



Scott Turow

[By David Kukoff]

This week, we profile Scott Turow, partner at Chicago's Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal and acclaimed novelist of some of the most popular legal fiction of our times. His career, while unlikely to be duplicated anytime soon, serves as a model for attorneys with more than one passion.

There is a term, often bandied about the legal profession, known as "Scott Turow Syndrome" that refers to unsatisfied lawyers who secretly wish to be writers. The story of how Turow went from mere prominence to worldwide fame was so tantalizing that it became a kind of paradigmatic fantasy of sorts for any disgruntled member of the legal profession: lawyer writes novel on train while en route to work, watches it become bestseller, then goes on to celebrated career as novelist. And while all of the above is true, it is not the complete truth; indeed, it is this very exploration of the subtleties of truth that has been the basis for Turow's career, not only as a writer but as a lawyer as well.

Practicing law was the farthest thing from Scott Turow's mind when, in 1970, he graduated from Amherst College with high honors. That year, he received an Edith Mirrielees Fellowship to the Stanford University Creative Writing Center, which had been founded in 1946 by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Wallace Stegner. Whether or not Stegner's reputation as a regional writer in any way influenced Turow's decision to set his novels in the fictional enclave of Kindle County - long assumed among readers and critics to be Cook County - is not known; what is clear, however, is that Turow was a precocious, and talented writer. So much so that at the age of twenty-three he wound up teaching creative writing at Stanford from 1972 to 1975.

But fiction was changing. Turow was struggling with the accepted boundaries of what was considered worthy of inclusion in the literary canon, as well as with an increasingly perverse sensibility among

readers of serious fiction whose tastes included everything from Saul Bellow to Jacqueline Susann. As Turow puts it, "Popular fiction as it existed was just plain dumb, and literary fiction was either abstruse, or unbelievably boring." Turow's sentiments echoed those of many fiction-lovers, whose malaise with what they were reading seemed akin to that of a child who knows he must eat his vegetables yet keeps track in his mind of how many bites he has left until the deed is at last done. And Turow, who at this point was not only a graduate of a prestigious writing program but a rising star of its faculty as well, realized that not only was literary fiction not for him, but neither was the life of an English professor. For one, he confesses that he didn't have a scholar's attitude toward literature. For another, not only had all his college roommates become lawyers, but many of the friends he seemed to be making in the Bay Area were lawyers as well. "Something about the questions at the heart of the law - defining what is right, what is wise, and how effective rules can be made - (were) more congenial to me than the ones that English professors deal with," he says when asked about his ultimate decision to leave Stanford and apply to law school. "All in all, it added up to a deep attraction to the law and the people drawn to it."

And yet, as is often the case with decisions of the "don't look back" variety, it was only once Turow ostensibly left writing behind that it snuck its way back into his professional life. Turow entered Harvard Law School in 1975. And, like many of his colleagues, he wrote extensively while he was a student there. But while the focus of his colleagues tended to skew exclusively toward legal

matters, Turow was studying something else alongside his legal writings: namely his classmates and the way they were being prepared for their subsequent careers in the legal profession.

One L was published in 1977, and Turow's dramatic take on a law student's first year of law school was unlike anything that had ever been seen in American culture. Whereas the popular movie "The Paper Chase" had given sufficient warning of the intimidating professors and piles of work, Turow's account plunged deep into the soul of the would-be attorney. Turow, describing the bipolarity of the experience, wrote that "studying, I often feel as if I'm borne aloft, high just on the power of enlarging knowledge, making connections, grabbing hold. Then, suddenly, I'm close to dread." One of Turow's classmates claimed that law school was turning him into someone else, while others claimed that they were being "limited, harmed, by the education, forced to substitute dry reason for emotion, to cultivate opinions which were 'rational' but which had no roots in experience (and) the life they'd had before." Turow remained passionate about being a lawyer; law and the underlying problems that force those to seek out lawyers involve "the most fundamental assumptions regarding the way we live each day - the manner in which we treat each other." And yet this belief seemed to stand in stark contrast to the principles that were being taught in law school.

