not certain laws still apply during a national crisis. One of the doctors, Dr. John Thiele, who went along with euthanizing patients, felt that certain medical laws did not apply because he did not have time to provide proper medical care to his dying patients while also taking care of himself and other patients who had a greater chance of surviving. He, like Dr. Anna Pou, weighed the issue of saving the most lives at the expense of losing a few. While the discourse surrounding medical law and ethics is quite strong, my only fault with the book is in its lack of a stronger inclusion of an argument about the role that race played in the crisis.

In the epilogue of the book, Fink sets up a scene: she enters Memorial hours before Hurricane Isaac (2012) was set to strike, and finds that it has been evacuated. Some progress seems to have been made since Hurricane Katrina, but it is not enough: Fink contrasts this scene with one of poor preparation in New York before Hurricane Sandy struck down. While New Orleans seems to have learned from the past, other areas of the country might be behind on proper planning for such crises. Perhaps American society will never have answers for what the correct actions to take are in these situations, and the philosophy and ethics will always be highly debated among individuals with different morals and values. But, *Five Days at Memorial* is an important read for anyone interested in these broad subjects, or anyone looking to learn more about the issues and reactions surrounding one of the worst natural disasters in American history and its long-term repercussions.