

LOWELL B. KOMIE: AN INTERVIEW

Lowell Komie has been practicing law in Chicago for almost fifty years. While there are any number of lawyers who manage to practice law for three or four decades, few do so while establishing themselves as major writers. And if Lowell Komie is not today widely viewed as one of our best contemporary writers of legal fiction, he should be. His short stories featuring lawyers and judges and law students are flawlessly written, brilliantly conceived, and offer us a glimpse into the heart and lives of lawyers with a storytelling magic of a masterful writer with a fine literary sensibility. While the lawyer who writes fiction is no longer a novelty, few lawyers who take up fiction have come close to producing the finely crafted and haunting stories that are the hallmark of Komie's exceptional writing.

Komie has now authored three collections of short stories, *The Judge's Chambers and Other Stories*,¹ *The Lawyer's Chambers and Other Stories*,² and *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London and Other*

¹ Lowell B. Komie, *THE JUDGE'S CHAMBERS AND OTHER STORIES* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1987)(hereinafter *The Judge's Chambers*). Nine of the stories in *The Judge's Chambers* were first published by the American Bar Association in 1983, the first and only time that the American Bar Association has published a collection of fiction. The majority of the stories in this *Legal Studies Forum* collection first appeared in *Student Lawyer*, the magazine of the Law Student Division of the American Bar Association.

² Lowell B. Komie, *THE LAWYER'S CHAMBERS AND OTHER STORIES* (Chicago: Swordfish/Chicago, 1994)(hereinafter *The Lawyer's Chambers*). *The Lawyer's Chambers* received the 1995 Carl Sandburg Award for fiction from the Friends of the Chicago Public Library. Swordfish is a publishing house established by Mr. Komie and his son, David. On the origins of the name Swordfish, Komie relates the following:

When my father, who died several years ago, wrestled with me or hugged me and held me in his powerful grip, the only way he would release me would be if I said our secret password, "Swordfish." He was a powerful, athletic man, a very graceful athlete and a marvelous baseball player and shortstop. He could have held me for an eternity, and I wish he had, but the secret password, 'Swordfish,' was always honored between us not as a sign of weakness, but as a matter of honor between father and son. So Swordfish/Chicago is named after my father. My mother would be very happy.

My father was a friend of the Marx Brothers when they lived on the South Side of Chicago. His particular friend was Zeppo, who he called Buster. On Saturdays the Marx Brothers, who raised pigeons in a coop on the roof of their boarding house, would take the pigeons to Calumet City and sell them to immigrants, who baked pigeon pies. Then Buster, Chico, Harpo and Groucho would rush back to the South Side, and my father would wait with them on their roof for the birds to come flying back. If you let the pigeons out of your grasp for a second, they would be off—and would fly back to the coop because they were homing pigeons. So the Marx Brothers sold the same pigeons each Saturday, over and over again. My father swore this is a true story.

Stories.³ His first novel, *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America* appeared in 1997.⁴ His stories have been published in *Harper's*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *South Dakota Review*, *Student Lawyer*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, *Milwaukee Journal Magazine*, *Chicago Bar Record*, and *Canadian Lawyer* and other literary magazines. Mr. Komie is completing a new novel which will be published this year.

Having long admired Komie's stories we decided to see if we could entice him to consent to talk with us about his work and his writing. Mr. Komie graciously agreed to an interview and it was conducted by email in September and October, 2000.

THE INTERVIEW

J. Elkins: Mr. Komie, your writing first came to my attention some years ago when I found *The Judge's Chambers*, a collection of your short stories, in our law school library. I selected two stories from that collection and have used them over the years in my "Lawyers and Literature" course. While I find your stories quite exceptional and rank them with the finest contemporary legal fiction of our day, your work has not received the attention it deserves. But before we talk about your writing, its important to note that you have now been practicing law for almost fifty years. In an era when many young lawyers express dissatisfaction with the practice of law, and indicate they would choose a different profession if they had the choice to make again, one assumes you have found "satisfactions" in law that have sustained you as a lawyer. Could you tell us something about your law practice and the "satisfactions" you find in your work as a lawyer?

L. Komie: I wish I could say I'm an acclaimed author; I'm not. All writers want their work to be read and for many years I had very little of my work published. It was only with the American Bar Association's publication of *The Judge's Chambers* in 1983 that my work began to receive attention.

Years later, I learned that the Marx Brothers made a movie in which all through the movie the secret password was "Swordfish." So I finally learned where my father got the name, and I pass it on with these stories to you.

³ Lowell B. Komie, *THE NIGHT SWIMMER-A MAN IN LONDON AND OTHER STORIES* (Chicago: Swordfish/Chicago, 1999)(hereinafter *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London*).

⁴ Lowell B. Komie, *THE LAST JEWISH SHORTSTOP IN AMERICA* (Chicago: Swordfish/Chicago, 1997).

If I had it to do over again, I would probably still choose the law as my profession. When I was young, I thought maybe I'd become a journalist—a foreign correspondent—but I think, on reflection, I made the right choice.⁵ My biggest satisfaction in being a lawyer is being my own “boss.” I have freedom, as a sole practitioner, to pretty much come and go as I please.⁶ It took me many years to achieve this freedom and I survived several “partnerships” where I was a slave to the “time sheet”⁷ and to the senior partners in these associations.⁸ I should have gone off on my own earlier, but I've been alone now for perhaps 20 years. If you want to know more about my life as a single practitioner, I might refer you to the story “Burak” in *The Lawyer's Chambers*.⁹

⁵ Komie often draws his characters and their lives from the world he knows best—his own. For example, he notes in the interview that he gave thought to being a foreign correspondent. In *Intimate Pages: A Lawyer's Notebook*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 123, at 130 (2001), the narrator notes that:

When I graduated from Northwestern I thought I might lend my considerable talents to the World Court or the United Nations or the State Department. I would have liked to have worn a top hat and striped trousers and argued the Nicaraguan mining case before the World Court. I would have liked to have had my morning coffee on a hotel terrace in Geneva. But gradually, I dropped those ideas and became a lawyer in Chicago with an office on the sixth floor in a glass high-rise building.

⁶ The narrator in *Intimate Pages: A Lawyer's Notebook* is also a lawyer who enjoys his freedom:

I do enjoy being a lawyer, even if being a solo practitioner means that you spend a great deal of time worrying about money. . . . If I were in a big firm, I'd have a Mercedes and still worry. If a senior partner wanted me to fly off to Toledo on Saturday morning to review a memorandum on executive compensation at International Ball Bearings, Inc., I'd have to smile and say, Yes sir, I'll go. Fortunately, since I work for myself, I don't have to do that, and that's the best thing about being a lawyer—freedom. You don't have to take a case. You are relatively free.

Id.

⁷ The self-induced tyranny of the time-sheet and a lawyer's billing practices are explored in Komie's *The Balloon of William Fuerst*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 57 (2001) (where a lawyer who had once invented the billing system for his firm has come to abhor it). In “Solo” a young lawyer is fired because of his problem with not billing enough.

