One L Short Guide

One L by Scott Turow

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Characters

O ne L traces the important relationships in law school between professors and students and the students and their peers and families. At the center of the work is Scott Turow himself. He declares early on, "this book is not a novel. Everything I describe in the following pages happened to me."

Leaving graduate school in creative writing at Stanford at the age of twenty-six was a risky undertaking, and Turow carefully charts the changes he undergoes in his first year at Harvard Law from his initial euphoria and love of the law to his eventual burnout and disillusionment to his gradual adoption of a more balanced approach to his studies. Along the way, he is alarmed by the changes he sees in himself and in the people around him.

The extreme pressure to succeed brings out the worst in himself and in others; it also forces him to spend most of his waking hours consumed with the law and ignoring his understanding wife, Annette.

As he documents the changes in himself, Turow also sees the alterations in his group of friends, primarily those in his study group. Although he calls this work autobiographical, the other characters "are not the same as the friends and professors with whom I spent the year." Turow says that he "combined and altered personalities in order to represent more adequately the general character of my experience."

The friends he made at law school illustrate the diversity of the students present there. Among his closer friends are Terry Nazzario, a street-wise young man from Elizabeth, New Jersey, who becomes increasingly alienated from the classroom experience and spends most of his time studying law on his own in the library; Aubrey Drake, an older student who had already graduated from Harvard's M.B.A. program and had an unsuccessful business career; and Stephen Litowitz, a Ph.D. in sociology who came to law school to better his chances in finding a job in academe, but who becomes increasingly competitive and obsessed with making the Law Review, an honor reserved for only the top students.

Several professors also play important roles in the book. The most dominating figure is Rudolph Perrini who teaches the Contracts course. Both widely admired and feared, Perrini is an astute practitioner of the Socratic 3101 method in the classroom, making his students live in fear that they will be put on the spot and ridiculed. Another professor, William Zechman, who teaches the Torts class, also causes some frustration in the classroom but for different reasons. At first, Zechman's propensity for showing the ambiguities in legal cases irritates his class, but when the validity of his approach becomes apparent, his popularity and esteem increase. Another popular instructor is Nicky Morris, a thirtyone-year old professor who encourages more familiarity, a less rigid classroom style, and a more philosophical approach to the law. Turow comes to value the instruction of Zechman and Morris whose concern for the law and its

dilemmas appears genuine; he is less impressed by Perrini who seems more interested in manipulating students than in educating them.

Social Concerns

One L, Scott Turow's journal of his first year at Harvard Law School, reveals his fundamental concern with the training given to aspiring lawyers. As 550 of the best and brightest arrive at Harvard Law School to become one L's (the designation given to first year law students), they are systematically demoralized and defeated by the demanding workload and the rigors of the Socratic method. The students also worry that their indoctrination into the law has begun to alter many of their fundamental values. Gina Spitz, one of the one L's, complains, "They're turning me into someone else. . . . They're making me different."

Turow also questions whether law school training actually prepares students to face the difficult issues they will confront as lawyers. He observes, "Too much of what goes on around the law school and in the legal classroom seeks to tutor students in strategies for avoiding, for ignoring, for somehow subverting the unquantifiable, the inexact, the emotionally charged, those things which still pass in my mind under the label 'human.'"

Finally, Turow discusses a number of important issues about the profession — the reasons for increasing law school enrollment, the role of women and minorities in the profession, and the job prospects beyond law school.

Techniques

As a journal of Turow's first year in law school, One L follows a straightforward chronology that allows him to document his changing moods and perceptions. Yet Turow does more than provide a personal narrative, he also presents liberal doses of the material he was learning in his classes. His explanations of some of the moral dilemmas and technical points of law are similar to those he makes in Presumed Innocent and The Burden of Proof.

This book also reveals Turow's penchant for telling his story through the eyes of one character who, despite his personal and professional difficulties, remains the reader's only source of information in the story.

Themes

In all his books, Turow is "fascinated by the extent to which the law define[s] our everyday lives." In this book, he shows the methods by which lawyers are trained to argue and to view the truth, a concern also at the heart of his two subsequent novels, Presumed Innocent (1987) and The Burden of Proof (1990). Turow is intrigued with the law's central paradox: While it endeavors to standardize its judgments and eradicate ambiguity, the law also realizes that ambiguity forms the basis of most court cases. In its "war with ambiguity, with uncertainty," the law must presume that the truth may be discerned and that adequate judgments may be rendered.

More than the problems inherent in the law itself, Turow is also concerned with how the single-minded pursuit of the law affects those who study it so assiduously. Over the course of the year, he becomes dramatically aware of how the tensions in law school exacerbate everyone's weaknesses.

Key Questions

One L could serve as the basis for a lively discussion of law school and the training it gives to prospective lawyers.

Turow examines the moral and ethical dilemmas posed by the law and whether lawyers are adequately trained to confront them. For readers both in and out of legal circles, One L provides a stimulating introduction to the law's complexities.

1. What are some of the problems that Turow points to in legal training?

2. In his estimation, can the law provide just settlements for those who seek them?

3. What changes, both personal and professional, do law students experience during the course of their studies?

Are these changes positive or negative?

4. How well do the law professors serve as role models for their students?

How should these professors be evaluated?

5. What new understanding of the law does the book bring to non-lawyers?

6. Since this work has been used as a text at the Harvard Law School, what perspective would it give to first year legal students?

7. Would lawyers agree with Turow's assessment of legal education?

8. Does the law define our everyday lives, as Turow asserts? In what ways?

9. How did Turow feel, approaching the profession as an outsider?

10. Does the study of law make people distrustful? Why?

11. Are there any ways to improve legal education?

Literary Precedents

One L, in many of its scenes, is highly reminiscent of the 1973 movie The Paper Chase (based on John Jay Osborn, Jr.'s 1971 novel), also set in the Harvard Law School. Both reveal the perpetual drive to receive good grades and both feature a demanding, autocratic professor, in The Paper Chase, Charles Kingsfield and in One L, Rudolph Perrini. Yet, in the larger sense, One L is a classic initiation story, a bildungsroman, in which the young man is educated into a new way of life.

Turow writes, "In baseball it's the rookie year. In the navy it is boot camp. In many walks of life there is a similar time of trial and initiation, a period when newcomers are forced to be victims of their own ineptness and when they must somehow master the basic skills of the profession in order to survive." Like Charles Dickens's character David Copperfield (1849-1850), Turow has to adapt to a new world that forces him to learn much about himself both personally and professionally.

Related Titles

As in his subsequent novels, Turow focuses on the law and its ambiguities.

He also begins illustrating the toll that the law can take on those who adopt it as a profession. The long demanding hours of law school eventually translate to the equal demands of the workplace that bring such trouble to his later protagonists, Rusty Sabich, Sandy Stern, and Mack Malloy.

Interestingly enough, a Sandy Stern does appear in this book. However, this engineering student from MIT who eventually makes the Law Review is not the Argentinean-born Stern who plays a major role in both Presumed Innocent and The Burden of Proof and who is mentioned fleetingly in Pleading Guilty (1993).

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