

Writing the Good Book on Lawyers

A legal-thriller author thinks it is time to speak up for the profession

BY JAMES M. GRIPPANDO

When my colleagues hear that my first novel, "The Pardon," is being published by HarperCollins, they nod and smile, as if to tell me it's OK. They understand. They do not blame another lawyer for bashing the profession and then getting the heck out of it.

This reaction has been one of my most distressing experiences in writing a novel. Of course, I cannot fault them for assuming that my novel bad-mouths the profession. Lawyers have pumped out countless legal thrillers and courtroom dramas since "L.A. Law" hit the tube, and most of them distort reality. Most lawyers just accept that the lawyer character is going to be the villain, the cheat or lunch for Steven Spielberg's dinosaurs.

I was not so resigned. I did not want to pander to the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for lawyers "getting what they deserve." Although the judicial system is not perfect and, admittedly, is subject to manipulation and abuse at times, I refuse to portray it as anything less than the best system in the world.

Case in point: The lead character in "The Pardon," Jack Swytek, is a young, criminal defense lawyer who stands accused of a murder he did not commit. In the opening trial scene, my editor wanted to portray him as thinking this way:

"It was a flawed system at best. And it terrified Jack to think that justice might prove as elusive here as it had in so many other trials in which he was involved."

That is not nearly as bad as some of the staff I have read elsewhere, but I still disliked the suggestion that justice is such a rarity—that juries routinely turn murderers back onto the street. My own experience

is that jurors are pretty good at what they do. Anyway, the final version reads this way:

"It seemed almost amazing, really, that juries so often reached the right result. But the lofty notion that

her start there. The presidents of the American and Florida bar associations were, then, partners there. But she persisted. Finally, I gave her a printable quote: "I still think the law is a noble profession, and I'll continue to do it." She printed it.

You would not believe the grief I caught—but only from lawyers. Nonlawyers thought it refreshing to hear from a lawyer who did not bellyache about his job.

As more people find out about "my other life," I've had more such discussions, not just with lawyers but with aspiring ones as well.

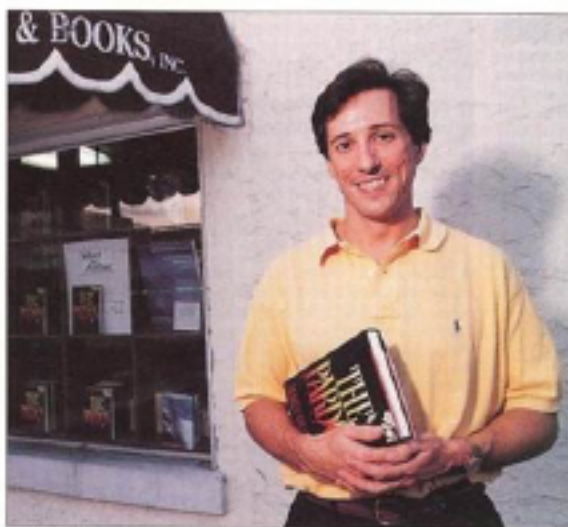
Recently, I was chairman of my firm's summer associate program. The associates' enthusiasm about law was a nice check on all the hubbub over my book, making me nostalgic about my own decision to become a lawyer. The summer program is our firm's lifeblood; 90 percent of our full-time lawyers come out of it.

Some say the program head is like the firm's head cheerleader. After talking with cynics across the country, I started to question whether it was the right job for a part-time author. When I spoke highly of lawyers and the profession, I had to wonder whether people were taking what I said with a grain of salt, figuring that I was really just another disillusioned lawyer who wrote a novel to escape from practicing law.

I wanted to think I started writing because I love to write. Period. Scott Turow still practices, says he will never quit. I am certainly not the type to have spent my entire professional career at the same law firm if I had been unhappy.

Still, it bothers me that wherever I go so many really good lawyers look at me with envy and say, "This is your ticket out."

I have wanted to be a lawyer since the eighth grade, and I am proud to be one. I am glad most of my friends are lawyers. Probably most of your friends are lawyers, too. Would you malign them? ■



James Grippando: Proud of his commitment to the law.

this was the best system in the world was little consolation for an innocent man who might well be convicted."

It is not a radical change, but it is an important one. I believe that—even in the realm of fiction—lawyers who become authors have an obligation to insist on these subtle editorial changes, to be fair in their characterization of lawyers and the judicial system so as stop breeding disrespect for the law.

Rampant Disrespect

Lawyer-bashing in fiction, however, is just a small part of the widespread self-flagellation. Lawyers heap disrespect on lawyers. And I don't just mean the bad lawyers. I mean good lawyers—lawyers I respect.

The first reporter to interview me about "The Pardon" was writing about lawyers running from the practice of law. She kept trying to get me to say I wrote the book because I hated practicing and could not wait to get out. I kept telling her I had an interesting practice at a good firm, Steel Hector & Davis. Attorney General Janet Reno got

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