Mirror, Mirror On The Wall: Histories of American Law Schools

Alfred S. Konefsky
University at Buffalo School of Law

John Henry Schlegel
University at Buffalo School of Law

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Cops are Pigs, and Lawyers Suck: The Portrayal of the Legal System in Young Adult Literature

When I entered law school, I began to hear a lot of negative lawyer jokes. I wondered where this attitude could have originated. I started thinking about my own experience with the law and how my foundation of legal knowledge began in books. Was the negative myth inspired by books and other media? Is it encouraged by the novels that teenagers read? I began questioning how literature, specifically young adult literature, portrayed the law. I know various Community Outreach programs bring police into cities to play basketball or throw dances to show kids that police are “okay” and can be turned to in times of trouble. I wanted to find out where young adult literature stood on this subject. Do novels portray the legal system as an alternative? Or are teenagers learning that the legal system is to be avoided because it is so riddled with problems?

Teenagers quickly learn they have few rights: they must attend school and obey curfew. When they talk on the phone, their parents can eavesdrop, legally. However, teenagers do have some rights, like the freedom from physical, mental, or verbal abuse. Without a legal system to uphold these rights, no recourse exists for these crimes. I wanted to find out if literature reminds teenagers that they have these rights, even if they are limited. Does teenagers’ academic and leisure reading empower them? The legal system has its flaws, yet it often fulfills its purpose of protecting citizens—of any age. Novels should encourage teenagers to go to the police if they are in danger. I examined young adult novels on censorship, rape, and child abuse, finding a frightening pattern.

Admittedly, teenagers have a lot of positive sources for dealing with censorship issues. Nat Hentoff’s The Day They Came to Arrest the Book incorporates his numerous years studying the First Amendment with his flair for writing young adult novels. Both Hentoff and Avi (in his documentary novel Nothing But the Truth) show both sides of the censorship issue: how the line between protecting adolescents and ensuring rights is ambiguous. This type of book would effectively show how some of the abstract terms in the Constitution can be applied to teenagers’ everyday lives. These novels make a point to show that young adults can have a loud legal voice on censorship if they choose to take a stand, speak out in classes, and attend town meetings.

When I switched gears from civil to criminal issues, I found it increasingly difficult to find books that don’t idealize the legal system, nor solely criticize...
it. However, sometimes I did find this balance, as in Lois Duncan’s *Killing Mr. Griffin*. The police force is sufficiently open-minded to listen to the victim’s wife and her hunch as to who murdered her husband. Additionally, the book portrays the courts as understanding and intelligent enough to try the true perpetrator of the crimes as an adult. The other kids who just went along with the homicide still get in trouble, but in a fair and just manner in light of their accomplice liability. This type of book has a double message: if you break the law you will get caught; but if you do commit a crime, turn yourself in and admit your mistake before it gets out of hand. Adolescents must learn these lessons.

The book that truly encompasses my own goals about what young adult literature should show about the legal system is Harper Lee’s classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The lawyer, Atticus Finch, is a “good guy” but stuck in the nebulous web of the legal system. John Jay Osborn’s *The Paper Chase* conveys a similar message but not as effectively as Lee does in her novel. She shows that the legal system is not always fair, but it is all that we have so we may as well work within its confines. Even if the fight appears futile, fight it anyway because there is always a chance of success and justice. Amazingly, even though the jury finds Tom Robinson guilty, the reader can still believe that Atticus correctly defended Tom’s rights. Atticus is the model for attorneys everywhere. He is both an attorney and an extraordinary character: an unlikely combination. This novel suggests that the legal system’s imperfection results from external forces such as racism and prejudice.

I have succeeded in finding good books concerning the legal system, but don’t be mislead: things only go down-hill from here. In the era of the Rodney King beatings, and the needless follies of the Simpson case, it seems evident that the police can be portrayed negatively. Either the police use excessive force (though for some reason that seems more concentrated in adult literature) or they are viewed as incompetent (young adult fiction commonly uses this device to debase officers). In Shelley Singer’s *Searching for Sara*, the officers question every suspect to no avail, thus requiring a private detective, someone outside the legal system to figure out the murder. This same ideology can be traced in almost all of the detective fiction I have read. The police system is too arrogant to listen to clues, too dumb to suspect the right people, and too unorganized to act on any information it stumbles upon.

