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## Book Review: The Onion Field (1973)

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Onion Field.** By Joseph Wambaugh.<sup>1</sup> New York: Delacorte Press, 1973. Pp. 427.

*Reviewed by Mack A. Player<sup>2</sup>*

Truman Capote would call *The Onion Field*<sup>3</sup> a "non-fiction novel." Critics might call it a murder story with heavy sociological comment,<sup>4</sup> or as one suggested, it is the author's defense of a friend and fellow officer.<sup>5</sup> The Library of Congress might well classify the book under "Murder-Los Angeles-Case Studies." The average reader, with or without exposure to the legal profession, will find this book engaging, fascinating, and if a mood of permeating depression can be called entertaining, it can be called that too. Perhaps most importantly to those in and about the legal profession the book has its messages. At a time when questions are raised, and rightfully so, about insufficient "due process" for the accused, Mr. Wambaugh graphically illustrates the impact of giving more process than is due.

As with Joseph Wambaugh's previous works of acclaimed fiction, *The New Centurions*<sup>6</sup> and *The Blue Knight*,<sup>7</sup> this, his first work of non-fiction, is drawn from the author's actual experiences on the Los Angeles Police Department. Not unlike Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*,<sup>8</sup> *The Onion Field* analyzes with prodigious research an actual event and the dramatis personae of a true life and death drama. Like a novel, however, the characters are fully developed and the time sequences juxtaposed so as to make the events carry the author's ideas. In fact, one has to constantly ask himself, "Is this really true?"

The book can be divided into three basic sections. The first would

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<sup>3</sup> J. WAMBAUGH, *THE ONION FIELD* (1973).

<sup>4</sup> *SATURDAY REVIEW & WORLD*, Sept. 11, 1973, at 47; *N.Y. TIMES BOOK REVIEW*, Sept. 2, 1973, at 5.

<sup>5</sup> *TIME*, Sept. 24, 1973, at 126.

<sup>6</sup> J. WAMBAUGH, *THE NEW CENTURIONS* (1970).

<sup>7</sup> J. WAMBAUGH, *THE BLUE KNIGHT* (1972).

<sup>8</sup> T. CAPOTE, *IN COLD BLOOD* (1966).

be called "the characters." Wambaugh skillfully relates biographies of four men — two policemen and two, for the want of a better term, "criminals." The reader views the minutiae of their lives, the forces that make up their characters, their dreams and aspirations. He meets their wives, parents, friends, and victims. One policeman, Ian Campbell, has a passion for the bagpipes and had planned on becoming, like his deceased father, a physician. The other, Karl Hettinger, the son of a carpenter, dreams of becoming a farmer. The author presents subtle insights regarding what makes one become a police officer, and conversely, what forces direct individuals into anti-social behavior. Jimmy Smith, one of the "criminals," is an illegitimate mulatto reared by his crippled "Nana." Jimmy is a born follower, a petty hustler, never destined to make the big time. Gregory Powell, the second "criminal" is the product of a white middle-western, middle-class, middle-America background. He is the oldest son of a preoccupied musician father and a hypochondriac mother. By the time he is sixteen, he has stolen his first car. He runs away from home and ends up having a homosexual experience with a priest. He develops a fascination for pistols and takes fanatical pride in his marksmanship.

These two dissimilar misfits meet, and with Powell's wife, form what Powell calls "his little family."<sup>9</sup> A bond is forged by the domineering personality of Powell and the ferret-like instincts of Smith to obey, follow and—survive. There is some sex, and an ample supply of unhousebroken language; and in its own sick way, there is also humor. Reminiscent of the movie "Bonnie and Clyde," Powell and Smith prowl around town in an old jalopy with a clutch that slips so badly that the getaway after a stick-up is little more than a crawl away from the curb. Robberies are committed with such carefree abandon that on one occasion the robbers "escaped" into a *cul-de-sac* and were forced to drive back in front of the store they had just robbed. Powell prepared elaborate disguises, conceived with some insight. For instance, he uses a fake mole on his earlobe on the theory that victims will not remember obvious characteristics of a robber but will remember minutiae.