He had refused to accede to the firm policy of 2,000 annual billable hours. It was an absolute. He knew about it but had defied it. He'd turned in only 1,750 hours again, but it wasn't enough this year, and he had refused to pad his time. His senior associate had told him just to go back to his office, review his time sheets, and come back with the missing 250 hours. He refused to do it. So they let him go. Lowell B. Komie, *Solo*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 41 (2001)

⁸ For a fictional partner's view of his law firm world, see Komie, *I Am Greenwald, My Father's Son*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 77 (2001).

⁹ “Burak,” in *The Lawyer's Chambers*, *supra* note 2, at 129-132 [25 Legal Stud. F. 165 (2001)]. This story was originally published by the American Bar Association in a series on solo practice and was later translated and published by the Japan Federation of Bar Associations in July, 1996.

J. Elkins: Most of us have sufficient trouble maintaining one career, much less two. Is it accurate to say you have also had a “career” as an author?

L. Komie: Yes, I think that’s accurate. I have spent 40 years writing stories. I’m very proud of my work as a writer.

J. Elkins: Your first collection of short stories, *The Judge’s Chambers* appeared in 1983. Over what period of time did you write these stories and how did they come to be published by the American Bar Association, an organization not commonly known as a publisher of fiction?

L. Komie: Almost all of the stories in *The Judge’s Chambers* previously appeared in *Student Lawyer*. The editor, David Martin, took the proposal for a collection of short stories before an annual meeting of the Student Division of the American Bar Association (ABA) and acted as an advocate for the book. Ann Campbell, then officer in charge of the Student Division also fought for its publication. It was a long, drawn out, difficult process. After two years, the proposal for a collection went before the Board of Governors at the ABA and was voted down. Later, the proposal was presented again, and the ABA decided to publish the stories. Many of the stories were written in the 1970s.

J. Elkins: When did you first start writing fiction?

L. Komie: I began writing fiction as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan back in the late 40s.¹⁰ I went to Europe in the summer of 1948 and broke up with a girlfriend in Venice. She was from Chicago and a student in Italy for the summer. She had met a young, handsome, Italian man in the fruit market in Florence and he followed her to Venice. I remember we all had a drink together at Harry’s American Bar and he was so overcome with emotion (he’d never been to Venice) he crushed his wine glass in his hand and began bleeding. I thought I was a young Hemingway and my young love was Catherine Barkley so the three of us took the vaporetto to Lido Beach where the two of them eventually dumped me. I rode the vaporetto back alone. This was my

¹⁰ Komie has the lawyer narrator in *Intimate Pages: A Lawyers Notebook*, *supra* note 5, return to the University of Michigan law school where he has occasion to comment on changes he observes from the time he attended the law school. The law student protagonist in “Spring” is also a law student at Michigan. See Komie, *Spring*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 21 (2001).

first real experience at being broken-hearted and I tried to exorcize the pain by writing a story about it.

One of my professors at Michigan was Allan Seager, a distinguished short story writer and novelist,¹¹ and a Rhodes Scholar, and he was very patient and a gifted teacher; he didn't laugh at my story. I continued taking his classes and eventually got into one-on-one conferences with him and he turned out to be a fine mentor.¹² However, I was a poor writer and prone to imitation Hemingway stories.¹³ It was much later when I found my own voice as a writer.¹⁴

J. Elkins: And your first published story?¹⁵

L. Komie: "The Name, Kozonis"¹⁶ was my first published short story. It appeared in the fall, 1973 issue of *Karamu*, a literary magazine published by Eastern Illinois University. Allen Neff was the editor and I will always remember Allen with gratitude. He was a literary man and a gentleman who lived too short a life. I was so excited when the story was published, I drove down to Charleston and took Allen and his staff members out for a lunch of hamburgers and beers at a local tavern. My son Jim went with me and went fishing in the river there and caught a nice fish. Also, I will always remember coming home from the office on the train and finding my entire family at the station waving the acceptance letter from *Karamu*. They were as excited as I was.

J. Elkins: How would you characterize the stories in your first collection, *The Judge's Chambers*, and why would the American Bar Association decide to publish them?

¹¹ Allan Seager, *THE GLASS HOUSE: THE LIFE OF THEODORE ROETHKE* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); *HILDA MANNING: A NOVEL* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956); *THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN, AND SEVENTEEN OTHER STORIES* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950); *THE INHERITANCE: A NOVEL* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948); *THEY WORKED FOR A BETTER WORLD* (New York: MacMillan, 1939).

¹² For a Komie mentor story with a darker ending, see Komie, *Mentoring*, 25 *Legal Stud. F.* 51 (2001).

¹³ The law student protagonist in Komie's *Spring* struggles, unsuccessfully, to write a novel. See Komie, *Spring*, 25 *Legal Stud. F.* 21 (2001).

¹⁴ On "voice" and writing, see Peter Elbow, *WRITING WITH POWER: TECHNIQUES FOR MASTERING THE WRITING PROCESS* 281-313 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1998) (1981).

¹⁵ I posed this question to Lowell Komie for the explicit purpose of incorporating his published recollection of this event and his gracious tribute to his first editor, Allen Neff. See "The Name Kozonis," in *The Night Swimmer—A Man in London*, at 67 [25 *Legal Stud. F.* 87 (2001)].

¹⁶ 25 *Legal Stud. F.* 87 (2001).

L. Komie: It's a difficult question. I never wanted to be known as a writer who wrote only about lawyers.¹⁷ I want my stories to have a broader reach. This may be why I'm not an admirer of legal thrillers and courtroom fiction generally. I know some writers make a fortune at it, but I don't regard it as literature. I wanted to write stories that would transcend the narrowness of being a lawyer, and portray characters (and lawyers) as real human beings. In these lawyer stories I try to move away from traditional characterizations of lawyers and portray them as real people. My characters have problems, anxieties, hang-ups, frustrations, love affairs. Some of the stories deal with lawyers and their disaffection with the law; in some, lawyers find satisfaction in their work.

I can't really tell you why the American Bar Association would be willing to publish the stories. Maybe it was because they too, as lawyers, were interested in stories that portray lawyers in the way I have tried to imagine them.

J. Elkins: Are there particular stories in *The Judge's Chambers* for which you have a particular fondness?

L. Komie: I really cannot pick one story from *The Judge's Chambers* and say I am most fond of it. I was, however, touched that "The Balloon of William Fuerst"¹⁸ was selected for inclusion in Professor Jay Wishingrad's fine collection of law-oriented fiction published under the title *Legal Fictions*.¹⁹ He included that story in a collection that included stories by Kafka, Faulkner, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Louis Auchincloss and others. I had some fine company in that collection and Jay Wishingrad will always have my gratitude for including one of my stories. Sadly, Professor Wishingrad died before the collection was published and he never saw the finished book.²⁰ He called me several

¹⁷ While many of Komie's short stories do feature lawyers, judges, and law students, he is equally adept with characters who have nothing to do with law. The law does not play a significant part in Komie's novel, *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America*. While the focus of this interview is on Komie's legal fiction, his stories certainly have a broader reach.

¹⁸ *The Balloon of William Fuerst*, *supra* note 7.