However, although some novels portray officers negatively, it is still better than what happens in Jimmy Cheshire’s *Home Boy*. It is one thing to say that the legal system has problems. It is entirely different to completely overlook the system as if it doesn’t exist. In this terrible tale of physical and sexual abuse, the protagonist, the school administrators, and the counselors never even consider turning to the police. It is as if that option does not exist. Perhaps trite, there is a correlation with Disney’s production of *Beauty and the Beast*. The Beast never considers turning to the police for protection from the mob attacks, nor does Belle go to the police to force the Beast to return her father. Like *Home Boy*, *Beauty and the Beast* tells of a world seemingly outside the legal system. I worry about the spread of this mindset because it reenforces adolescents’ misconception that there is nowhere to turn.

Admittedly, apathy is far less dangerous than the group of books I found that blatantly advise avoiding the legal system. In a way, these shocked me more than anything else I read. As an adolescent, I might have been cynical enough to believe these novels over the more optimistic ones. All I had to do was watch television news stories about rape and murder to see that the police and legal system could not help everyone in need. In *Stalker* and *Are You Home Alone?*, young adults are told not to rely on the police for protection. The message is that the only person you can rely on is yourself. Why would any teenager go to the police in this situation? Even more
strangely, Sandy Asher’s *Things Are Seldom What They Seem* advocates avoiding the legal system because it might actually punish someone who sexually molests kids, and that would be unfair to the abuser. Sounds a little crazy? I thought so, too.

I know that the legal system has problems and I realize that fiction should not over-romanticize the courts or the police. I still wish that the majority of the books I found painted a balanced picture. I can understand why some young adults do not turn to the legal system as a reasonable alternative in a time of crisis. I may not have found the source of the anti-police, anti-attorney ideology, but these types of books only reinforce these negative stereotypes for our adolescents. To be faithful to reality, books should portray both the good and the bad aspects of our legal system.

Christine Pedigo, a first-year law student at UC Davis, wrote this as an undergraduate contemplating law school.

Bibliography


   Mr. Carraway, the Drama Club coach, seems to have too much power over his students, so Debbie and Murray decide to find out why. They discover that the teacher sexually abused his students. This book advocates not turning the teacher in because the police will unfairly punish him.


   Through a series of letters, journal entries, and newsletters, this documentary novel covers the two-sides of the same story. Philip Malloy decides to hum along with the national anthem despite repeated warnings from his teacher, Margaret Narwin, that it is against the school rules. This book is a great teaching tool and shows how quickly a story can be twisted around. It also shows the first amendment in action.


   Frederick Gamble lives in Father McFlaherty’s Home for Boys where he is sexually, mentally, and physically abused. Yet, amid this struggle he must grow into an adult and come to terms with his homosexuality. This book is one to avoid because it treats homosexuality like a sin and depicts life as something that should be merely accepted and not changed.


   A group of students decide to teach their evil English teacher (Mr. Griffin) a lesson by kidnapping him for being so hard and unfair. But what starts as a prank turns out bad because Griffin dies. This book is not the best writing but good for a quick read.


   Janna is a dancer striving for stardom, that is stalked by a fan. She must figure out who her stalker is before he hurts. This book is poorly written and is more of a guide of what not to do in this situation.


   Barney Roth takes a stand on whether *Huck Finn* should be removed from the school library, but fails to convince the parents to keep the text. Barney and his friends quickly learn that censorship can easily get out of hand. This is a great book that shows both sides of the issue without getting preachy or moralistic. This book can be taught alongside Avi’s book, mentioned above.


   Issues of justice are discussed in the story of Jem and Scout, the children of an attorney. The attorney defends Tom Robinson, a black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman in the pre-civil rights South. It is a must read, or a must re-read if you haven’t already experienced this book.


   Various viewpoints of first-year students at Harvard Law, as they learn what it means to study law. The book provides a rather harsh view of law school that is slightly outdated, but it still gives a good idea of the stress and pressure that future lawyers must go through. *May* not be interesting to all audiences, but it is a good book for pre-law students who may be pursuing law school for the wrong reasons.


   Gail is raped by Phil Lawver, her best friend’s boyfriend, while she is baby-sitting. In her pursuit for justice, she realizes the legal system is unwilling to punish Phil because his parents are highly influential in the town. This book discusses the whether the law protects the victims or the rapist in society. It is rather depressing, but sadly accurate.


    Barrett Lake, part-time history teacher and part-time detective, tries to find a runaway named Sara. Instead she gets caught up in solving a murder at the runaway center where Sara is staying. Lake must solve the mystery before the murderer attacks again. This book follows in the hard-boiled detective genre but provides a nice feminist twist. It is not all that literary but quite enjoyable.