

BOOK REVIEW: PRESUMED INNOCENT

Neevati Tomar* Priya Mishra*

INTRODUCTION

Scott Turow's novel *Presumed Innocent* is a highly praised and popular work that explores the world of Rusty Sabich, a chief deputy prosecutor in a fictional Midwestern city. The tale opens with the finding of Carolyn Polhemus' dead body, who was supposedly raped. Initially, it is presumed that her death was the result of an S&M scenario gone too far, but no weapon is recovered at the site. Despite his hidden relationship with Polhemus, the district attorney assigns Rusty to her case.

The novel investigates the notion of presumption of innocence, emphasizing the ineffability of human purpose and the challenge of making clear-cut judgments of blame. The reality of *Presumed Innocent* comes not from Rusty Sabich's trial, but from his first-person reflections, which show a gloomy, philosophical temperament comparable to the author's. The novel's final part involves a severe moral dilemma, yet it can also be viewed as another great depiction of verisimilitude.

Despite the predictable twist conclusion, Turow's story is regarded as a remarkable and genre-defining example of a crime novel. Many of the novel's characters appear in later Turow novels, the majority of which are set in Kindle County, a fictitious Midwestern region. Turow also penned a sequel to *Presumed Innocent*, *Innocent*, which was released in 2010.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND BACKGROUND OF THE PRESUMED INNOCENT

Scott Turow, the father of the legal thriller, was intrigued by *The Count of Monte Cristo* at the age of ten and chose to pursue his passion for writing. While still in college, he created a short tale about a commuter leaving his wife, *DithyramB*, which was eventually published. While at Stanford, he met a girl who told him about being raped the summer before, which inspired him to write "A Classic Case,"¹ a short fiction about an exhibitionist who becomes a rapist. This was the first time Turow had felt the wind in his sails as a writer. Scott sought and was given two

*BA LLB, SECOND YEAR, SYMBIOSIS INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY, PUNE.

*BA LLB, SECOND YEAR, SYMBIOSIS INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY, PUNE.

¹ Rick Pullen, 'My First Thriller: Scott Turow' (Crime Reads, 29 October 2020) <<https://crimereads.com/my-first-thriller-scott-turow/>> accessed 19 October 2023

writing grants to sustain himself, one of which was presented during a luncheon in New York City.

Turow was teaching undergrads at Stanford while writing a novel about a rent control strike on Chicago's north side. He'd lost his market by the time he finished it in 1974. After five years of teaching, he discovered that the individuals doing the things he was most drawn to were friends who went on to law school. He chose law school in 1974, believing he could accomplish both. Some of his initial thoughts in law school were about writing rather than the law. He opted to write a nonfiction book in his first year at Harvard Law School, which was released during his third year of law school.

Turow worked as a federal prosecutor in Chicago for eight years after graduation, during which time he discovered who his mistress was. The burden put a strain on his marriage and left him with little time to write, despite his burning desire. He began thinking about writing a novel about an innocent prosecutor working in a similar corrupt environment. He knew he had to continue writing, even if it was only for thirty minutes a day. He ultimately bought a portable computer in 1982 since he had so little time to write on a regular basis.

Turow was diagnosed with Chronic Anemia, during the summer of 1986. His wife Annette advised him to reduce his stress level and leave the U.S. Attorney's Office. Turow took a three-month vacation between employment and a partnership with the Chicago firm Sonnenschein, Carlin, Nath, and Rosenthal in the early days of writing his legal thriller, *Presumed Innocent*. With limited time to write, it took him eight years to complete *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Ned Chase, who had gone to Charles Scribner's & Sons and offered Turow a \$350,000 advance, gave Turow a \$350,000 advance. Turow, on the other hand, had another purpose in mind: to make a financial choice. He asked each publishing house's editors how he might enhance his manuscript. Turow's previous contact, Farrar Straus & Giroux's newly appointed Executive Editor Jonathan Galassi, provided him with the most direct answer. Turow retrieved the original rejection letter and framed it when Galassi made an offer for *Presumed Innocent*. Farrar Straus Giroux offered just \$200,000 for the publication rights, 43% less than Scribner's, and Turow accepted because he was impressed with FSG and its editors' literary reputation.

Presumed Innocent became a literary success, bringing an entire generation of readers to the legal thriller. His novel arrived before John Grisham and many other authors who have since hopped on the legal thriller bandwagon.

STORYLINE

Rozat "Rusty"² Sabich, a prosecutor and district attorney Raymond Horgan's right-hand man, gets involved in a murder case after learning that his colleague Carolyn Polhemus has been brutally raped and killed. Tommy Molto, the acting director of the murder unit, left to work for Nico Della Guardia's campaign in anticipation of the next District Attorney election. Rusty is a married man who has a romantic relationship with Carolyn that ended abruptly.

The murder investigation is initially under the direction of Detective Harold Greer, then Rusty assigns Detective Dan Lipranzer to take over. Parts of the murder suggest that the murderer was aware of the procedures used by the police to acquire evidence and concealed clues in accordance with them, according to Molto's own research into the case. After Rusty is elected, Della Guardia and Molto start looking for evidence to convict him of murder. The fibers retrieved from Carolyn's death match those found on Rusty's carpet at home, and his fingerprints are detected on a beer glass collected as evidence from her apartment. Greer's questions lead to Lipranzer's firing, and the affair is exposed.