¹⁹ Jay Wishingrad (ed.), *LEGAL FICTIONS: SHORT STORIES ABOUT LAWYERS AND THE LAW* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1992). Regrettably, *Legal Fictions* is now out-of-print.

²⁰ Dick Vaughn, writing in *Res Ipsa Loquitur* notes that:

In his final days of life, New York litigation and entertainment attorney, Jay Wishingrad dotted his last "i's" and crossed the final "t's" of his life. Working from his hospital bed, where leukemia imprisoned him, he finished the introduction to

times when he was putting the book together and told me how difficult it was to get all the copyright permissions. He never said anything about being ill. I still regret he could not have lived to see published the book he worked so hard to pull together. It's a really fine collection of legal fiction.

J. Elkins: I would nominate two stories "The Interview"²¹ and "The Cornucopia of Julia K."²² from *The Judge's Chambers* for inclusion in any definitive collection of lawyer stories. I've taught these stories for many years and have grown quite attached to them. In "The Interview," Susan Eliofson receives a rather harsh introduction to law firm life when she is interviewed for a position in a firm by some rather crass lawyers, lawyers so wrapped up in themselves and their work they don't have any idea how rude and offensive their actions are.²³ I find "The Interview" intriguing because Susan is leaving one world (law school) and entering another (work world), and while we suspect there are going to be all manner of disappointments ahead for Susan, we learn she has a kind of wild energy which might see her through hard times. The story ends with a perfectly mischievous act. She is a young woman who has what we might at one time have called "spunk" or what I have come to think of as wild energy. Susan Eliofson may end up in the crass world of the lawyers who interview her—the story doesn't reveal her ultimate fate—but if so we suspect she may well be a match for what she encounters in that world.

How did you happen to write "The Interview"?

L. Komie: I have always been rather superstitious about deconstructing my stories. I think it's better, if there is to be any magic in the story, to let the story stand for itself and let the reader say what magic there might be.

Legal Fictions just hours before his death. In a recent New York Times article, Wishingrad's widow commented on her late husband's drive to finish his book: "What Jay really wanted to do was to get lawyers to read. He felt so many of them spent so little time reading anything other than their briefs and advance sheets, and was hoping to entice them into the world of literature."

3 (3) Res Ipsa Loquitur <<http://www.law.indiana.edu/lib/pubs/news/1192.html>> (visited January 19, 2001).

²¹ Lowell B. Komie, *The Interview*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 11 (2001).

²² Lowell B. Komie, *The Cornucopia of Julia K.*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 71 (2001).

²³ For a non-fiction account of a law student's experience with law firm interviews see Brenda Waugh, *A Theory of Employment Discrimination*, 40 J. Legal Educ. 113 (1990)(a prose poem by a young woman with plenty of "wild energy").

Both "The Interview" and "The Cornucopia of Julia K." have female protagonists.²⁴ They both deal with interviewing for a job at a large law firm. They both warn against it. Susan is warned "don't join the corporate army" and a young applicant in "The Cornucopia of Julia K." is told by Julia, "we don't help people here, we help hamburger corporations . . . we don't help people. Don't be beguiled."

I'm against law schools being used as employment agencies by big law firms who exploit students.²⁵ The lure of big salaries is a disease of the profession. Young people would be well advised to think carefully about what they lose in quality of life by becoming members of "the corporate army." Many become as dehumanized and desensitized as the male lawyers in these stories, or in your words, they become "crass."

I've seen too many young people attracted by these big firms and then discarded. Alternate lifestyles should be considered. Students need to think about smaller communities, opportunities for leisure, sports, culture. It doesn't matter how much money you make if all you do is work and have no time for yourself or your family.

J. Elkins: In "I Am Greenwald, My Father's Son," the lawyer, Greenwald, complains that the new office computer is "surely a monster." It, along with the other firm practices, he feels "are turning us all into dying technocrats, dry little old men, servile and dyspeptic."²⁶ In "The Cornucopia of Julia K.," Julia Kiefer, a corporate securities litigation lawyer, sends a memorandum to the office committee "suggesting that the scanning screens [of the office computers] emitted radiation and that the stenographers be issued radiation badges." Julia believes "the machines are cancerous, that the green glowing chains of perfectly formed calligraphy were as lethal as chains of carcinoma cells."²⁷ And here we are conducting this interview by e-mail. Have you, unlike Greenwald and Julia Kiefer, come around to embrace the new computer technologies in the practice of law?

²⁴ Komie's stories often feature female law students, lawyers, and judges. See e.g., *The Ice Horse*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 29 (2001); *Solo*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 41 (2001); *Mentoring*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 51 (2001); *Skipping Stones*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 63 (2001); *The Divorce of Petra Godic*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 99 (2001); *The Honorable Alicia Beauchamp*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 169 (2001); *Justine*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 199 (2001).

²⁵ See the concluding paragraphs to Komie's "Res Ipsa and Fox Hunting," 25 Legal Stud. F. 215 (2001).

²⁶ 25 Legal Stud. F. 77, at 81.

²⁷ *The Cornucopia of Julia K.*, *supra* note 22, at 71.

L. Komie: I have no problem with new technologies other than learning how to use them. I use a computer, fax, and e-mail in my daily practice.

J. Elkins: In your fiction writing, do you use a computer, typewriter, or write your stories out long-hand?

L. Komie: I write in long-hand. I don't seem to be able to feel anything with a computer. When I say "feel anything," I mean the characters don't seem to come alive for me when I try to write at the computer.

J. Elkins: Where do you write? At the office? At home? One place, or anywhere the spirit moves you?

L. Komie: Now, I only write in one place and that's in a townhouse I own and use only for writing. I haven't always had a place of repose for writing. Before I owned the townhouse, I wrote in the morning in a restaurant after breakfast. I'd write every morning I didn't have to be in court. I don't do that anymore except when I travel. I wrote a story I call "Aliyah" sitting on a park bench in Haifa.²⁸ I spent about 3 hours a day on that story and it took almost 2 weeks to write. I think I wrote "Solo"²⁹ sitting on a park bench in Bloomsbury in London. When I read it, I realize that much of it came from what I was observing in the park that London day. I don't write "when the spirit moves me." If I waited for a spirit to move me, I would end up not writing much. I try to be disciplined and write at set times just like I'm going to my law office.

J. Elkins: Do you have any special rituals associated with writing, or is it something that gets done by being routine and disciplined about it?

L. Komie: Writing a novel requires scheduling and discipline. You have to keep the pages coming and then there's the task of editing. I think I spend as much time editing as I do writing. I go over my handwritten drafts again and again until they are sometimes indecipherable. I know that if I can't read the story and make sense of it, the reader will surely have difficulty. I no longer treat short stories with quite the same discipline. Unfortunately, the market for short stories in this country is almost non-existent, so an author writes them for his own pleasure.

²⁸ "Aliyah" in *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London*, *supra* note 3, at 181-199.

²⁹ "Solo" in *The Lawyer's Chambers*, *supra* note 2, at 31-42 [25 Legal Stud. F. 41 (2001)].

