

The Burden of Proof Short Guide

The Burden of Proof by Scott Turow

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Characters

The central characters of *The Burden of Proof* are nearly all members of the Stern family. At the center of the novel is Alejandro "Sandy" Stern, Rusty Sabich's enigmatic defense lawyer from *Presumed Innocent*. As this novel indicates, Sabich's trial had increased Stern's practice and he seems the model of the successful professional man. However, when he comes home to discover his wife dead in the garage with only the note, "Can you forgive me?", the fifty-six-year old Stern is forced to face the deficiencies and failures in his life.

He comes to realize that he had chosen to avoid looking at the darker aspects of his wife, including the fact that she had always been an unhappy woman, full of secrets. As flashbacks in the book reveal, he had found Clara's past a mystery; he had never really understood how he, a poor immigrant, had been able to marry Clara Mittler, the daughter of a prominent and wealthy attorney. Clara's death forces him to reexamine and analyze their relationship in a way that he never had while she was alive.

Stern also has to confront the mysteries embedded in his three children — Peter, a doctor, whose troubled relationship with his father continues to deteriorate after his mother's death; Marta, a legal aid lawyer in New York who comes to her father's aid when he himself becomes involved in legal proceedings; and Kate, his youngest daughter, whose beauty seems to have shielded her from many of life's harsh realities.

Each of these children hides a number of secrets whose revelation forces Stern to re-evaluate his original assumptions about them.

Also important in the story is Dixon Hartnell, husband of Stern's beloved sister, Silvia. Dixon, head of a commodities futures trading empire and owner of Maison Dixon, a brokerage house, is Stern's chief client and often the bane of his existence.

Stern half admires this powerful, womanizing, and self-confident businessman as the prototypical American and half despises him for the pain that this self-involved man sometimes inflicts on those around him.

Dixon's shady dealings bring Stern into contact with Assistant U.S.

Attorney Sonia Klonsky. Klonsky, after spending a decade in various graduate programs, had now embarked on a demanding law career while in her early forties. Stern finds this woman, in the midst of her first pregnancy after a bout with breast cancer and in a shaky marriage, a compelling figure; she seems to offer him the enticing prospect of starting over again.

However, he gradually overcomes his infatuation with her and eventually marries Helen Dudak, an old family friend now divorced from her husband.

Like Stern, Helen has had to learn to adapt to the single life after the security of a long-term relationship.

They both have learned by their failures and are ready for the demands of a new marriage.

Social Concerns

While *The Burden of Proof* maintains the interest in law demonstrated in Turow's two earlier works, the novel's primary emphasis is on the troubled relationships within the Stern family and the quest of Sandy Stern for self-definition following the mysterious suicide of his wife Clara after thirtyone years of marriage. During the course of the novel, Stern must come to grips with the "imponderable duties darkly rooted in the hard soil of [his] own sense of filial and professional obligation." Stern must also learn to venture out of the neatly ordered world he had created for himself as he explores the reason for his wife's suicide and rethink some of the assumptions of his own life.

The novel also examines, as *Presumed Innocent* did to a lesser extent, the assimilation of political refugees into the American landscape. Like Rozat Sabich who Americanizes his name to Rusty, Alejandro "Sandy" Stern comes to realize the legacy of his past; it led to his career as a defense attorney and colored all his dealings with his family and associates, where among whom he always feels like an outsider.

Techniques

Turow's plotting technique is basically the same as in *Presumed Innocent*. Although the novel seems to be written in retrospect (Stern's eventual marriage to Helen Dudak is presented in the book's first sentence), most of the action takes place in the present tense. While the book is written from the third, not the first, person point of view, the story is told exclusively from Stern's perspective.

Thus the reader, once again, must work side by side with the protagonist to decipher some of the book's mysteries.

As in *Presumed Innocent*, Turow also uses extensive flashback sequences to show the protagonist's relationship with the dead woman.

One intriguing symbol Turow employs in the novel is Stern's glass desk.

