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Book Review by Joel Cohen

LAW STORY: A NOVEL (By Bennett L. Gershman) Fulton Books, 2026

Cosimo de Medici, the principal of the Florentine Renaissance, famously said: *"Every artist paints himself."* I would add: *"or paints the self he would like to have been."*

Bennett Gershman, author of the newly released *Law Story: A Novel*, has been a friend for more than fifty years. He has been a tenured law professor for almost as long and an essayist *par excellence* regarding the law, society and all manner of things affecting the human condition. He has now struck out on something new for him: a novel. To my delight in reading—and surely the likely delight of all readers—his novel seems seemingly semi-autobiographical. It features a lawyer protagonist wrestling with life. The novel's narrator is unnamed. Perhaps it is Gershman himself? He has much to tell us about life from the vantage point of a lengthy professorial career during which he has taught literally thousands of law students.

Gershman speaks early in the book—from the vantage point of student and professor of the infamous teaching technique long applied in legal studies known as the Socratic method, laying bare the very painful nature of the infamous method. Taking us back to his law school days, Gershman presents his own contracts professor, a man he calls "Bob Ballard". Ballard, for sure, is a pseudonym for the late Robert Childress, under whom I, too, studied as a law student at New York University. Gershman precisely captures Childress -- my fellow students nicknamed him "Bullet Bob". Like Gershman's unnamed narrator, I too felt the brunt of his opprobrium as a rookie law student. A former 6' foot 4" footballer at Mississippi, Childress strode into the classroom exactly when the bell rang, seemingly intent on embarrassing anyone he might call on from his lectern—and he made good on those intentions, plainly delighting in our public suffering under relentless questioning.

His southern drawl was clearly different from John Houseman's accent presented in the *Paper Chase*; but we students got the point -- quickly. But is that what Gershman's anonymous narrator would want to present to *his* students? Indeed, although I never myself perceived it from Childress, Gershman's novel

elucidates how those painful paces, which Ballard (and so many other law professors over the years) deliberately put law students through, *presumably for our own good*. Notably, whenever I have connected with any of my law school classmates over the years, the only professor we ever talked about is – guess who? I wonder though, whether this focus was out of gratitude for what we learned, or a shared sense of simply having survived?

Readers coming to the book with such experiences will find Gershman's novel all the more compelling, because he dares to present a kinder model of law school experience. *Law Story: A Novel* whether somewhat autobiographical as de Medici would present it or not -- demonstrates a different kind of Socratic-method law professor. That is, one with humanity. A law professor with an always open-door policy to his office. One willing to listen to their personal woes and offer solace and advice regarding life itself, whether they're suffering with personal problems related to their studies, their personal lives, or both.

The novel is not limited to the classroom. Rather it is a full rendering of a man engaging with life, involving himself in the tribulations of a law school employee family, leading to the adoption of a child. There is a passionate love interest and consequent jealousy drama spilling over into the law school community -- yes, our professor crosses the line and has dalliances with students. While this reviewer won't reveal the details, suffice to say that yes, even law professors have sex, even resulting is mayhem.

Gershman brings great humanity to the protagonist, rendering him as a law professor who occasionally suffers from insecurity, as do we all. Whereas the iconic *Paper Chase* addressed exclusively the insecurities that the students suffer in the classroom in the province of a gratuitously overbearing professor, Gershman presents something different altogether. Namely, that life can also, surprisingly, be difficult for those we encounter in life who are the ones in charge—even the overbearing ones. And maybe that's precisely why they have retreated into the realm of being overbearing. The book thus gives us insight to help us understand young lawyers, who move on into their own professional lives and are required to deal with clients in distress. Even these accomplished law graduates must continue to face their own insecurities, both in the courtroom and in life generally.

And, maybe, that's exactly the point of Gershman's book – a lesson about life itself that we learn from a law professor who employs his unique podium, now as a part-time novelist, from which to teach. My only quibble about this excellent book would be that the title should have been: "Teaching Law *& Life*: A Story."

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