J. Elkins: I've noticed that Franz Kafka appears or figures prominently in several of your stories. The law professor, Paul Strauss, in "Professor Strauss's Gift," making conversation with a waitress he has just met at a Chicago sidewalk café, asks her, "Do you know Kafka?"³⁰ In "The Cornucopia of Julia K.," one assumes you have Kafka's Joseph K. of *The Trial* in mind with the title of that story. Kafka figures prominently in "Justine"³¹ (a story quite unlike any of your others), and in "A Woman in Prague" we find a teacher from New York in a Prague cemetery looking for Kafka's grave.³²

What draws you so frequently to Kafka's work?

L. Komie: I've been drawn to Kafka's work primarily out of curiosity, and because he was Jewish and a lawyer. I too am Jewish. As I learned more about Kafka, I found similarities between his life and mine. He worked every day at being a lawyer. He was employed by the Czech government and did what we would call workman's compensation or industrial law. He worked on his stories at night. He received almost no attention during his lifetime.³³

When I first started seriously writing stories, I had a young family and could only work on the stories at night or on the weekends. I had nothing published. So it was consoling to know that a writer like Kafka felt alone and abandoned by the literary world. As I matured as a writer and began to publish, this feeling of alienation began to subside, but remains in some ways with me still. I have never really liked Kafka's novels and I am not particularly fond of his short stories other than the famous "Metamorphosis." What I do love are his letters, his love affairs, the account of his relationship with the Czech writer, Milena Jesenská.³⁴ Kafka could never quite make his mind up about anything. Felice, the

³⁰ *The Judge's Chambers*, 87-116, at 89.

³¹ 25 Legal Stud. F. 199 (2001).

³² *The Lawyer's Chambers*, at 135-142 ("A Woman in Prague" also appears in *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London and Other Stories*, at 161-168).

³³ See generally, Pietro Citati, *KAFKA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) (Raymond Rosenthal trans.); "Joseph K.'s Franz Kafka Home Page," <<http://www.digiworldinc.com/users/jjames/>>; "Constructing Franz Kafka," <<http://info.pitt.edu/~kafka/intro.html>>; "Leni's Franz Kafka Page," <<http://victorian.fortunecity.com/vermeer/287/index.html>>; Daniel Hornek, "Franz Kafka, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Kabbalah," <<http://members.aol.com/kafka100/index.htm>> (all websites visited January 13, 2001).

³⁴ See generally, Mary Hockaday, *KAFKA, LOVE AND COURAGE: THE LIFE OF MILENA JESENSKÁ* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1997)(1995). See also "Milena Jesenská," <<http://victorian.fortunecity.com/vermeer/287/milenajesenska.htm>> (visited January 19, 2001).

woman to whom he was engaged, experienced his indecision as he kept breaking his engagement with her.³⁵ He would write Milena about meeting her (she was in Vienna, he was in Prague) and then worry about the arrangements—the train schedules, visas, his absence from work and his boss, the length of time they would have together. He was a classic, but fascinating neurotic. He was a presage of modern man.

J. Elkins: Chicago, where you live and work, figures prominently in many of your stories, yet your stories also have a delightful international, cosmopolitan feel to them. Your first published short story, “The Name, Kozonis,”³⁶ is a story about a lawyer and his clients, a young Greek couple, and their being Greek figures prominently in the story. The exquisite town of Taormina provides the title of a story in *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London and Other Stories*.³⁷ Joel Greenfield, the Chicago corporate lawyer in “Podhoretz Revisited,”³⁸ is on a flight from Paris back to Chicago as the story opens and another of your characters, Martha Levine, the lawyer in “Skipping Stones,”³⁹ goes to London and on to Paris for a few weeks to get away from her law firm and its dominating patriarch. London is the setting for two stories in your latest collection—*The Night Swimmer-A Man In London*.⁴⁰ Montreal provides the setting for “A Man in Montreal.”⁴¹ Finally, “Aliyah” in *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London* is set in Israel⁴² and “The King of Persia”⁴³ features a cleaning woman from Iran.

But it is Eastern Europe and Poland which lend the most poignant character to a number of your stories. “A Woman in Prague”⁴⁴ begins with a man, a teacher from New York, in a Prague cemetery searching for Franz Kafka’s grave. “Professor Strauss’s Gift” has a waitress from Poland as a central character in the story.⁴⁵ Casimir Zymak, the criminal

³⁵ On Kafka and Felice, see, Elias Canetti, *KAFKA’S OTHER TRIAL: THE LETTERS TO FELICE* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974)(Christopher Middleton trans.).

³⁶ 25 Legal Stud. F. 87 (2001).

³⁷ *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London and Other Stories*, *supra* note 3, at 73-84.

³⁸ *The Judge’s Chambers*, at 127-134. (“Podhoretz Revisited” also appears in *The Lawyer’s Chambers*, at 121-127)[25 Legal Stud. F. 145 (2001)].

³⁹ *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London and Other Stories*, at 35-42.

⁴⁰ “The Night Swimmer-A Man in London,” in *id.* at 1-10 and “Who Could Stay the Longest?” in *id.* at 29-33 [25 Legal Stud. F. 159 (2001)].

⁴¹ *The Lawyer’s Chambers*, at 143-152.

⁴² *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London*, at 181-199.

⁴³ *Id.* at 43-49.

⁴⁴ *Supra* note 32.

⁴⁵ *The Judge’s Chambers*, at 87-116.

lawyer in "Casimir Zymak" is a Pole.⁴⁶ Warsaw is the setting for both "Hotel Europejski"⁴⁷ and "A Woman in Warsaw."⁴⁸

You mentioned earlier that you wrote "Aliyah" sitting on a park bench in Haifa and "Solo" doing park bench duty in Bloomsbury in London. Do you travel to find these stories or in traveling do the stories in some way find you?

L. Komie: I travel to find the stories. You cannot sit in your office in a hi-rise tower in Chicago and find stories other than stories about lawyers who sit in hi-rise towers. You have to hunt stories and I do that when I travel. I went to Kafka's grave and I put a stone on it and I met a woman there who was doing the same thing.⁴⁹ That resulted in my story "A Woman in Prague" which was published by the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* which has an audience of over 3,000,000 people. I was sent to Poland in 1984 by *Chicago Magazine* to write about what was happening there just after the cessation of martial law. I made some wonderful Polish friends who are still friends today. However, as graciously as I was treated, I still always had this feeling of being a Jew, an outsider, someone who had come as a voyeur to walk upon the ashes. It was this feeling that resulted in "A Woman in Warsaw"⁵⁰ and "Hotel Europejski."⁵¹

By getting away from America and looking at it from the outside I think I get a much clearer view of what is going on here at home. My

⁴⁶ *The Lawyer's Chambers*, at 73-80 [25 Legal Stud. F. 109 (2001)].

⁴⁷ *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London*, at 21-28.

⁴⁸ *The Lawyer's Chambers*, at 187-198 ("A Woman in Warsaw," also appears in *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London and Other Stories*, at 169-179).

