

A NOVELIST'S KNOWING LOOK AT THE LAW

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Somehow fiction about lawyers and the law has slighted what many lawyers are looking for most—penetrating and illuminating accounts of what it means and what it is like to be a lawyer.

Non-lawyer novelists, perhaps because they do not have an adequate feel for the law or lawyers, have tended to build their plots around ambiguous fact situations or obscure points of law, neglecting the sensibility the law imposes on lawyers. Lawyers turned writers, possibly because they lack a true writer's imaginative spark and ability to discern character, have not fared well either. How much, after all, do we really know about Erie Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason? Lawyer-novelists writing today, while more sophisticated than Gardner, still leave lawyers wanting. Louis Auchincloss appeals to too small a group, John Jay Osborn Jr. cares more for the politics of law firms, and George V. Higgins thinks lawyers are actually stand-up comics in disguise. All are guilty of not probing enough, of not investigating the particular result fashioned by the continual impact of the law on an officer of the court. And perhaps more important, all fail to address the pivotal issue of what the law means.

In six short stories about lawyers published between 1975 and 1981, John William Corrington has succeeded where others have fallen short. He too is a lawyer-novelist, but his background is different from that of the others. After taking degrees at Centenary and Rice, Corrington earned a D. Phil. in literature from Sussex in England. He then taught English for several years at Loyola University in New Orleans. In addition to a batch of articles of literary criticism, Corrington began writing poetry and fiction, publishing four volumes of poetry, three novels and one volume of short stories by 1970. He also began writing scripts for Hollywood, and his credits include *The Omega Man*, *Boxcar Bertha* and *The Killer Bees*.

In 1972, at the age of 40, Corrington changed roles and turned from teacher to student when he entered the Tulane Law School. He was graduated in 1975, the same year his first short story about lawyers appeared. It was included in *The Best American Short Stories of 1976*, as was his next story about the law, published the following year. In 1978, while practicing law in New Orleans, Corrington published a

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second volume of short stories, *The Actes and Monuments*, containing two prize-winning stories plus one more about the law, and in 1981 he produced another collection of short stories, *The Southern Reporter*, again including three stories about lawyers. Not coincidentally, Corrington also was involved deeply in a study of the historian-philosopher Eric Voegelin during the mid-1970s, culminating in a brilliant essay in 1978.

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When Corrington turned from his academic, literary life to a life in the law, he brought with him a special sensibility. He had sought to understand the nature of man and society in fictional worlds; now he confronted the same issues and themes in the law. The only difference was that now he was reading about real people in the hundreds of cases he pored over as a law student and practitioner.

This sensibility, meshing the universality of fiction with the specifics of the law, was heightened by his interest in history, in seeing the integral relationship between the past and the present, all of which found its nexus in his understanding of what the law meant. His stories, to summarize quickly, illustrate and give meaning to Holmes's observation that the law is an abstraction, "wherein, as in a magic mirror, we see reflected not only our lives, but the lives of all men that have been!"

Corrington's lawyers do not appear in court often. As a result, his stories have little of the courtroom drama that marks other fiction about lawyers. The lawyering his characters engage in is of the garden variety, and in part the relative banality of their work allows Corrington to explore character and examine the way the ordinary life of the law affects these men who have made it their vocation. The ordinary has some little attendant twist, however, that prompts the lawyer's reflection or reassessment of the law and what it means to him. The process is always one of definition, with the characters moving closer to an understanding of who they are and the related idea of what the law is.

Distinguishing Corrington's stories are these thoughtful, contemplative characters and their ability and willingness to see themselves in relation to a larger whole. The tension between the discrete individual and the whole gives the stories their life and meaning, allowing us, in

* Editor's Note: Holmes' quote is from Oliver W. Holmes, Jr., "The Law," in *THE OCCASIONAL SPEECHES OF JUSTICE OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES* 20, 21 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962)(1913)(Mark DeWolfe Howe ed.). The quote is used as the basis for the title of Kermit L. Hall's *The Magic Mirror: Law in American History* (1989).

turn, to understand Corrington's vision of the whole as nothing short of history itself, of a fabric stretching over centuries, of which our participation is only one thread.

Connections are what Corrington is trying to illustrate for us, connections between those living and dead. The dead are not truly dead, however, because they still affect the living. "The past isn't dead," Faulkner once wrote, "it isn't even the past." This is true in Corrington's world, where the law becomes the living imprint of the past on the present.

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The cornerstone of Corrington's fiction about the law is his story, "The Actes and Monuments." Its title comes from John Foxe's distinctly religious *Book of Martyrs*, *The Actes and Monuments*. Corrington's story also is rooted deeply in a religious interpretation of life, with an emphasis on time and truth. His understanding of history in the abstract begins here and continues, in the same general form, in the other stories, although the theory of history and the law has meaning even without the religious context in which Corrington places it.