If Turow felt any ambivalence about his chosen profession coming out of law school, he was about to get a "proctologist's view," as he puts it, of the legal profession. A self-



described “sixties kid who thought that the worst thing you could do was work for money or help people make it,” Turow eschewed private practice in exchange for a job as an Assistant United States Attorney in Chicago. That a prosecutor will inevitably have his or her own issues with good and evil is a given, but Turow soon found himself in the unusual position of confronting those qualities in his peers. Operation Greylord was a federal investigation into corruption in the Illinois judiciary in which, in some cases, Turow served as lead counsel, running a high-profile decoy operation in one courtroom to shift the focus from the undercover federal operations going on in adjoining courtrooms. “I saw the worst abuses of the law, and craven dishonesty by attorneys,” he says. “But I was a lawyer too, and I thought highly of myself, my colleagues, and many other lawyers I knew. So it was a mixed bag.”

Turow’s conflicted nature about his profession would soon lead him to the unfinished business he’d left behind at Stanford. Returning to the great divide between the abject crassness of popular fiction and the stultifying nature of most work held up as literary, he began to wonder if there wasn’t an island somewhere in between, one that might be populated by the types of ambivalent personalities that he’d encountered throughout his legal career. One day he heard something from a coroner’s office and the rest is, if still too recent to be considered history, at least the stuff that envious attorneys are made of. Scott Turow wrote *Presumed Innocent* and, in doing so, created the modern legal thriller.

There is however much more to it than that, as there always is. For all the success John Grisham has enjoyed - and he was but one of many to benefit from the acceptance of the legal thriller as a legitimate publishing medium - one does not witness examples of him being placed on a pedestal by his fellow attorneys nearly as much as tends to be the case with Turow. Grisham seems more interested with the triumph of the little guy over the incorrigibly corrupt system, themes that make him enjoyable enough to the average American reader but hardly make his work realistic enough to whet the appetites of his contemporaries in the legal profession. Whereas most practicing attorneys have, at some point in their careers, found themselves in a situation that bore some resemblance to the ones faced by Turow’s protagonists. And while Turow is a staunch defender of the conventions of plot and storytelling in his work and relies upon them to help steer his characters out of their ethical quandaries (or, as has been the case in some of his books, around them), he never stoops to the kind of cheap suspense tactics or tacked-on, exaggerated set pieces that always seem manufactured to service the back-end needs of a movie production company. Rather, the action in Turow’s work invariably results from the characters’ situations, which are the result of the choices they have made in their lives. It is as if Turow, in his struggle to understand the realities of what we are and what motivates us as lawyers and as people, is quietly resigned to the notion that authenticity is sometimes the only truly accessible form of the truth.

Turow continues to practice law, as a partner in the Chicago office of Sonnenschein, Nath, & Rosenthal, where he focuses primarily on white collar crime (although in 1995 he won a reversal of a man who had spent eleven years in prison - many of those on death row - for a crime that another person had confessed to). Hardly a man of letters or leisure, he has maintained a schedule that would be daunting even without the constraints of his day job; his website states that, among other appointments, he is currently Chair of the Illinois State Appellate Defender’s Commission, which oversees the state agency which represents indigent criminal defendants in their appeals. And yet he still manages to write practically every day. But to say that Turow is a guy whose phenomenal success is the result of talent and good timing would be, if not untruthful, again only part of the story. Turow is fond of the adage that chance tends to favor the prepared mind, and while it might not be within everyone’s range of ability to earn degrees in both law and creative writing, it is well worth noting that he took two seemingly disparate careers and brought them together in an effort to make sense of the questions posed by the study of both. Turow’s fiction may, on the surface, address contemporary topics in the world of law (his latest book, *Reversible Errors*, concerns a man convicted of a capital offense), and he may thrust his characters through the maelstrom of truths, half-truths, and untruths that could only be written by an insider in America’s legal system, but at the end of the day the exploration of why people do what they do is nothing if not entirely human.