⁴⁹ For a photograph of Kafka's grave and the place Komie describes see: <<http://www.radio.cz/hrbitov/kafkeng.html>>. Other images of the grave can be found at: <<http://www.wu-wien.ac.at/usr/h95d/h9550023/ka.html>>; <<http://www.findagrave.com/pictures/559.html>> (visited January 13, 2001). For other writers' visits to Kafka's gravesite, see: "The Borrowed Skull-cap," <<http://home.swipnet.se/~w-11822/kanel/borrowed.html>>; "A Conversation with Stephen Dixon," <<http://www.smallmouthpress.com/authors/dixoninterview.htm>> (all websites visited January 13, 2001).

Kafka is buried with his mother and father. At the gravesite his three sisters are memorialized in a separate tablet. The sisters, Gabriela, Valerie, and Otilie, died in concentration camps. His friend and editor, Max Brod, is memorialized on a marker on the cemetery wall opposite Kafka's grave. Kafka instructed Brod to burn all of Kafka's works' after Kafka's death but Brod instead brought the work to the attention of a world audience. On Brod and his decision to publish Kafka's work, see William R. Bishin & Christopher D. Stone, *LAW, LANGUAGE, AND ETHICS: AN INTRODUCTION TO LAW AND LEGAL METHOD* 1-9 (Mineola, New York: Foundation Press, 1972).

⁵⁰ *Supra*, note 48.

⁵¹ *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London and Other Stories*, at 21-28.

last story about a lawyer, "Who Could Stay The Longest?"⁵² was written after returning from London. It was about a gay lawyer from Chicago who goes to London and commits suicide because he is dying from AIDS. When I submitted it to the *CBA Record*, the magazine of the Chicago Bar Association, they rejected it even though they had published all the other stories I had given them. The Board of Editors decided not to publish "Who Could Stay the Longest?" or so I was told, because it was "too formulaic." I think the real reason they refused to publish it was because it was about a gay lawyer who commits suicide. As a fiction writer you cannot have your stories edited by a committee, particularly a committee of lawyers.

J. Elkins: Anything more you can tell us about your travels and how travel figures in your writing?

L. Komie: Initially, I traveled as a journalist for *Chicago Magazine*. My dear friend, John Fink, was then the editor. John is dead now but he was a close friend and encouraged me always. He was also a fine writer and novelist⁵³ and one of Chicago's greatest editors, always patient and encouraging.

Chicago Magazine and the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* no longer publish fiction. So, I no longer have the market I once had for my short stories but I keep writing them. I write them for the pleasure of it, and because I believe in my work. I started my own small publishing company, Swordfish/Chicago, with my son David Komie as my partner, to insure I would have an audience for the stories.

My wife, Mary Lou Schwall-Komie, is an artist and did the beautiful cover of *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London*. She is also doing the cover of my new novel, *Conversations With a Golden Ballerina*. I think it will look like a Chagall ballerina, but she hasn't told me. It's a humorous novel in the same genre as *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America* only perhaps even more outlandish and zanier. *Conversations with a Golden Ballerina* will be published by Swordfish/Chicago sometime this year.

J. Elkins: What writers and novels, other than Kafka, have influenced your view of the world, and of Poland and East European culture?

⁵² 25 Legal Stud. F. 159 (2001).

⁵³ John Fink, *PAINTED LEAVES* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995); *LIBEL THE DEAD* (New York: Worldwide, 1994)(1992); *THE LEAF BOATS* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

L. Komie: My favorite writer is Isaac Bashevis Singer. He writes very little about lawyers although when he was a young boy in Warsaw, his father, a Rabbi, conducted a rabbinical Court in their apartment. Singer writes about these rabbinical cases in *In My Father's Court*.⁵⁴ I love his stories, first because he was an artist and knew human nature so well and could describe its frailties. Even though Singer wrote in Yiddish in America, he won the Nobel prize and almost alone kept the world of pre-holocaust Poland alive in memory and brought the story to the world.

Some of my family came from Poland, but most of my immediate family came from Lithuania. They arrived in Chicago in the 1870s and we've lived here for several generations, but our history goes back to Eastern Europe.

I also like Cynthia Ozick, a brilliant writer, humorist and essayist,⁵⁵ Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*,⁵⁶ and Ivan Klíma,⁵⁷ the Czech novelist and short story writer. Bruno Schulz,⁵⁸ the demonist Jewish/Polish writer and artist, and Louis Begley,⁵⁹ the New York

⁵⁴ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *IN MY FATHER'S COURT* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966). For the sequel, these many years later, see Isaac Bashevis Singer, *MORE STORIES FROM MY FATHER'S COURT* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000)(Curt Leviant trans.).

⁵⁵ A young woman lawyer is the central protagonist in Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

⁵⁶ Jerzy Kosinski, *THE PAINTED BIRD* (New York: Grove Press, 2nd ed., 1995)(1965).

⁵⁷ Ivan Klíma, *LOVERS FOR A DAY* (New York: Grove Press, 1999)(Gerald Turner trans.); *THE ULTIMATE INTIMACY* (New York: Grove Press, 1997)(A.G. Brain trans.); *THE SPIRIT OF PRAGUE: AND OTHER ESSAYS* (New York: Granta Books, 1995)(Paul Wilson trans.); *WAITING FOR THE DARK, WAITING FOR THE LIGHT* (New York: Grove Press, 1995)(1994) (Paul Wilson trans.); *MY GOLDEN TRADES* (New York: Maxwell Macmillian International, 1994)(Paul Wilson trans.); *JUDGE ON TRIAL* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993)(A.G. Brain trans.); *LOVE AND GARBAGE* (New York: Knopf, 1991)(Ewald Osers trans.); *MY FIRST LOVES* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988)(Ewald Osers trans.); *A SUMMER AFFAIR* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987)(Ewald Osers trans.); *MY MERRY MORNINGS: STORIES FROM PRAGUE* (New York: Readers International, 1985)(George Theiner trans.); *A SHIP NAMED HOPE: TWO NOVELS* (London: Gollanc, 1970)(Edith Pargeter trans.).

⁵⁸ Bruno Schulz, *THE COMPLETE FICTION OF BRUNO SCHULZ: THE STREET OF CROCODILES, SANATORIUM UNDER THE SIGN OF THE HOURGLASS* (New York: Walker & Co., 1989). Bruno Schulz (1892-1942) was also a painter. In his fiction, he mixed fantasy and personal memories. Awarded a prize by the Polish Academy of Literature, he was killed by the Nazi SS during the occupation.

⁵⁹ Louis Begley's novels include: *SCHMIDT DELIVERED* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2000); *MISTLER'S EXIT* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998); *ABOUT SCHMIDT* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1996); *AS MAX SAW IT* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994); *THE MAN WHO WAS LATE* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993); *WARTIME LIES* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991).

On Begley's latest novel, *Schmidt Delivered*, see interviews and conversations at: <http://www.bookpage.com/0011bp/louis_begley.html> and <<http://www.randomhouse.com/BB/readerscircle/begley/guide.html>> (All websites visited January 13, 2001).

lawyer, who survived a Jewish/Polish boyhood in wartime Poland are also writers I read.

J. Elkins: Were you born in the United States?

L. Komie: Yes, I was born in Chicago in 1927 and have lived here most of my life except for a few years as a young boy when we lived in Milwaukee.

