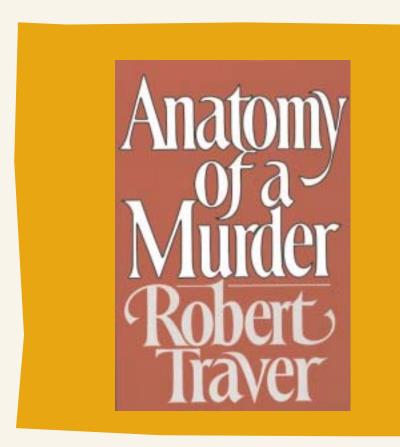
Anatomy of a Murder



Reader's Guide

50th Anniversary Celebration

About the book

Originally published in 1958, the book was on the bestseller list for 65 weeks. It helped establish the popular genre of the legal thriller and became a model for courtroom dramas. Robert Traver was the pen name of John D. Voelker, who was a lawyer, prosecutor and a Michigan Supreme Court Justice throughout his distinguished career. Recalling the advice of an English professor to be authentic, when he took up writing he wrote what he knew. In *Anatomy of a Murder*, he penned a story about an actual trial in which he served as the defense attorney.

Anatomy of a Murder is the story of Paul Biegler, a small town lawyer in the Upper Peninsula who takes on the case of Lieutenant Manion, charged with murder for shooting a local barkeeper. Based on the true story of a murder in Big Bay, Michigan, the novel is a fictionalized account of the trial. While there is no question that Manion shot Barney Quill, the novel examines whether the killing is justified and if Manion is truly blameworthy. Quill allegedly raped Manion's wife. Was the murder justified? Did Manion murder Quill in a fit of temporary insanity?

Much of the book is the trial, where it quickly becomes clear the focus is not guilt versus innocence. Instead, the real issues are whether the prosecutor or the defense will outwit the other and convince the jury to believe their version of the crime or even what crimes were committed. In the process, Traver brings out important questions about the insanity defense, witness coaching and the prosecution of rape. In the end, Traver asks what integrity and justice really are.

About the movie

In 1959, director Otto Preminger came to Michigan's Upper Peninsula with a film crew to put *Anatomy of a Murder* on the big screen. Filmed in Big Bay, Marquette, Ishpeming and Michigamme, Preminger captured the look and feel of the small towns of the Upper Peninsula. The movie starred James Stewart as Paul Biegler, Ben Gazzara as Lieutenant Manion, Lee Remick as Laura Manion, and George C. Scott as the downstate big city prosecutor sent in from Lansing. Nominated for seven Academy Awards, the film won a Grammy for the soundtrack by Duke Ellington.

Preminger broke new ground in several ways with this film. The language and topics of the trial are frank and direct for the 1950s. It was among the first Hollywood movies to challenge the Production Code, a set of industry censorship guidelines. The dialogue included the first on-screen use of such words as intercourse and contraceptive. In Chicago, police blocked screening of the film due to "obscenities" until a federal judge overruled the ban. The film was also one of the first to feature jazz as the soundtrack. Duke Ellington composed the music and his orchestra performed it.

The American Bar Association rated this as one of the twelve best trial movies of all time and UCLA law professor, Michael Asimow, has called the film "probably the finest pure trial movie ever made."



John D. Voelker with actor James Stewart. Photo courtesy of the Archives of Michigan.

Biography of Robert Traver (John D. Voelker)

John D. Voelker was born in 1903 in Ishpeming, Michigan, the grandson of German immigrants. Voelker's father owned and operated a prominent saloon in Ishpeming. Voelker attended Northern Michigan Normal in Marquette, Michigan and later graduated from the University of Michigan Law School in 1928.

He and his wife Grace moved to Chicago, where he practiced law. Tired of city life, Voelker returned to Ishpeming and established his own practice. Eventually he was appointed as the Marquette County Prosecutor. In 1957, Governor G. Mennen Williams appointed Voelker to the Michigan Supreme Court. Voelker retired in 1960 to pursue his passion for writing.

As a defense attorney, Voelker defended the case on which he based his most famous novel, *Anatomy of a Murder*. Voelker wrote many books dealing with two of his passions: law and fly-fishing. He wrote novels under the pen name of Robert Traver, because he felt it would seem inappropriate for a sitting judge to also be a crime novelist.

Director and producer, Otto Preminger made *Anatomy of a Murder* into a motion picture in 1959. The movie starred Jimmy Stewart, George C. Scott, Lee Remick, and Ben Gazzara. It received seven Academy Award nominations, including best picture.

Adapted from the biography by Frederick M. Baker, of the John D. Voelker Foundation.

How can I participate in the Anatomy of a Murder anniversary activities?

Read the book!

Copies are available through public libraries and bookstores.

Organize a book discussion!

Use this reader's guide to lead your own book discussion!

Show the movie!

If your library does not already have a movie license, Swank Motion Pictures holds the license to Anatomy of a Murder. www.swank.com

Organize a One Book project with Anatomy of a Murder.

