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# Book Note

Law Review Staff

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MY PEOPLE IS THE ENEMY—AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POLEMIC. By William Stringfellow. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. Pp. 149. $3.95.

A young lawyer practicing in a small town will often encounter problems of communication that are a product of the localism peculiar to small-town people. To establish a working relationship he must get to know the people. He must become familiar with them, and familiar with their problems and needs. One place to develop such relationships will be in the sleepy avenues where the people are apt to congregate. There, under the shade trees, the young lawyer will pass the time of day, gossiping about matters of all sorts, and discussing the sundry legal questions which arise in the minds and affairs of his clientele. In a real sense the street will become an office to him. Such was the case with Harvard-educated William Stringfellow. He came to know his people, and they to trust in him. The street was as much of an office as he ever had. But the town was not small, and the only shade was to be found in the shadows of the festering ghettos. William Stringfellow's small town was the "inner city"[1] of Harlem, and this book is a product of his seven years in its streets.

Why did he go to Harlem rather than back to his home in Northampton, or to the Boston firm which sought his services? The idea was first suggested by a friend who was associated with the East Harlem Protestant Parish, and initially Stringfellow was in some manner associated with that group. But his personal motivation is not made entirely clear. It seems to have involved his religious feelings to a greater extent than his belief that the poor should be represented at the bar.

It is also not clear what Mr. Stringfellow accomplished by way of improving the legal position of the people that he started out to help. This is to his credit in some respects. Rather than turning his book into a back-slapping account of his mission, he succeeded in subordinating "self" to the message that he wanted to convey.

What is that message? Here lies the book's great strength, and at the same time its great weakness. Mr. Stringfellow attempts to make three main points. The quality of each suffers from a lack of depth because of the presence of, and emphasis on, the others.

Mr. Stringfellow strikes hard at the indifference of the legal profession to the plight of the poor before the bar. Usually, they are

1. STRINGFELLOW, MY PEOPLE IS THE ENEMY 43 (1964).

"simply not represented at all,"[2] much less honestly or effectively. He attributes this to three factors: the expense and time usually involved in the legal process, charlatan lawyers who exploit the poor, and the poor man's image of the law derived from police brutality. The police are the poor's most frequent contact with the law, and "the image that they see when they see the law in action is of the law as an enemy."[3] Mr. Stringfellow illustrates this thesis, as he does others throughout his book, with graphic illustrations from his own experience.

Political processes, most notably those of the New York Mayor's Office, come under the fire of his scathing pen. He asserts that the real foundation of political power is the "protection and preservation of vested economic interests,"[4] and when political power represents economic investment, the poor are excluded. He denounces the apathy displayed by the city's leadership, which has succeeded in ignoring the presence of the Harlem ghettos and their primarily non-voting populace, save for occasional ceremonial inspections and unfulfilled promises of reform. A typical incident involved a decrepit school building in Harlem. Plagued by complaints as to its inadequacy, the Mayor of New York, "a man of extravagant apathy,"[5] staged an attention-getting foray into the world of social reform. He came to the school to address the parents and students there assembled. As he rose to speak, a large rat scurried across the stage in front of him. Amid a flurry of publicity, the school was closed. Unfortunately, it has yet to be reopened or replaced, thus adding to the overcrowded conditions of the other schools.

Mr. Stringfellow also condemns the "Uncle Tom-ism" of the Negro politicians. Using Adam Clayton Powell as his prime example, he describes how they "use" their color to win the votes of the Negro population and then betray their constituents by serving as figureheads or "yes men" for the white leaders in exchange for a small bit of inclusion in the white social world.[6]

Mr. Stringfellow poignantly asserts the failure of the law and the politicians in Harlem. Unfortunately he makes no attempt to get to the bottom of the problem and explore the reason for these deficiencies. Herein lies the weakness of his work. Mr. Stringfellow obviously has something of value to offer as to the problems of Harlem. But when he reaches the point where he really begins, he shifts to another point. The subject to which he shifts is usually valid, and he certainly treats it with intelligence. Nonetheless he leaves the impression that the

2. *Id.* at 38.
3. *Id.* at 54.
4. *Id.* at 69.
5. *Id.* at 11.
6. *Id.* at 78-80.

former point has not been examined completely.

Mr. Stringfellow's views on race relations, which follow his legal and political discussions, are no less timely and damning. He perceptively analyzes the Negro revolt, observing that it suffers temporarily from the lack of a forceful leader. His criticisms are leveled as much at the *de facto* segregation of the north as the bitter racism of the south. The Negro is groping to find himself and his place in society and does not wish to become "like whites" whether by intermarriage or otherwise.[7] The Negro wants to be accepted as such. But he grows impatient; he is tired of promises and sickened by "Uncle Tom-ism" in all walks of life. "Each day of die-hard indifference of white people in the north, each day of die-hard segregation in the south, invites disaster by making it more difficult for the Negro leadership favoring and practicing nonviolent protest to maintain its leadership."[8]

Mr. Stringfellow's religious philosophy permeates the entire volume. He refers to the position of the church in the racial struggle; how it has forfeited its position of leadership and relegated itself to hiding behind platitudinous pronouncements while in fact practicing and promoting discrimination. One of the most valuable contributions of the book is the subchapter in which Stringfellow describes, seemingly almost as an afterthought, the drifting away of the Harlem Protestant Parish from his concept of what the Church's position in the world, and the Bible's position in the Church, should be. In discussing this schism he succeeds in conveying the meaning of his own religion and its relationship to his life and practice.

There is much of value in this fine volume. All of the subjects are treated with great thought and insight. All that the treatment lacks is depth. One feels that perhaps Mr. Stringfellow would have been well advised to write three books and treat each field separately. His treatments are of such high quality and so meaningful to the reader that one feels deprived and disappointed that he chose to stop where he did.

7. *Id.* at 118-19.
8. *Id.* at 113.