J. Elkins: Jews figure prominently in many of your stories and the title of your 1997 novel is *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America*. Do you consider yourself a Jewish writer?

L. Komie: I consider myself an American writer. Very few of my stories about lawyers have Jewish themes although some of the protagonists in my stories are Jewish. I wouldn't call Louis Auchincloss⁶⁰ a Christian writer because many of his characters are Eastern Establishment WASPs. In only one of my stories with a central Jewish figure does the story actually have Judaism as a theme. In "Mentoring," a young Jewish woman is hired by an all Gentile firm as their first Jewish woman lawyer.⁶¹ I wanted to address the theme of prejudice in the profession particularly in the hiring practices of big firms. When I graduated in 1954 from Northwestern University School of Law almost no Jewish students were employed by Gentile firms. I remember seeing want ads on the bulletin board of the Law School that advertised jobs "for Christians only." I complained to the Dean's secretary but that's as far as I got. Nothing was done about it, even though the building where the law school was located was donated by a Jewish lawyer, Levy Mayer of Mayer, Brown and Platt, the law firm where I then worked as a law clerk. I remember a portrait of Levy Mayer which hung in the main hall of the law school. I wondered what he would have thought about those employment notices for Christians only.

⁶⁰ Louis Auchincloss is well-known as a Wall Street lawyer, far better known as a novelist of manners. Lawyers figure prominent in his writings. See e.g., *THE GREAT WORLD AND TIMOTHY COLT* (New York: McGraw-Hill Paperback, 1987)(1956), *POWERS OF ATTORNEY* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963); "The Senior Partner's Ghosts," "Foster Evans on Lewis Bovee," "Lloyd Degener on Eric Temple," and "Cliffie Beach on Himself," in *TALES OF MANHATTAN* 125-220 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); *THE PARTNERS* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); *DIARY OF A YUPPIE* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986); "Hermes, God of the Self-Made Man," in *FALSE GODS* 37-97 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

⁶¹ *Mentoring*, 25 *Legal Stud. F.* 51 (2001).

As the years passed, the barriers against the recruitment of Jews in Chicago firms were removed and now almost all the formerly exclusively Gentile firms have Jewish lawyers. The same problem existed with the Chicago banks and now the banks, of course, employ Jews. I don't know about other cities but I would hope that law firms throughout the country have opened themselves to Jewish lawyers. In Chicago there have been several mergers between large Jewish and Gentile firms. There is still, I know, a problem for Blacks and Hispanics.

I have tried to write about the situation with black lawyers in my story "Ash" which is about a black judge and his life as a lawyer in Chicago.⁶² Also, I write about an Hispanic woman law clerk in my story, "The Ice Horse." I just can't believe that the law profession which prides itself on being an educated profession can continue these discriminatory hiring practices or that law schools can allow it. It brings shame to all of us. It's just unbelievable.

J. Elkins: There is a young Jewish woman lawyer in Cynthia Ozick's novel, *The Puttermesser Papers*,⁶³ who talks about discrimination and you've mentioned Ozick's work and I wonder whether you know this particular story?

L. Komie: I love the *Puttermesser* story and I enjoy Cynthia's Ozick's work. Puttermesser, if I remember correctly, was a lawyer who worked for the City of New York and fashioned a Golem (an artificial human being) out of the dirt of her houseplants. The Golem takes over Puttermesser's life and eventually Puttermesser runs for Mayor of New York. I don't remember if she won or maybe the Golem abandoned her and began dating Rudy Guiliani. I just don't remember.

J. Elkins: While we're talking about writers, you mentioned Louis Begley, another lawyer turned novelist, and I wonder what you think of his novels, particularly, *About Schmidt* (1996), *As Max Saw It* (1994) and *The Man Who Was Late* (1993)? Sometimes your stories remind me of Begley's laconic and wistful male characters.

⁶² *The Lawyers Chambers*, at 59-72 (25 Legal Stud. F. 181 (2001)).

⁶³ Ozick, *supra* note 55.

L. Komie: I admire the work of Louis Begley very much. My favorite is *Wartime Lies*⁶⁴ his story about the young Jewish boy trapped in Poland during the war.⁶⁵ It's a fictionalized chronicle of Begley's life as a young child. He is now an international lawyer with a large New York firm⁶⁶ and has been honored with many awards and was President of American PEN, the writers' organization. Begley and Louis Auchincloss are classic examples of how lawyers can move beyond writing about lawyers and become literary figures as novelists and writers. John Mortimer has also done this.⁶⁷

J. Elkins: Do you read Louis Auchincloss?

L. Komie: I have always read Louis Auchincloss. His *Powers of Attorney*⁶⁸ and *Tales of Manhattan*,⁶⁹ both collections of short stories written in the 1960s, mainly about lawyers in large New York firms, have always been an inspiration to me. He is a true Man of Letters as Cynthia Ozick is a great Woman of Letters. Auchincloss is a lawyer and the legal profession can be proud of him. Yesterday I was reading his *The Cat and The King*⁷⁰ which was dedicated to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. It's the story of the duc de Saint Simon, a memoirist of the Versailles court of Louis XIV. It was published in 1981 and by then Louis Auchincloss had already published 21 works of fiction and 10 collections of non-fiction on various literary subjects. He has a range that is just marvelous and is in a class with Edmund Wilson and Henry James among our greatest critics of American literature. I must say though that I find his novels too highly mannered and old-fashioned for my

⁶⁴ Louis Begley, *WARTIME LIES* (New York: Ivy Books, 1992) (1991). See generally, Victoria N. Alexander, "Louis Begley: Trying to Make Sense of It," *Antioch Rev.* (1997) <<http://www.dactyl.org/begley.html>>; "A Conversation with Louis Begley," <<http://www.randomhouse.com/BB/readerscircle/begley/guide.html>>; "Interview with Louis Begley," <http://www.publishersweekly.com/NBF/docs/studyguides_begley1.htm> (websites visited November 9, 2000).

⁶⁵ For another famous account of the horrors of children and war, see Jerzy Kosinski, *THE PAINTED BIRD* (New York: Grove Press, 2nd ed., 1995)(1965).

⁶⁶ Louis Begley is a partner at Debevoise & Plimpton and heads up the firm's international practice group. A synopsis of Begley's law practice with Debevoise & Plimpton can be found on the firm's website at: <<http://www.debevoise.com/attorneys/lbegley.html>> (visited November 9, 2000).

⁶⁷ For Mortimer's view of his life as a lawyer and novelist, see John Mortimer, *CLINGING TO THE WRECKAGE: A PART OF LIFE* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1983)(1982).

⁶⁸ Louis Auchincloss, *POWERS OF ATTORNEY* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963).

⁶⁹ Louis Auchincloss, *TALES OF MANHATTAN* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).