Harry Cohen, the main character, had been a successful New York City lawyer, perhaps too successful for his own good. He had, he says, a certain gift and exceptionally sharp teeth to devour opposing attorneys who, unlike him, worked within the confines of their dignity and gentleness. Harry lacked heart as a bloodthirsty lawyer, and perhaps as an ironic consequence he suffered a heart attack at thirty-eight. Recognizing that his former life had to yield, he moves to Vicksburg, Mississippi, to provide free legal services for rural blacks.

In Vicksburg, Harry is a changed man, one who is peaceful and eager to do what he calls his part, to use all that he knows. Harry had followed the right impulse when he suspected that his own salvation lay in a neglected corner of America (to a New Yorker, at least), but surprisingly his usefulness and salvation do not come from his *pro bono publico* work. For others that might be enough. For Harry, however, there is a sudden, disturbing collision with history as illuminated by Grierson, a Vicksburg lawyer Harry comes to know, who has discovered, for himself at least, the meaning of history, truth and law.

Grierson carries about him all sorts of visible signs that he has discovered and embraced history. He wears outdated yet still fashionable clothes; he drives a flawless 1941 automobile; he drinks a whiskey that is "more like sipping the past"; and he has a library overflowing with thousands of rare books on literature, philosophy, religion, history and science. It is in his library, Grierson tells Harry, that he does his

work, but not until later does Harry understand and appreciate the nature of Grierson's work. It takes the arrival of a rapist-killer fleeing a Louisiana warrant for Harry to make his leap of understanding, which in turn becomes a literal leap in faith.

The rapist-killer freely admits and recounts his terrible acts to Harry and Grierson. He surprises his counsel by going beyond confession and demanding punishment. "Christ," he says, "a sonofabitch who would do that has *got* to die." Harry thinks his client must be insane, but Grierson thinks he understands why the man feels he must die. He tries to explain to Harry that the rapist-killer has become a kind of historical figure who now, in a perverse way, is fit to receive God's grace because he understands the futility of lying and recognizes his future lies with his statement of the truth, his call for punishment.

Telling the truth is what matters to Grierson. For him it means writing briefs in his library for long-dead clients who told the truth and were victimized. He has taken on, for example, the case of Raymond of Toulouse, who was tormented by orthodox authorities in ancient Rome. Grierson's 300-page brief in Latin defending the acts and character of his client as those of a Christian prince seems ludicrous to Harry, who feels it is a waste of legal talent. "The past is the past," he snaps. "Isn't the evil in our midst sufficient." "My Christ," Grierson replies, "you better get hold of history before you go to probing grace." Grace, Harry soon learns, is where he will find the meaning of life.

The rapist-killer is found incompetent to stand trial in Louisiana and decides to take matters into his own hands by hanging himself. Later, following his second heart attack (another dramatic suggestion that he needs to change his view of life), Harry finally begins to see that the rapist-killer had to die. He had to tell the truth because "time matters only to liars, and they are, at last, worse than murderers, even rapists of old ladies. Because, caught in the grid of His truth, they yet try to evade, even as they see time vanishing before them. Grace is history transcendent, made true at last. And faith is the act of embracing all time, assured of renewing it."

Grierson's apparently mad hobby of telling the truth about neglected cases finally makes sense to Harry. He understands the beautiful simplicity of Grierson's work to tell the truth because "no lie survives as long as the truth is stated . . . sooner or later, when the profit goes out of a lie, nobody wants to bother defending it any longer. That's where grace joins history."

The past is not the past, Harry learns, because the lies of the past affect the present by coming between reality and grace. Only one measure of time matters—God's seamless embrace of the past and present that is contingent on the truth. The rapist-killer understood that

he would be lost forever outside of time unless he acted on the truth. Grierson understood this as well, and finally Harry understands and can join Grierson in his work. He must seek out the truth, but not just as a lawyer in his own world. He must embrace the past and assert its truths.

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The beleaguered lawyer in "Pleadings," Corrington's other prize-winning story, comes to learn, like Harry, that history and the truth cannot be ignored. And like Harry, the narrator of "Pleadings" finds new life in his discoveries and is able to reverse his slide into the colorless world of personal detachment, the by-product of his life in the law. Like Harry, he grows to feel that he is part of a larger whole, the whole of humanity.

The lawyer in "Pleadings" is in his 30s, has a wife, two kids and a general practice that is wearing him down. A kind of malaise has come over him, making him wonder about the very forces touching his life. "Was it that I didn't love Joan anymore," he says, "that somewhere along the way I had become insulated against her acts? Could it be that the practice of law had slowly made me responsive only to words?"