The next section of the book would be headed "the crime." In it, the author describes the chance meeting of the four protagonists on a Los Angeles street, a meeting that has all the predictability of a lightning strike. The two policemen are captured by these two petty

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<sup>9</sup> J. WAMBAUGH, *THE ONION FIELD* 55 (1973).

nonentities. They drive to a remote onion field. Ian Campbell is executed. In the confusion Karl Hettinger escapes. Wambaugh's narrative is poignant, chilling, and heart stopping. The detective work that follows and the incredibly rapid capture of Smith and Powell are almost anti-climactic. This part of the story is read with a quick exhale and a thought that "I'm glad that is over."

In the final section of the book, the author introduces the all too familiar phenomenon, the ex post facto reaction of the bureaucracy. Police officer Campbell is buried with pomp and circumstance. The desk jockey police officials then decree that under no circumstances is a policeman to surrender his weapon,<sup>10</sup> suggesting defensive measures for the disadvantaged officer—but never surrender. Mr. Wambaugh no doubt has sympathy for the old beat cop who shouts down his fuzzy cheeked superior with:

Sweet \_\_\_\_ mother, can you imagine me rolling around on the ground like some big goddamn walrus trying to knock him down, or yellin, 'Look out behind you, you little cundrum!' Or trying to grab that scrawny neck so I can shove a pencil through his crummy \_\_\_\_ jugular? What the hell is goin on up there these days?<sup>11</sup>

This third section would be classified as "Justice?". If one is seeking relevance from his reading, he can certainly find it here. In some ways, this is a twentieth-century replay to Dickens' nineteenth-century *Bleak House*.<sup>12</sup> Why is it, one might ask, that ten years after the confessed kidnap murderers have been captured litigation drones on and on, never allowing the surviving victims, the relatives and the children to forget? One wonders, does it take 45,000 pages of transcript, a half dozen frustrated judges (one dead from a heart attack) and numerous wrecked prosecutors to dispense justice? Is one of the prosecutors correct when he states, "The American system of justice is the laughing stock of the English speaking world and totally incomprehensible to the rest of the world."<sup>13</sup>

Then one looks at his profession and asks, should it allow its members to pursue, not adjudication according to the rules of law and evidence, but obfuscation, exhaustion, and systematic contempt to make trial on the merits impossible? Can the profession

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 225.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 231.

<sup>12</sup> C. DICKENS, *BLEAK HOUSE* (1852-53).

<sup>13</sup> J. WAMBAUGH, *THE ONION FIELD* 375 (1973).

allow attacks on the bench, the prosecutor, the jurors, and when all else is exhausted, "the system," all on the callous but irrefutable theory that time is on the side of the defendants? Is it to be the client and acquittal at *all* costs? All of which leads one exhausted prosecutor to reflect what are no doubt the sentiments of the author: "At the end I would've made *any* deal . . . if I'd had the power. I would've let them go. Dropped all charges. Released them. If only I could've put their two lawyers in the gas chamber."<sup>14</sup>

Finally, and most pathetically, there is the portrait of the surviving victim of crime. What does such a crime and its aftermath, the dispensation of "justice," do to the victim? First, there was the guilt flowing solely from survival. Second, the realization that he had surrendered, a fact the police force would not allow him to forget. Third, he had run. He did not stay and confront his tormentors. Finally, the trials, the endless trials where these horrors had to be repeated and repeated, where his honesty, his good faith, his morality were analyzed and reanalyzed. Throughout these proceedings, the victim faced thinly veiled challenges that he could not really see who actually pulled the trigger because he was *running*. The result: Karl Hettinger's life was ruined. His personal relationships disintegrated. He developed kleptomania. He was dismissed from the police force, for a time without a pension. He narrowly escaped suicide. His greatest fear—another trial.

*The Onion Field* is but one story of how one victim of both crime and our criminal justice system reacted. It is indeed a sad and tragic conclusion that perhaps, just perhaps, it would have been better had Smith and Powell on that March evening in 1963 claimed two victims rather than just one.

The final day of the book is a day in the spring in 1973. There is a spark of hope that time, nature and the legal system are at last allowing ghastly wounds to heal. But the reader who is familiar with our legal system is not left with such hope, for he is not sure that 1974 will not bring more judicial proceedings. More importantly perhaps, if the reader believes in our system of justice, he grieves at its abuse. Mr. Wambaugh was perhaps writing in defense of a friend and fellow officer, but in doing so he exposed a fissure in our criminal justice system that needs some attention and repair.

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 383-84.