This desk, chosen by an interior decorator hired by Clara, had never been a favorite with him. Even after many years, he "was still not accustomed to looking down and seeing the soft expanse of his lap." This desk, so reminiscent of Clara and so emblematic of Stern's aversion to clear-sightedness, is shattered during the final scene between Dixon and him when many of the novel's secrets are revealed. From that meeting, Stern emerges feeling like a different person.

Themes

Like *Presumed Innocent* (1987), *The Burden of Proof* is a mystery with the death of an enigmatic woman at the center. Both books force the protagonists on a journey of outward and inward exploration to probe their lives and their relationships with these dead women. In both the case of Rusty Sabich and Sandy Stern, each is so intent on creating a semblance of "normal" life that he refuses to acknowledge the darker influences in his life until compelled to confront them in a dramatic fashion. With Clara's suicide, Sandy must examine his own failings in his relationships with his wife and with his children. At the same time, he comes to realize that the interpretations he has made of other people or events are flawed.

Adaptations

In February 1992, Scott Turow's *The Burden of Proof* was broadcast as a twopart television mini-series on ABC. The cast featured Hector Elizondo as Sandy Stern, Brian Dennehy as Dixon Hartnell, Mel Harris as Sonia Klonsky, and Stephanie Powers as Helen Dudak.

Mike Robe directed the production and Turow acted as the production consultant.



Key Questions

The focus of *The Burden of Proof* is on a mystery; yet this novel deals even more explicitly with the personal and emotional ramifications of that mystery as Sandy Stern has to unravel the reasons behind his wife's suicide. As he does so, he must come to grips with the toll that the legal profession has taken on his personal life and with the deep secrets within his own family.

1. How has the depiction of Sandy Stern changed from *Presumed Innocent* to this novel?
2. Is there a typical Turow protagonist? Are there any ways in which Stern is like Rusty Sabich?
3. How does Stern's immigrant past influence his present?
4. How does Turow comment on the typical American success story through his depiction of the Stern family?
5. How guilty is Stern of the problems which overtake his family?
6. In what ways does Stern find Dixon Hartnell both a compelling and a repulsive figure? In what ways does he represent for Stern the prototypical American?
7. What choices do the different female characters in the novel offer to Stern?
8. What secrets does Stern find hidden in his own children?
9. How does his discovery of the various secrets within his family change Stern?
10. What are the burdens that these characters have to carry?

Literary Precedents

At one point, late in the novel, Stern sees that "The walls were closing in on Dixon, as on some Poe character. . . ."

In its revelation of the dark secrets embedded in families, *The Burden of Proof* may be an echo of a work like "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). The tortured family conflicts in the novel have their literary roots as far back as Sophocles' Oedipus plays.

The image of the family disintegrating around the figure of the mother is also seen in Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). The quest for a more mature understanding of life also forms the basis of novels by two of Turow's favorite authors — Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1864-1869) and Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964).



Related Titles

The Burden of Proof is intimately connected to Presumed Innocent. Not only are Stern and his wife Clara part of the earlier work, but the second novel discloses that Rusty Sabich is now a judge. Yet these books are linked by more than the characters. Their structures and concerns are also quite similar. Both novels feature protagonists who must cope with their parents' pasts as political refugees. Both of these men are married to complex and mysterious women whose tightly reined emotions yield explosive results when released. Both become infatuated with troubled women who offer them something they feel is lacking in their lives. Finally, both must interpret the mystery behind the death of a woman that forces them to explore regions of themselves that they had previously ignored. This continuous focus on the darker recesses of the protagonists' lives is also an important aspect of Pleading Guilty.

The Laws of Our Fathers (1996) brings together Sonja (Sonny) Klonsky from The Burden of Proof, who is a kind of refugee, left politically stranded by her wild communist mother; black defense lawyer Hopie Tuttle; state senator Loyell Eddgar, whose wife's murder by a soul-dead black gangster sets this drama in motion; and Seth Weissman, journalist and son of a Nazi death camp survivor. In this novel Turow abandons a jury motif and tries this case from the bench so that the scenes are worked out dramatically person to person. The theme, finally, is the working out the profound struggles of two generations through one emblematic crime.



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