His feelings about Joan, his wife, point to the conflict between words and actions. Words in the law become a substitute for action and cause the narrator to lose touch with actions and their human impact. Actions, he comes to realize, are the stuff of life, the meaning of existence. He discovers all of this because of a divorce he was hired to handle.

Howard Bedlow, the unhappy husband, had been separated from his wife for a couple of weeks and wants to divorce her. He claims that she had another man's child while he was away fighting financial ruin and that she has been running off often to see the child's father. A fuller explanation reveals that the child was born very deformed and has been kept in a state hospital since birth. All of these events have soured Howard's life, which already has been devastated by bankruptcy and a failed car dealership.

When the lawyer meets with Irma, the wife, at Howard's request, he discovers the truth. Irma takes him to visit the child, where he sees, as if he were visiting a level of Dante's hell, "extreme cases of mongolism, cretins and imbeciles, dwarfs, and things with enormous heads and bulging eyes." But he also sees Irma lovingly take care of her son, treating him with compassion and respect. Living in a world of words, our narrator now witnesses the most human of all acts.

Howard Bedlow, the lawyer realizes, concocted the story of another man's child and secret meetings. Irma has not been trysting with a man.

She has been visiting her child, Howard's child, something Howard has never been brave enough to do. The child is clearly his, but he has been unable to come to terms with what went wrong, using the child to explain his own failings, the lost car dealership, for example, which went under after the child's birth, not before, as he had claimed. He feels that if he can somehow get around the truth, then perhaps his life will change. Instead of embracing the truth he lives a lie that, in the terms of "The Actes and Monuments," comes between reality and history made true.

To his credit, the narrator recognizes the significance of Irma's actions for what they are, but not until the story's dramatic conclusion does he understand fully the relationship between love, actions and the past. Howard is the key link because when he races into a burning building to save Irma and their son, he admits and reconciles himself to the truth he has avoided too long. All three die, yet they die spiritually united. Having been touched by Irma and now by Howard's willingness to give up himself and embrace the truth, the narrator becomes transformed and can now live a full life. He has escaped his malaise.

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The clearest explication of Corrington's related ideas of history and the law comes in "A Day in Thy Court." The story is a stunning achievement, both beautiful and profound, especially when read in light of Corrington's other stories. He redirects our attention in "A Day in Thy Court" and focuses it on an old lawyer's love for his late wife, using it as a metaphor for history, for the way the past inexorably affects the present.

The old lawyer has been practicing for 40 years. His has been a successful career, one blessed additionally by a long, happy marriage. A few years ago, however, his wife died, altering his life substantially. To hold back the pain of memories, that ironic pain happy memories bring, he has trained himself not to remember his wife and their life together.

Now he too faces death. A quickly spreading, inoperable cancer has invaded his body, punishing it with a wracking pain. Armed with a bottle of powerful pain-killers and a quart of whiskey, the lawyer has returned once more to fish the river he has known all his life. Corrington, as the story's title suggests, uses the river as a metaphor for God's court, his hall of justice. The river represents the continual cycle of life, "the amalgam of decay and generation, death and birth, fallen leaves and rotten logs." On the river, this symbol of life, the old lawyer meets his death gracefully and finds, at last, joy and salvation.

On the river the lawyer confronts and then allows his past to affect him once again. Until now his has been a life filled with the warm fellowship of other lawyers, and in his boat he recalls fondly many instances of the lawyers coming together and sharing their lives—the victories and defeats. He recalls, for example, a judge he knew many years before who was suddenly struck down by cancer. Those who had practiced before him began stopping in for informal lunches and drinks once they heard of the cancer. They gathered to share their pasts, to make the past come alive once more for this man who had a limited future. Thinking about these scenes brings happiness to the old lawyer because, for him, a life in the law has meant a life with other lawyers as well as a life with the abstraction of the law itself.

The lawyer should be able to see the logical extension of his happy memories and their effect on his life, but being almost there is different from being all the way there. Like Harry in "The Actes and Monuments," the lawyer in "A Day in Thy Court" needs to recognize the full impact of history to find his own salvation. For him this means remembering his wife and becoming whole. On this day on the river, he catches the symbolic fish he has forever sought, and, in this divine courtroom, he admits the truth of history and remembers. He finally recognizes that his life must include his past. "Crushing out the anguish of losing her had distorted everything else. He now felt tears on his cheeks, mourning not so much the losing as the time wasted not remembering." His life has come together on the river. He has escaped his life anchored only to the present and has embraced history, all because of love.

The old lawyer in "A Day in Thy Court" has much in common with the lawyers in "The Actes and Monuments" and "Pleadings." All three develop a different view of themselves because they have been able to define and understand better the law and its essential connection to history. They have, as a result, moved closer to the law. Undoubtedly they will be better lawyers because of it. They certainly will lead more fulfilled lives, giving added meaning to the phrase "a life in the law."

