

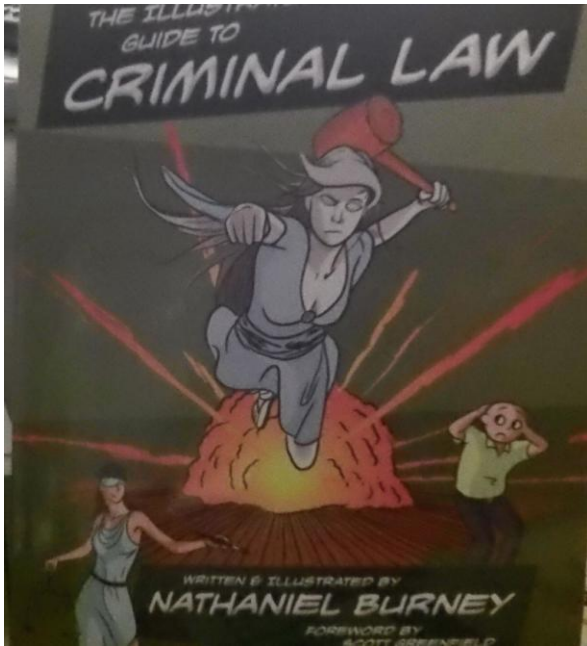
The illustrated guide to criminal law

Nathaniel Burney

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Book review by Sally Ramage

This law book has 17 chapters and is 335 pages long, but unlike any other law book, it has been offered as a series of comic strip stories illustrating crime and punishment; *mens rea* and *actus reus*; *inchoate crimes and their defenses*.

The author states that one reason for this illustrated guide is to debunk many myths about criminal law. Using this light approach to imparting knowledge was successful and even a cursory glance at a few pages illustrated that the author has succeeded in imparting some quite technical knowledge in a clear and clever way. Firstly, the book is a paperback, making it accessible to the public in general. Secondly, the author departed entirely from traditional law books by not citing any cases or statutes or regulation- just the essence of general American criminal law. It should be placed in every library in the

country so that the public and especially young people might (unwittingly even) be drawn to understand their law. This young approach uses 'outside the box' thinking.

Here in New York especially, crime stories have made the front pages of the New York Times; New York Daily News; New York Post; and other newspapers. One only needs to remember the 9/11 terrorist outrage. In New York especially, the crime rate has always been high: public order offences in the 1800s riots (Cook, 1974); gangs and their goings-on since 1850; the mad bomber from 1940 to 1956; developments in criminology and the gun database. In 1980 New Yorkers and the rest of the world read about the killing of John Lennon of the Beatles fame (Kane, 2005); organized crime of the Cosa Nostra mafia gang (Raab, 2005); cults and clubs (Terry, 1987).

If statistics are to be believed, and care taken in making direct comparisons between states, there is no doubt that there is much crime. The US Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation ('FBI') published crime statistics and in 2004, for example, nationwide, there was one murder every 32.6 minutes; one forcible rape every 5.6 minutes; one robbery every 1.3 minutes; one aggravated assault every 36.9 seconds; one property crime every 3.1 seconds; one burglary every 14.7 seconds; one larceny-theft every 4.5 seconds and one motor vehicle theft every 25.5 seconds. That crime is a feature of life is all the more reason for an illustrated book of criminal law.

Chapter seven of the book addresses the problem of when a person should know the consequences of their actions and how difficult it is to teach very young persons about 'property' and parental responsibility later explaining pictorially what inchoate offences such as conspiracies are.

Chapter eleven on defenses consists of many scenarios, illustrating that ignorance of the law is no excuse; just as mistake of law is no defense nor is mistake of fact (page 124).



Chapter fourteen concerns duress and here the author again illustrates that although in comic form, the content is very serious and sometimes definitely academic. On page 279, Burney illustrates a motorcycle group in one frame and the men off their motorcycles

fighting in the other frame. As one man punches a second man, the second man says “*Explain again why Schrodinger’s cat is not in superposition.*” The second man then motions to club him and with club in the air, he replies: “*Because that only works in isolation. The cat’s environment constantly collapses the cat-box system, dummy.*”

This is but one example of the author’s aim of readership. No child would understand that page because it refers Erwin Schroedinger’s theory (Schroedinger, a key figures in quantum physics, gave us the "Schroedinger's Cat" thought experiment. He had created the quantum wave function, which was now the defining equation of motion in the universe and the cartoon refers to the concept of Schroedinger's Cat which illustrates the issues with quantum physics.

Nathaniel Burney introduces criminal law to lawyers and non lawyers in a similarly clever way, reminding the reader that crime is any behavior that our courts and laws have determined should be a crime, ie morally sensoring behavior with punishment meted out by the state. Crime contrasts with torts under civil law, when the court’s intention to restore the situation to one before the tort. Criminal law specifically punishes the person responsible. Crime’s main categories are offenses against the person; sexual offenses; public order offences; offences of dishonesty; offences against the state; regulatory offences; and inchoate offences.

Conclusion

This book is novel. It is a valient attempt to modernize the way we teach criminal law and the way we impart knowledge.

References

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