⁷⁰ Louis Auchincloss, *THE CAT AND THE KING* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

personal taste.⁷¹ His stories may be confined to New York and Wall Street, but that is the world he knows and he ably relates it. He would be a duck out of water in my legal world but his stories were an inspiration to me as a young man. I have always kept them on my bookshelf in my office

One word further on Louis Auchincloss. I've never met him but he is a real gentleman and kind to young writers. I remember when I was first starting out I sent him a story and he immediately wrote me back on Hawkins, Delafield & Wood law firm stationery.⁷² I still have the letter somewhere. Auchincloss sent me a list of agents and marked off the ones he thought would be most helpful. He also suggested I contact his own agent. I believe his name was James Oliver Brown, a well known agent in New York literary circles. I did write Mr. Brown but he turned me down as a prospective client because he was about to retire. I will always view Auchincloss as a gracious man and remember his kindness to me.

J. Elkins: What do you make of the commanding presence of so many lawyer/novelist (novelist/lawyers) in the book world these days?

L. Komie: I don't read Grisham and I have only read Turow's *Presumed Innocent*⁷³ and found him to be a good writer. I'm not familiar with any of the other lawyer/novelists writing today.

J. Elkins: I understand that Scott Turow is also a Chicago lawyer and indeed was born and raised in Chicago.⁷⁴ Have your paths crossed?

⁷¹ On Auchincloss, see "Interview: The More the Merrier" (Atlantic Unbound), <<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/bookauth/laint.htm>> (Auchincloss talks about how he has been able to write fifty-four books while also practicing law) (visited November 9, 2000); James W. Tuttleton, *Louis Auchincloss at 80* (The New Criterion On-line), <<http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/16/oct97/tuttle.htm>> (visited November 9, 2000).

⁷² Auchincloss retired from the Wall Street firm of Hawkins, Delafield & Wood in 1986. See, Tuttleton, *id.*

⁷³ Scott Turow, *PRESUMED INNOCENT* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987).

⁷⁴ On Scott Turow and his latest novel, *Personal Injuries* (1999) see <http://www.bookpage.com/9910bp/scott_turow.html>. Turow is also the author of a popular non-fiction account of his first year at Harvard Law School, *One L* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988) (1977). On Turow's *One L* and the psychological journey in legal education see: <<http://www.wvu.edu/~lawfac/jelkins/orientation/legalmind/turowonel.html>>. For a brief Turow biography and synopsis of each of his books, see: <<http://www.crosswinds.net/~bastulli/Turow/Turow.htm>> (websites visited November 9, 2000).

L. Komie: I met him only once. He came to an award ceremony in 1995 when I was presented the Carl Sandburg Award For Fiction by the Friends of the Chicago Public Library. It was nice of him to have come. It was an awful, snowy night. A real Chicago blizzard. I spoke to him briefly before the ceremony and that is the only time we have met.

J. Elkins: How have your reading interests changed over the years?

L. Komie: As an undergraduate at Michigan I read Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolf and Dos Passos and of course Allan Seager,⁷⁵ who was my professor at Michigan. Capote and Salinger⁷⁶ came on the scene and I loved their work because they were new and fresh and were essentially short story writers. As I grew older I discovered Saul Bellow, Phillip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw, Willa Cather, Eudora Welty, John Marquand, and William Faulkner. My special interest became East European writers and I've already mentioned Isaac Bashevis Singer. I left out the fine Polish novelist, Tadeusz Konwicki,⁷⁷ and the poet and critic, Czeslaw Milosz, who won the Nobel Prize for literature. By the way there is a Polish lawyer, a poet hardly anyone has heard of, Boleslaw Lesmian,⁷⁸ a crazy lawyer/poet in the image of almost no one, a true original who I admire.⁷⁹

J. Elkins: How important is your reading (and the work of other writers) to your writing?

⁷⁵ Allan Seager, *A FRIEZE OF GIRLS: MEMOIRS AS FICTION* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); *DEATH OF ANGER* (New York: Avon Books, 1960); *AMOS BERRY: A NOVEL* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953); *EQUINOX: A NOVEL* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943).

⁷⁶ Salinger gets mentioned in "Podhoretz Revisited." See Lowell B. Lomie, *Podhoretz Revisited*, 25 *Legal Stud. F.* 145 (2001).

⁷⁷ See generally Dorota Sobieska, "An Interview with Tadeusz Konwicki," <http://www.centerforbookculture.org/interviews/interview_konwicki.html> (visited January 13, 2001). The Britannica Encyclopedia describes Konwicki as a "Polish writer, screenwriter, and film director known for his bitter novels about the devastations of war and ideology." <<http://www.britannica.com/bcom/eb/article/7/0,5716,99677+1+97444,00.html>> (visited January 13, 2001).

⁷⁸ See generally Rochelle Heller Stone, *BOLESLAW LESMIAN: THE POET AND HIS POETRY* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

⁷⁹ See Boleslaw Lesmian, *MYTHEMATICS AND EXTROPY: SELECTED POEMS OF BOLESLAW LESMIAN* (Stevens Point, Wisconsin: A.R. Poray Publishing, 1987) (Alexandra Chciuk Celt trans.)

L. Komie: I think it's important for a writer to read. It has helped not only with my own writing but it brings great enjoyment. It's one of life's great rewards.

J. Elkins: There is at least one of your stories—"Spring"⁸⁰—in which the protagonist has some things to say about law school and legal education. Looking back on your own legal education, did it adequately prepare you for your work and life as a lawyer? Or can any education, regardless of its focus, prepare one to be a lawyer?

L. Komie: I had a good legal education. My teachers were fine people. I remember all of them. Unfortunately, they are almost all now dead. They taught me civility and honor. That's enough. They couldn't teach me how to make money.⁸¹ I have never learned how to do that.

J. Elkins: Has anyone in legal education shown an interest in your writing?

L. Komie: Not really. You are certainly the first to request an interview and I thank you. Several years before his death, Professor Wishingrad at the Cardozo School of Law, contacted me to inquire about the use of some of my stories for a collection of legal fiction he hoped to publish. Recently Fordham Law School listed *The Judge's Chambers* as recommended reading for first year law students along with Dickens' *Bleak House*, Kafka's *The Trial*, Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* and John Mortimer's *Rumpole of The Bailey* series.⁸² How can I justify in my mind something like that? I can't. No one from Fordham has contacted me about the stories.

J. Elkins: The field of "law and literature" scholarship has become something of a growth industry in the last twenty years. I would have thought that with the growing interest in law and literature and legal fiction in legal education circles there would have been more law professors knocking at your door.

⁸⁰ 25 Legal Stud. F. 21 (2001). See also Lowell B. Komie, *Res Ipsa and Fox Hunting*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 215 (2001).

⁸¹ The efforts of lawyers to make money figure prominent in several Komie stories. See e.g., *Solo*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 41 (2001); *The Balloon of William Fuerst*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 57 (2001); *The Kite Flyer*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 91 (2001); *The Divorce of Petra Godic*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 99 (2001); *Investiture*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 151 (2001).

⁸² "Reading List for 1Ls" (Fordham Law School), <<http://www.fordham.edu/law/student/Orient99/readinglist.htm>> (visited November 9, 2000).

L. Komie: No, not really. It hasn't happened. Jim, you're the first and for that I thank you again. I should also thank Professor George Bornstein,⁸³ Professor of English Literature at the University of Michigan, who invited me to Ann Arbor in 1999 and now again next year to speak to students in his Jewish literature course. I read an excerpt from my novel *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America*⁸⁴ on my first visit and it was a marvelous experience.

