

Pleading Guilty Short Guide

Pleading Guilty by Scott Turow

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Characters

At the center of *Pleading Guilty* is Mack Malloy, ex-Catholic, ex-cop, ex-husband, ex-alcoholic, and soon to be ex-partner in Gage & Griswell. Even from his childhood he had recognized that "I was hopelessly at odds with everyone — my ma, the Church, the nuns at school, the entire claustrophobic community with its million rules."

As he grew older, Mack continued to realize the many traps around him.

Since he owed his admission to the police academy to a local councilman, Mack had to repay the favor, and so he altered the bar exam results for the councilman's son, Jake Eiger. This pattern of corruption was a part of Mack's life, even though many times it was inadvertent rather than willed.

When he was a police officer, Mack's partner gave him his "share" of a drug bust. Although Mack gave this money to the Church, he later testified against his partner, ruining that man's career while furthering his own. He comments, "Sometimes in life, things just happen. No planning. Out of control."

Mack's guilt is also strong because of his failed marriage, his abortive relationship with his son, and his own troubles as an alcoholic. Therefore, even before Bert's case arose, Mack already was dealing with the many corruptions in his own life.

Mack finds his own guilts mirrored in the lives of the characters around him, particularly his partners in Gage & Griswell. Mack discovers that he is not the only one with a series of dark secrets. As his investigation unfolds, he learns that Bert Kamin had been involved in a gambling scheme; yet Bert had participated in this plan for love, not money. He had fallen in love with the son of the firm's staff supervisor in Accounting, Glyndora Gaines. Like Mack, although he had been involved in wrong-doing, Bert really had no intention of harming anyone.

The same might be said of Martin Gold, the firm's managing partner, and the man Mack calls, "no question, the best lawyer I know." Mack believes that Martin is "the navigator, the person with the compass, the man who tells the high and mighty, if not about morals, then at least about principles and rules." Mack is particularly disillusioned to learn of Gold's role in the cover up of the theft of the money, even though Gold's reasons turn out to be nobler than Mack had at first thought.

From other characters, such as Jake Eiger, his friend from the old neighborhood that he had "helped" out of a pinch, and Gino "Pigeyes" Dimonte, his former police partner, Mack expects complicity and corruption. Yet, he is surprised to find it in his closest friend in the firm, and sometime lover, Emilia "Brushy" Bruccia. Although Brushy is one of the "stars" at Gage & Griswell, she remains a sort of outsider, not only because she is a woman, but because she is a sexually active one. Mack remarks, "But for her sexual follies, Brushy still pays a heavy price. Her commitment to appetites that most of us are busy trying to suppress leads folks to regard her as odd, even dangerous. . . ." Brushy

stays close to Mack during his investigation, but this closeness is revealed to be self-interest as she keeps tabs on him in order to protect her own career.

Social Concerns

Turow continues his exploration of how the law affects people's lives in his presentation of a potentially scandalous situation at the successful law firm of Gage and Griswell. Partner in the firm and former policeman McCormack "Mack" Malloy is asked to investigate the mysterious disappearance of another of the firm's partners, Bert Kamin, along with 5.6 million dollars from a client's account. Like other Turow protagonists, Mack is forced to face his own failings — as a husband and father, as a policeman, as a lawyer, and as a human being. Recognizing his own shortcomings, Mack is further compelled to view the corruption in the lives of those around him and in the life of the firm itself. Everyone is out to protect his/her own reputation.

Things appear to be as Mack's mother told him when he was a boy, "Everybody's a bit of a thief, Mack. Everybody's got something they're wantin to steal. It just takes the rest of us watching to make most folks stop."



Techniques

As in Turow's earlier novels, *Pleading Guilty* focuses tightly on one central protagonist. Like Rusty Sabich in *Presumed Innocent* (1987), Mack Malloy narrates his own story. However, Turow tries a new narrative technique in this novel. The narrative ostensibly consists of a series of tapes that Mack recorded to serve as a memorandum to the Management Oversight Committee at Gage & Griswell. However, as these tapes progress, it becomes obvious that these tapes record much more than the details of Mack's investigation, they become a confession of the many deficiencies he sees in his own life. He realizes the course that these recordings have taken when he observes, "It seems increasingly obvious, even to me, that I'll never show a word of this to anyone on the Committee. . . . So we all wonder: who am I talking to?" Instead, these recordings become, for him, a way of sharing his own story with himself, "I got up and, for comfort, like a child who fixes on a blanket or a teddy bear, went back across the veranda to my cabana, and found my Dictaphone." And even more importantly, they become his way of sharing his story. What does he want? He says, "What more can I call it but connection?" This technique forces the reader even more intimately into the story than in Turow's previous novels. Here, the audience becomes Malloy's confessor, who ultimately is being asked to judge his actions.



Themes

As in his earlier novels, Turow, in *Pleading Guilty*, examines the darker forces that control the lives of many of his characters. However, unlike Turow's previous protagonists, Mack Malloy is much more aware of the shadows in his life. From his upbringing as the child of a father who stole, to his exposure to and participation in the corruptions of a policeman's life, to his failed marriage and parenthood, to the often questionable dealings of the law, Mack understands life's many temptations. In fact, when he learns of Bert's presumed theft, Mack's reaction reveals his desire to escape the many compromises of his life: "What a notion! Grabbing all that dough and hieing out for parts unknown. The wealth, the freedom, the chance to start anew! I wasn't sure if I was more shocked or thrilled." Mack longs to escape from his life; yet he also feels the need to confess his many failures.

At the same time that Turow explores the life of his protagonist, he also examines how the legal profession, supposed to insure justice and fairness, is particularly vulnerable to corruption and manipulation.



Key Questions

Pleading Guilty should provide an extremely complex canvas for group discussions, particularly in its complicated central character, Mack Malloy. It would also be interesting to chart the changes in Turow's characters from his earlier works to this one.

1. What is the significance of the title? Was Mack Malloy guilty even before the novel began?
2. In what ways does Mack's background affect his current state?
3. How does Turow present women in this novel? What do his relationships with Nora Malloy, Glyndora Gaines, and Emilia Bruccia reveal about Mack?
4. Are other characters besides Mack influenced and affected by their past actions?
5. Is there a difference between the small incidents of corruption illustrated in the novel and the big ones?
6. How does the narrative technique influence the reader? Do readers find themselves sympathizing with corrupt actions?
7. Is a true meaningful relationship possible in the world of this novel?
8. Are characters' actions understandable or reprehensible?

Literary Precedents

As its title suggests, *Pleading Guilty* should be read as an example of confessional literature. The novel opens with an epigraph from *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (397-401). In its desire to a frank and open record of Mack Malloy's life, it is also reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781, 1788). The novel also echoes a whole line of confessional poets including Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and W. D. Snodgrass who all exposed their personal guilts and shortcomings in their works.

Related Titles

Pleading Guilty is closely related to all of Turow's earlier works. As in *One L* (1977), this novel explores the moral and ethical dilemmas posed by legal practice. It shares with *Presumed Innocent* and *The Burden of Proof* (1990) a concern with the darker sides of human experience and their impact on people's relationships. Further, once again, Sandy Stern puts in a brief appearance as the lawyer who defended Malloy's former partner. Turow's fictions increasingly seem to ask whether anyone can be presumed innocent.

Further, if people are always guilty for one reason or another, how can our legal system cope with this type of corruption?

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