Sandy Stern is a well-known defense lawyer whom Rusty works with. When the missing beer glass is found during the trial, Raymond lies to the court and says Rusty forced him to look into it. When Rusty investigates, he discovers that Carolyn was the facilitator in a bribery case involving Leon Wells, who admitted to paying Judge Lyttle \$1,500 to have criminal charges dropped.

Throughout the trial, Stern repeatedly states that he was aware of the bribery plot, a tactic used by Della Guardia and Molto in Rusty's framing. At their meeting, Lipranzer shows Rusty the missing beer glass and reveals that he never put it back in evidence when the investigation was passed over to Della Guardia and Molto. Given that he forced Carolyn to die and now has to live with her killer, Rusty feels terrible about what he did.

SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION

Best-selling legal thriller *Presumed Innocent* by Scott Turow opened doors for other writer-lawyers like John Grisham and Richard North Patterson as well as contemporary writers like Gillian Flynn. The rise in popularity of *Presumed Innocent* marked a turning point in the long

² Alan J. Pakula, 'Presumed Innocent (film)' (Wikiwand, 1990)
<[https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Presumed_Innocent_\(film\)](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Presumed_Innocent_(film))> accessed 20 October 2023

process of combining middlebrow entertainment with highbrow literature to create the hybrid literary landscape that exists today. Turow did not start this change; rather, he rode a wave that was started years before by the general public as well as authors like Stephen King and John le Carré who twisted the conventions of their genres for darker, more meaningful ends.

Born and raised in the Jewish suburb of West Rogers Park on Chicago's North Side, Turow was the son of a Russian Jewish physician. After graduating from Amherst College, Turow took up a two-year Stegner Fellowship at Stanford, where he became embroiled in a conflict between Realists, who wanted fiction that provided "the intricate rendering of daily experience"³ without the use of melodrama or narrative tricks, and an Avant Garde faction that saw art as a kind of machine that could be improved through constant experimentation. Saul Bellow and John Updike were among the top Realists that Turow praised, but he thought the form was inappropriate.

Turow considers the book he wrote at Stanford, about a rent strike in a Chicago slum, to be the product of a writer fundamentally at odds with his own inclinations. His impulse was to construct a suspenseful tale about who owned the flat building therefore he was going against his nature by designing impeccable lines and drove himself nuts attempting to extract the elements that would make him the next James Joyce. It was almost a relief when the rent-strike novel fizzled out and he decided to drop the Joycean mantle to go to Harvard Law. After finding employment in the US Attorney's Office in Chicago, Turow was drawn to the inherent drama of criminal law and started writing fiction on the way to work, a habit he would maintain for decades.

Turow was in court in the early 1980s to examine a rookie prosecutor he was supervising when he heard a witness on the stand. The hold of crime on all of us prompted him to create *Presumed Innocent*, a novel aimed at reinventing the murder mystery genre. Carolyn Polhemus's corpse is discovered naked in her flat, wrapped in a tangle of ropes. When Rusty Sabich, Turow's narrator, investigates her death, he discovers that all traces point to him. As a result, the novel becomes the first-person evidence Rusty never offers at his trial. We see he has not only the desire and opportunity to conduct the crime but also the brains to carry it out.

³ Michael Bourne, 'The Lasting Influence of Scott Turow's "Presumed Innocent"' (Los Angeles Review of Books, 4December 2013) <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-lasting-influence-of-scott-turows-presumed-innocent/>> accessed 19 October 2023

A notable piece in the annals of literary/genre fiction fusion is *Presumed Innocent*. It blends the conventional idea of a murder mystery with the core theme of literary fiction, concentrating on an in-depth understanding of a well-known person's soul from a psychological perspective. The reason the book has endured is because it presents Rusty as a representative figure from his day. But Turow stopped innovating after that book. His most recent pieces, such as *Identical* from this year, stay squarely inside the parameters of their genre. He could only employ the investigator-as-suspect plot device once, and even in his 2010 follow-up *Innocent*, when Rusty is once again accused of murder, Turow fails to create the same degree of closeness between the reader and character that was created in *Presumed Innocent*.

CONCLUSION

Presumed Innocent is an intelligent, deep, and intriguing literary masterpiece in which all of the characters appear to be in a condition of grace. Scott Turow's debut novel, *Presumed Innocent*, was released in 1987. Rusty Sabich, a prosecutor, is accused of the murder of his colleague and mistress Carolyn Polhemus in the novel. Rusty Sabich is appointed to take her case after Polhemus, an attractive and successful prosecutor, is found dead in sexual bondage. Carolyn, on the other hand, is Rusty's ex-lover. The past affair is finally revealed, and Rusty is eventually charged with murder thanks to a series of narrative twists. Carolyn's assassin had a compelling reason for killing her. However, it is difficult to assume that the true offender would leave his escape from the trap completely to chance. A brilliant, passionate, and consistently fascinating thriller. Even if you believe you know what the answer is, the character representation is so good and the author is so subtle that your assumptions may be mistaken. The most exciting and thought-provoking book in decades. *Presumed Innocent* makes our worst dread, come true: a common person being found guilty of the most horrible crimes. It's an incredible portrayal of a man's all-too-human, deadly desire for a passionate woman who isn't his spouse, and it tells the story of how his devotion threatens everything he holds dear, even his own life. It's a book that unveils the deepest recesses of the human heart in addition to a terrifying universe of betrayal and murder. It will also haunt you long after you've experienced its startling conclusion.