

# Traver: Laughing Whitefish

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Laughing Whitefish*. BY ROBERT TRAVER. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1965. Pp. 312. \$5.50.

An actual reported Michigan Supreme Court case<sup>1</sup> underlies this latest of three legal novels by former Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, John D. Voelker.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Voelker, himself a man familiar with controversy in his own right, portrays the plight of an Indian girl with a just claim and her lawyer against a powerful mining corporation. Admittedly, the actual case simply provides the framework for the writer's creativity. Yet, a realistic note is readily apparent to anyone familiar with the legal profession. A certain idealism, common to the artist but lamentably slipping from the grasp of the profession, is basic to the novel.

Willy Poe, a recent migrant from an Ann Arbor, Michigan, law firm, finds his way to Marquette. The year is 1873, and the country is the rugged mining area of the Upper Peninsula. With an inauspicious beginning, the young lawyer meets his first client. She is a beautiful, black-haired, raven-eyed Indian girl named Laughing Whitefish. In a time and place where the rights of Indians was a neglected concept at best, Willy Poe agrees to take on his first and only client's fight against the powerful and wealthy Jackson Ore Company. He obtained the case principally because he was the only lawyer in the area unconnected with the mining industry.

The proof supporting the claim of Laughing Whitefish is positive and unquestionable. An area of the law familiar to all is involved—the collection of a debt. The question is rather basic: can Laughing Whitefish, a Chippewa Indian, collect a debt owed her deceased father, Marji Kawbawgum? The claim is founded on a tattered document which gave her father a share of the mining company for leading the white man to the iron ore many years before.

The plight of Willy Poe is frustration when faced with the opposition of the money and power of the Jackson Ore Company. The company has an ally in a Christian setting with a puritanical overlay. His client is the schoolteacher-daughter of an illiterate, heathen, savage lost in the new and strange world of the white man. Robert Traver captures the mood of the setting in a style that is captivating and free. With a just cause, the vagaries of the law in its administration beguile the young lawyer and his reprobate ally, Cassius Wendell. Technically, the writing accomplishment attained is the fascination and interest generated in a subject which generally holds the least interest—the collection of a debt.

Typical of Robert Traver, as evidenced by his best known novel, *Anatomy of a Murder*, insights on topics which at one time or another are common to the lawyer and jurist are expounded upon. Through Willy Poe, the author muses that the law is really the catch-all profession for drifters, dreamers and malcontents, forced of necessity to earn a livelihood. Willy Poe, as is true of Robert

<sup>1</sup> *Compo v. Jackson Iron Co.*, 49 Mich. 39, 12 N.W. 901 (1882); *Compo v. Jackson Iron Co.*, 50 Mich. 578, 16 N.W. 295 (1883); *Kobogum v. Jackson Iron Co.*, 76 Mich. 498, 43 N.W. 602 (1889).

<sup>2</sup> The name Robert Traver is a *nom de plume* of the author.

Traver, yearned to be a writer and poet and to fish. A good family would not tolerate such a thing. In desperation, he fell into the lap of the law. The law is said to be not only a shelter and an escape for the confused and the malcontent, but also the last of the romantic professions.

Following Willy Poe in and out of court, the author reflects in a practical manner on a variety of topics; factual preparation of a case, the pleadings and the preparation of the law. The fencing of opposing counsel, their courtesy and amity in turn receive some form of treatment in a manner which is neither disagreeable to the thoughtful nor offensive to the sensitive.

In another area, the author philosophizes on the immortality of the corporate entity which lacks soul and conscience and which is capable of performing acts that would horrify the individual shareholder if done himself. Such a topic was probably more capable of provoking controversy in times past than presently.

The author criticizes the legal profession for giving up its independence to become dominated by business. The lawyer, such as Willy Poe, is fast becoming a rarity and an outcast for championing the unpopular cause. Instead, the profession seems content to lie lazily in the sun "nuzzling at the bountiful corporate udder." Cassius Wendell, apparently finding Cherry Soda more mentally stimulating than demon rum, wonders for what other reason would it be that the only person in the entire area to speak up for the Indian should be a beardless boy, barely out of law school. Such interjections do not detract from a delightful and flowing novel, but are interposed with such style so as to enhance a thoroughly entertaining work. Such thoughts in fact are apt to remain with the reader when the enjoyment of the story becomes a pleasant emotion.

Central to the entire book is this theme of the young lawyer championing the right of a young Indian girl. His faltering accomplishments against formidable opposition in an unfavorable social and economic setting are in the best traditions of the profession. This is the legal tradition for which the author surely has a great deal of feeling. The problems of the Chippewa Laughing Whitefish are the problems of all who find themselves in the role of the down-trodden underdog. Willy Poe is the unblemished young lion who champions the just but unpopular cause and in so doing not only nobles himself, but the entire profession. Significantly, how much he stands to gain monetarily by winning for Laughing Whitefish is not determined and intentionally ignored by our young lion.

Willy Poe, now more aptly called William Poe, reaches his finest hour in an impassioned plea on behalf of his client in her struggle to get law and justice to work together and in his scathing attack on the treatment of the Indian generally. William Poe himself conceded that whatever the decision in Laughing Whitefish's case, the injustice to her was but a minor backstairs pilfering when compared with the grand larceny of a continent from the Indian.

Whether the reader's enjoyment of a novel is based on style, interest in the subject matter or in a message, Mr. Traver should achieve something akin to universal acceptance since these qualities are all tastefully and artfully combined in *Laughing Whitefish*.

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