Use this reader's guide and the ALA One Book One Community Planning Guide - www.ala.org/ala/ppo/files/onebookguide.pdf

Discussion Questions about the book

- 1. Did Paul Biegler lead Lt. Manion to an insanity defense by explaining the possible defenses and what would work best before asking him to think about what he remembered? Did you think this was ethical? How does this influence the course of the trial?
- 2. Do you feel that an irresistible impulse is truly a case for the insanity defense? What do you think really drove Lt. Manion's actions?
- 3. Since the trial was about Lt. Manion shooting Barney Quill, why would Claude Dancer imply Laura Manion was a loose woman in the cross examination? What benefit would that give the prosecution?
- 4. Is the trial truly about the guilt or innocence of Lt. Manion? What do you think the jury was deciding?
- 5. After the trial was over, did you feel justice was done?
- 6. Do you feel the theme of the book questions how sound our justice system is if lawyers can bend the truth and manipulate witnesses and juries?

Quotes from the book

"I've known for years, of course, as you doubtless have, that murder juries invariably 'try' the victim as well as the killer." – Judge Weaver

"Your verdict is not a television give-away prize to be awarded the side that puts on the best show." – Paul Biegler

"We've got a judge, Parn," I whispered back. "My God, I think maybe we got a real judge." – Paul Biegler

"You mean you want to find a way to give the jurors some decently plausible legal peg to hand their verdict on so they might let me go - and still save face?"

— Lieutenant Manion

Quotes from the movie

"The prosecution would like to separate the motive from the act. Well, that's like trying to take the core from the apple without breaking the skin." – Paul Biegler

"Twelve people go off into a room; twelve different minds, twelve different hearts, from twelve different walks of life; twelve sets of eyes, ears, shapes, and sizes. And these twelve people are asked to judge another human being as different from them as they are from each other. And in their judgment, they must become of one mind – unanimous. It's one of the miracles of Man's disorganized souls that they can do it, and in most instances, do it right well. God bless juries." – Parnell McCarthy

Other works by Robert Traver (John D. Voelker)

Anatomy of a Fisherman

A large format collection of photographs depicting Voelker in the environs where trout are found. It includes his "Testament of a Fisherman."

Danny and the Boys: Being Some Legends of Hungry Hollow

The mischievous escapades of Danny and his "boys" near the iron-mining town of Chippewa in the Upper Peninsula, Danny and his cronies spend their time fishing and hunting, story-telling, moon shining, and rampaging through the local saloons.

Hornstein's Boy

The story of a reluctant candidate for Senate office and the travails of his campaign.

The Jealous Mistress

Essays on various legal issues as seen through specific trials and appeals.

Laughing Whitefish

In 1873, a shy young lawyer meets the girl he yearned for, Laughing Whitefish. She presents him with a challenge and a hopeless case. In an elemental question of justice, can Laughing Whitefish, a Chippewa Indian, collect a debt owed her father?

People versus Kirk

A tale of a love triangle that ends in mortal violence. The story is more than a simple whodunit, and as the mystery unravels, the reader is led through a complicated maze.

Small Town D.A.

Compelling short stories drawn from Voelker's years in the prosecutor's office. As in all of his writing, the characters depict the vibrant immigrant mix in small town northern Michigan.

Traver on Fishing: a Treasury of Robert Traver's Finest Stories and Essays about Fishing for Trout
The best that the old judge wrote about his favorite sport - tall tales, strange happenings and true
lore, including his famous 'Testament of a Fisherman'. It is a marvelous catch of wit and wisdom.

Trouble-Shooter: the Story of a Northwoods Prosecutor

A collection of well-crafted short stories drawn from Voelker's adventures as Marquette County's prosecutor.

Trout Madness

Introduces fly-fishermen, armchair anglers, and nature lovers to the remote and hauntingly beautiful Upper Peninsula. There are hilarious stories, and stories of deep emotion, covering the range of trout season.

Trout Magic

A warm, joyous look at trout fishing and its attendant tall tales, strange happenings, and all-around fishing lore. We meet unforgettable characters and events from anything-but ordinary fishing trips.

Selected Resources on Robert Traver (John D. Voelker)

Web sites

The John D. Voelker Foundation - www.voelkerfdn.org/

Anatomy of a Murder film site - www.imdb.com/title/tt0052561/

Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society – www.micourthistory.org/bios.php

Articles

"An Anatomy of Anatomy of a Murder" by Frederick M. Baker, Jr. A speech given to the National Conference of Chief Justices on June 28, 2007.

www.voelkerfdn.org/PDFs/ANANATOMYOFANATOMYOFAMURDernomouse.pdf

"The Real Trial" by Shirley J. Bergman

"Anatomy of a Murder" by Richard D. Shaul

"Backwoods Barrister" by Richard D. Shaul

All published in Michigan History, November/December 2001 www.michiganhistorymagazine.com/features/discmich/anatomy.pdf

"Michigan Lawyers in History--John D. Voelker: Michigan's Literary Justice" by Frederick M. Baker, Jr. and Rich Vander Veen III in the *Michigan Bar Journal*, May 2000.

www.michbar.org/journal/article.cfm?articleID=74&volumeID=7

Books

Voelker's Pond: a Robert Traver Legacy by photographer, Ed Wargin; with essays by James McCullough, Chelsea, MI: Huron River Press, 2003.

Collections

John D. Voelker Papers held at the Central Upper Peninsula Archives and Northern Michigan University.

library.nmu.edu/archives/collections/index.htm

Discussion Notes

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