

One L

By *Scott Turow*

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Reviewed by **Dr. Janet B. Rainey**

Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

This is a book for anyone to read who is interested in or planning to attend law school, or perhaps more importantly, work with students transitioning into new learning and living environments, such as a graduate or professional school. Scott Turow chronicles his first year as a student of the Harvard Law School, the oldest and most prestigious law school in the US. Turow recorded the intellectual and emotional trials and tribulations of survival during a year of uncertainty. The questions he has about himself and the reasons for wanting to become a lawyer are revealed during the end of his last term of the first year.

The book is written as a journal of the experiences of true concerns and questioning of himself, fellow students, faculty, and these relationships. The interactions with students bonds them together, yet is also keeps them separate. The competition for being the best in the best, most elite law school in the country compounds the simplest assignments. The humiliation from professors takes the human aspect out of law, and he recognized that classroom terror has been a fixed aspect of legal education.

The first year law class numbered 140 and all students took their classes together. Students were placed in groups by section and took all of the same classes. This sectioning did provide for the development of small study groups and building personal relationships. The relationship between faculty and student was distant and did not promote one-on-one discussion. Preparation for each class was intense and for the student who was not prepared, it was torture to anticipate the humiliation that would be their fortune to receive.

Unlike, traditional graduate schools, exams and grades were not given throughout the course of each semester thus keeping the atmosphere and tensions heightened and stressful. This lack of traditional benchmarking is difficult given that there is not interaction with faculty outside the classroom. There is no measuring mechanism in place to give the students information as to their standing in the class. Exams were given after each term and all material presented during the term was included in the examination.

The Socratic method of teaching was also new to the first year law students. This method was not simply lecturing; it was discussion that began when a student was selected without warning by the professor and questioned in depth about the case and its outcomes. The professor would continue to questions the student on the details of the case, getting narrower with each question. If the student was unable to respond, the professor would move to another student and interrogate in the same manner. This type of interrogation was often terrorizing and humiliating to the student by the professor.

If the student was unable to answer the questions, it often lead to the humiliation of the student by the professor. The professor had used the opportunity to illustrate the

depth of his own knowledge and expertise and power over the student. Other students viewed the humiliation of a student as “thank goodness it wasn’t me this time.” The interrogation often also created isolation and embarrassment for the victim.

The humiliation was characterized by terror of the professor as the custodian of justice. This professor was a learned person who was brutal in the process of teaching students. This brutality was accepted by most students as part of their learning, but did not believe it to be the way to teach law. Faculty were criticized for their style of teaching, presentation of material, and lack of humanness in teaching.

Students were very competitive with each other and also with themselves. The admission that competitiveness leads to recognition and pleasure was part of the nature of being in law school. The way of containing the competitive feelings was simply to deny them, but that was the edge that got one into the prestigious Harvard Law School. To openly give in to the competitive feelings was to win recognition and favor from the professors. Usually those who had gained recognition were viewed with disdain from fellow students, yet also admired.

Change in the life of a student was expected. There were obvious changes such as relocation, lifestyle, financial, relationships between student and faculty and uncertainty as to whether the right decision had been made to be a law student. There were underlying changes that would not be identified until much later in the year. These changes were more personal and not discussed with classmates.

The courses did not seem to connect during the first semester. During the last semester of the term, it was the performance at “moot” court that Turow realized that the courses had been building blocks for this difficult presentation. The realization that everything that he had been taught and read was an integral part of his learning at the Harvard Law School. The humiliation and grilling by the faculty had been for a reason and it was to teach the student to analyze and look at a case from different perspectives, to not have a narrow vision.

The transition that Harvard Law School students have to make is difficult but is achievable. A first year law student with persistence, determination and a will to survive the elite, inhuman, prestigious Harvard Law School will return for the second year to continue the struggle of becoming a lawyer. For orientation professionals this is a powerful book and provides a very telling story of the best and worst in higher education. At the very least, it catalogs much of the raw emotion that new students go through when entering a new institution and program, and this can be an excellent source of conversation for those looking to build experiences and programs that meet student psychological and academic needs.