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# Lawtalk: The Unknown Stories Behind Familiar Legal Expressions



## Synopsis

Law-related words and phrases abound in our everyday language, often without our being aware of their origins or their particular legal significance: boilerplate, jailbait, pound of flesh, rainmaker, the third degree. This insightful and entertaining book reveals the unknown stories behind familiar legal expressions that come from sources as diverse as Shakespeare, vaudeville, and Dr. Seuss. Separate entries for each expression follow no prescribed formula but instead focus on the most interesting, enlightening, and surprising aspects of the words and their evolution. Popular myths and misunderstandings are explored and exploded, and the entries are augmented with historical images and humorous sidebars. Lively and unexpected, Lawtalk will draw a diverse array of readers with its abundance of linguistic, legal, historical, and cultural information. Those readers should be forewarned: upon finishing one entry, there is an irresistible temptation to turn to another, and yet another. . . .

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is meticulously researched and immensely enjoyable to read. I loved learning about such expressions as the "thin blue line" (actually linked to the British red coats) and "green card" (which isn't green--at least not now--and a great example of "Spanglish," or how words move back and forth between English and Spanish). This well-designed, easy-to-navigate volume would make a great holiday gift for any legal mind or aficionado of language.

If you like language history, this book is a lively read, and a quite engaging one too, not a dry listing of etymologies. While it should also be of interest to those in the legal profession, it focuses mainly on words and phrases of legal origin used in everyday life ("billable hour", "green card", etc.) rather than technical legal phrases, so non-lawyers shouldn't find it unnecessarily daunting. Many of the phrases have entertaining backstories that touch on a variety of historical incidents and accidents, so it's a nice route by which to get at some of the alleys and byways of legal history. The phrases themselves often make more sense once their origin is clarified, too. And finally, it's a good work of scholarship: the authors go to primary sources and comb archives to find the real origins of words, which in many cases are older than what existing literature usually claims (they even correct a few errors in high-quality sources like the Oxford English Dictionary).

The only thing that saved me on a packed 11 hour flight from NYC to Hawaii (with broken earphones and a sleeping girlfriend) was this book. Funny, insightful, completely repeatable (between naps my girlfriend got to hear the many "best ofs"), this book is terrific. As a lawyer, I've used or was familiar with virtually all of these phrases. Yet I had not before considered themes of the law in terms of color (blackmail, blue laws, green card, and white shoe), anatomy (Chancellor's foot, pound of flesh, or eye for an eye) or animals (kangaroo court, Jim Crow, and the law is an ass) - and the derivation of these terms is fascinating. Thoughtfully researched and entertainingly presented, half reference, half entertainment, this book has become a staple in my office, shared with friends and colleagues alike.

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