

An Odyssey That Started With 'Ulysses'

By SCOTT TUROW

At the age of 18, after my freshman year in college, I worked as a mailman. This was merely a summer job. My life's calling, I had decided, was to be a novelist, and late at night I was already toiling on my first novel.

One of the glories of postal employment in those days was that once carriers learned their routes, they could deliver the mail in far less than the five hours allotted. By longstanding agreement -- explained to me in a most emphatic and furtive way by a colleague my first week -- mail carriers who finished early did not return to the post office until the end of the day.

Since the public library was the only air-conditioned public building, even in that affluent suburban town, I spent my free time there. And inasmuch as I wanted to be a novelist, I decided to read James Joyce's "Ulysses."

By then I had read Joyce's magnificent first novel, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," and I wanted to be a novelist just like him. In homage to Joyce's embroidery from the stuff of the Greek myths, I'd called my first novel "Dithyramb," the name of a Bacchic dance whose relevance was entirely elusive, even then, to my story of two teen-age runaways from Chicago who witness a murder.

As for "Ulysses," even as a freshman I'd been taught that it was hands down the best novel ever written. The literary god T.S. Eliot had hailed the book in 1923 as "the most important expression" of its age. "If it is not a novel, that is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve," said Eliot, praising Joyce for being in advance of his time.

So for the next eight weeks I read the novel to end all novels for an hour and a half each afternoon at taxpayer expense. A number of things struck me about "Ulysses." First, it was hard. When I finished, I was glad I'd read it, but I didn't mind that I'd been paid by the hour to do it.

I was also troubled that the library's single volume of "Ulysses" was there every day when I went for it, never checked out. It seemed that no one else in this well-to-do,



Todd Buchanan for The New York Times

Scott Turow, who gave up writing for law and then reversed himself, is pleased with his final choice.

highly educated community wanted to read the greatest novel ever written, at least not in the leisure hours of summer. I thought inevitably of the philosophical riddle with which schoolchildren were routinely teased in those days: If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, is there sound?

Thus began the questions that plagued me for years. Was "Ulysses" really a great work of literature, if almost no one read it for leisure, and if the few who dared found it so taxing? What did writers owe their audience? How easy were we supposed to make things for them? And what were we entitled to demand in return?

It was obvious that every writer, at least those who sought to publish, craved an audience. But on what terms? The modernists, for example, did not aim to be read by everybody. Their attitudes were well expressed in Eliot's remarks about Joyce or in Ezra Pound's declaration "Artists are the antennae of the race, but the bullet-headed many will never learn to trust their great artists."

In the modernists' view the writer's job was to lead culture, to reinvent art constantly, thereby providing society with previously undiscovered insights. It did not matter if the bullet-headed didn't understand "Ulysses," provided the few who could change culture did.

The radical democrat in my soul who was running amok in the '60s had a hard time buying this. Yet even I had to accept the modernists' formulation that artists must lead. But my view was more of an I-thou relationship: The artist offers a special vision that reframes experience in a way that, although intensely personal, reverberates deeply among us all.

To lead and arouse a universal audience seemed the writer's task, yet it was hardly clear to me how to do it. Following college I spent several years at the Creative Writing Center at Stanford University, first as a fellow and later as a lecturer. The center was roiled by intense factional rivalries that echoed much of my own turmoil.

A clutch of anti-realists, self-conscious innovators, championed the views of John Hawkes, who had once declared, "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme." The experimentalists reacted in horror when I contended that the ideal novel would be equally stirring to a bus driver and an English professor.

My ideas were much closer to those of my teacher, Wallace Stegner, a realist writer in the tradition of James and Dreiser, which had stressed an exacting representation of our experience in the everyday world. The realists eschewed Dickensian plot, since it depended on coincidence or the kind of odd or extreme behavior we don't commonly

witness. Despite my affinities, I was tweaked by the experimentalists' complaints that the resulting literature was often static.

I dug through these issues in my own work, spending my years at Stanford writing a novel about a rent strike in Chicago. The book was steeped in the intricacies of real estate law, which explained in part why it, like "Dithyramb," went unpublished.

Nonetheless, writing the book had opened me to a previously unrecognized passion for the law. I startled everyone, even myself, by abandoning my academic career in favor of law school, vowing all the same to live on as a writer. By the time I graduated, I had published "One L," a nonfiction account of my first year at law school. But I still yearned to be a novelist, even as law school had confirmed my attraction to the life of a working lawyer and, especially, to criminal law.

I was hired as a prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's Office in Chicago. There I was astonished to find myself facing the same old questions about how to address an audience. The trial lawyer's job and the novelist's were, in some aspects, shockingly similar. Both involved the reconstruction of experience, usually through many voices, whether they were witnesses or characters. But there the paths deviated. In this arena the universal trumped; there were no prizes for being rarefied or ahead of the times. The trial lawyer who lost the audience also inevitably lost the case.

Engaging the jury was indispensable, and again and again I received the same advice about how to do it: Tell them a good story. There were plenty of good stories told in the courtroom, vivid accounts of crimes witnessed or conspiracies joined. The jury hung in primal fascination, waiting to find out what happened next. And so did I.

Thus I suddenly saw my answer to the literary conundrum of expressing the unique for a universal audience: Tell them a good story. The practice of criminal law had set me seething with potential themes: the fading gradations between ordinary fallibility and great evil; the mysterious passions that lead people to break the known rules; the mirage that the truth often becomes in the courtroom.

The decision to succumb to plot and to the tenacious emotional grip I felt in contemplating crime led me naturally to the mystery whose power as a storytelling form persisted despite its long-term residence in the low-rent precincts of critical esteem. I was certain that an audience's hunger to know what happened next could be abetted by some of the values of the traditional realist novel, especially psychological depth in the characters and a prose style that aimed for more than just dishing out plot.

Furthermore the supposedly timeworn conventions of genre writing seemed actually to offer an opportunity for innovation. Why not, for example, invert the traditional detective tale by having the investigator accused of the crime?

Thus was born "Presumed Innocent." I worked on that book for eight years on the morning commuter train and was staggered by its subsequent emergence as a best seller. My only goal had been finally to publish a novel. I didn't even like most best sellers, which I deemed short on imagination.

I have, frankly, learned to enjoy all the rewards of best-sellerdom, but none more than the flat-out, juvenile thrill of entering so many lives. I love my readers with an affection that is second only to what I feel for my family and friends, and I would be delighted to please them with every new book.

But I am, all the same, desperate not to be captured by that audience. I have self-consciously avoided cloning "Presumed Innocent" (to the oft-stated disappointment of many), knowing self-imitation would violate the rules I set for myself to start. Art -- or whatever it is I'm doing -- begins with the maker, not the audience. Capitulating to established expectations means abandoning that obligation to lead and is likely to yield the larded stuff that too often oozes out of the Hollywood sausage grinder.

Graham Greene, probably this century's most admired writer of suspense fiction, remarked that all writers tend to be governed by "a ruling passion." I regard myself as blessed to have been able to discover mine.

Over time I've realized that the ideal novel that deeply stirs everyone will never be written. Even "Anna Karenina" grows tiresome for some readers. The only true transcendence is achieved by the entire family of writers -- of artists -- who, together, manage to move us all. As individuals we can only dig toward our ruling passions, uncover them and desperately hope, as we fall, to be heard.