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Turow, S, *Pleading Guilty*, Penguin Viking, 1993.

As I have argued in these pages and elsewhere on previous occasions, our popular culture industry creates and reproduces images of law, lawyers and criminal justice with amazing frequency. As a result, the popular imagination and public impression on these subjects is formed more often and more deeply by the television shows people watch, the films they see and the books they read than it is by the daily “real” practices of the legal system. In this sense, the world of criminal justice is clearly what Baudrillard describes as the “simulacrum” in which the image is conceptually and concretely more real than reality itself.

A brief look at current bestseller lists and movie attendance records will confirm, if confirmation is necessary, the key and continuing role played by “lawyer” books and films in popular culture. At present, John Grisham, lawyer and author of the bestsellers “The Firm”, “The Client” and “The Pelican Brief” among others leads the pack in terms of attention and no doubt also in terms of the size of his bank account. Crime and criminal law, if there is a difference, share one thing in common, each is big business. Big Hollywood names such as Tom Cruise (“The Firm”) and Julia Roberts (“The Pelican Brief”) feature in the film versions of Grisham’s novels and paperback releases are timed to coincide with the latest movie opening.

The problem from an aesthetic point of view, although obviously not from a commercial one, is that Grisham really is not a very good writer. His novels are formulaic, predictable and quite simply fall within the category of books you would read on a long plane trip if you have trouble sleeping. They are not “bad” in the sense of being unreadable, they are just bad in the sense that they are only readable. Nothing more, nothing less. The author Grisham has apparently replaced in the public’s view as the “best” author of legal fiction, Scott Turow, does not suffer from this fault. He can write. Indeed, he was a writer before he was a lawyer and I am not sure that Grisham can make the same claim. As anyone who has ever marked a first-year law student essay can tell you, good writing and legal scholarship or even good writing and writing about law do not necessarily go together. Turow, however, manages not only to write well but to write well about law.

His first two novels, *Burden of Proof* and *Presumed Innocent*, were both best sellers and excellent and realistic depictions of the daily grind of the American criminal justice system. His latest book, *Pleading Guilty*, is also a bestseller and a very well-written novel. Like the other two, *Pleading Guilty* is set in the fictional Kindle County and offers a complex and interesting mix of law practice and personal trauma. Indeed, one of Turow’s persistent themes is the public/private distinction and the myriad ways in which this ideological construct plays a key role in the law. *Pleading Guilty* follows the trials and tribulations of Mack Molloy, the lawyer charged by his firm’s leaders with finding their missing partner, Bert Kamin and the \$5.6 million which has disappeared from a trust fund along with Bert. Adopting a cross-genre approach, Turow offers us the story as a series of tapes dictated by Molloy as his investigation proceeds. And the story does proceed along with the investigation. On the way, we deal with substance abuse, legal malpractice, corruption in the judiciary and the police force, fraud and on the “private” side, with gay

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relationships, sexually transmitted disease, interracial relationships and intergenerational conflict. We also receive an accurate, albeit fictionalised, account and description of the rivalries, jealousies and struggles which are part of day-to-day life in large law firms as well as a good description of just how easy it is to safely launder large amounts of money.

Turow does all of this with style, wit and charm and without ever sinking to the current level of pulp epitomised by the Grisham phenomenon. This does not mean that Turow's book is without fault. Once again, he has written a man's book. Women are either absent or are drawn with more attention to stereotypes than to the reality which surrounds his "main" male characters. As in his previous novels, Turow seems either reluctant or unable to deal with questions of female equality or sexuality. This is particularly unfortunate not just from the political perspective and what the absent female says about the culture of which Turow's work is a part but also at the less serious, but also important level of plot and character development.

Thus, Turow's book is good and probably worth reading. It is well written and fun. It is too bad, however, that the silencing and effacement in law and in the culture more generally is perpetuated by someone who should know better. After all, Turow has not yet been named to the Bench.

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