J. Elkins: There is a line in Kevin Oderman's new book of essays, *How Things Fit Together*,⁸⁵ that seems to capture something of the essence of the characters in your short stories. The line reads: "And yet something persists in darkness and in yearning, where desire hums as an absence."⁸⁶ There is, or so it seems in my reading of your fiction, this longing or yearning of the characters, as if they have been sentenced to live in the shadows of their own lives. Yet, they are not dead to the world, or to desire which "hums" so loudly "as an absence." Your characters seem to waver as they walk, first in light, then toward that liminal space that shields them from real darkness. It is, I think, this quality in the lives of your characters that make them poignant and difficult to leave behind when the reader turns from the page. Am I right about this shadow-like, yearning quality I find in your characters?

L. Komie: Since I do not view my characters as real people it's difficult for me to respond. Perhaps I'm revealing one of my weaknesses as a writer. I am always shocked when people speak of a character in one of my stories as if the character were a person. I know that a transference of some kind must take place for an engaged reader and when it does a character walks a shadowy line between reality and imagination. However, that transference does not take place for me as the author, and so I really have no idea how the people in my stories move within this world of light and darkness you so beautifully describe.

⁸³ Professor Bornstein's scholarly interests are in 19th and 20th century poetry, especially Yeats, Pound, Moore, and Stevens and the modern Irish literary renaissance and has published widely in these areas, especially on Yeats.

⁸⁴ Komie points out that it was his father who was *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America*. "He played night softball under the lights in Milwaukee in the businessmen leagues, and he had all the moves and a rifle arm as shortstop. I was the bat boy for his teams, and his fluidity and grace as a shortstop are locked in my memory and maybe now, released" with the publication of the novel. *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America* was awarded the Independent Publisher Magazine's Small Press Book Award for 1998.

⁸⁵ Kevin Oderman, *HOW THINGS FIT TOGETHER* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2000).

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 47.

J. Elkins: Sylvan, a character in "On the Beach-Sur le Plage" is a psychiatrist and a "serious amateur poet."⁸⁷ Are you too a poet?

L. Komie: No. I have always enjoyed poetry but I'm not a poet. I began reading poetry with Eliot and Pound, Dickinson and Yeats while in college. I heard Robert Pinsky⁸⁸ when he was in Chicago and I have heard Stanley Kunitz⁸⁹ read here. Pinsky and Kunitz are our last two Poet Laureates. I think that the legal profession should nominate a Poet Laureate every few years and even though I don't write poems, I'd be happy to accept the title and an annual stipend since I don't have a pension. I suppose Wallace Stevens is the most well known of the lawyer/poets.⁹⁰ I find his work too complex, although some of the lines of "The Idea of Order At Key West" resonate with me.⁹¹ The only other American lawyer/poet whose work I know is Edgar Lee Masters who wrote *Spoon River Anthology*.⁹² He, like Daumier, could quickly touch the core of our pretensions. Occasionally I go to readings but I don't read poetry as much as I did in years past.

⁸⁷ *The Night Swimmer-A Man in London*, 137-144, at 138.

⁸⁸ Robert Pinsky is the thirty-ninth Poet Laureate of the United States, poetry editor of the online journal *Slate*, and a contributor to *The NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer on PBS. He teaches in the graduate writing program at Boston University. "Interview with Robert Pinsky" (Cortland Review), <<http://www.cortlandreview.com/pinsky.htm>>; "An Interview with Robert Pinsky" (Meridan)(1998), <<http://www.poems.com/pinskint.htm>>; "Robert Pinsky: Modern American Poetry," <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pinsky/pinsky.htm> (websites visited November 9, 2000).

⁸⁹ "Stanley Kunitz: Modern American Poetry," <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/kunitz/kunitz.htm>; "A Visionary Poet at Ninety (Atlantic Monthly)," <<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/96jun/kunitz/kunitz.htm>>; "Stanley Kunitz: New USA Poet Laureate," <<http://classicpoetry.about.com/arts/classicpoetry/library/weekly/aa080200a.htm>> (websites visited November 9, 2000).

⁹⁰ See David Lavery, *Imagination and Insurance: Wallace Stevens and Benjamin Lee Whorf at the Hartford*, 24 *Legal Stud. F.* 493 (2000); Thomas C. Grey, *THE WALLACE STEVENS CASE: LAW AND THE PRACTICE OF POETRY* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); "Wallace Stevens" (links to web resources), <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Stevens/home.html>>; David Lavery, "Feigning With the Strange Alike: A Wallace Stevens WWW Site," <<http://www.mtsu.edu/~dlavery/Stevens/>>; "Wallace Stevens: Academy of American Poets," <<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=125>>; Wallace Stevens: From the Archives of the NY Times, <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/21/home/stevens.html>> (all websites visited November 9, 2000).

⁹¹ Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West" is a poem known by Joel Greenfield, the lawyer protagonist in Komie's *Podhoretz Revisited*, 25 *Legal Stud. F.* 145 (2001).

⁹² Edgar Lee Masters, *SPOON RIVER ANTHOLOGY* (New York: MacMillan Hudson River ed., 1969)(1944).

J. Elkins: Are you a fan of movies? Are there any lawyer films you find intriguing?

L. Komie: I do go to movies and enjoy them but I don't see many lawyer movies. I spend so much time with lawyers that I don't care to see the films about lawyers. I know you may find this an annoyance since I know you teach a course on lawyers and film and insist there is much to learn from them.⁹³ Of the lawyer films, I do like Horace Rumpole films. John Mortimer sees lawyers as they are and deftly portrays the venality of judges, cunning clients, and the pomposity of colleagues. His films reflect the human comedy much as Dickens did in his novels.⁹⁴ However, a full length film of Rumpole in a theatre would be too much for me. I prefer him in short doses.

J. Elkins: I'm particularly interested in knowing whether you might have seen the film, "Music Box" (with Jessica Lange playing a lawyer named Ann Talbot who ends up defending her father, who has immigrated to the United States from Hungary, in a deportation proceeding)?

L. Komie: No. I once wrote about a deportation trial for *Chicago Magazine* and I've heard about this film but I have not seen it. I have no desire to see a man accused of brutal war crimes being defended by lawyers.

J. Elkins: Much of your fiction is set in Chicago although the characters in your stories often take off for Europe or Canada or Eastern Europe. In what way has the city of Chicago and your long residence in the city affected your writing?

L. Komie: I have always loved Chicago. I was born here and have lived here most of my life. Most of my stories are either set here or if set in Europe or elsewhere, the character is usually musing about Chicago.⁹⁵ It's a beautiful city and also very brutal. I pass beggars every morning on my way to work. Some mornings I'm greeted by a man in a gorilla suit costume handing out flyers for a gym. Then, I cross the bridge over

⁹³ For an introduction to the themes of the "lawyers and film" course which Komie refers to, see: "Lawyers and Film," <<http://mentalsoup.net/jelkins/lawyersfilm.shtml>>.

⁹⁴ On Rumpole, see John Denvir, "Rumpole of the Bailey," in Robert M. Jarvis & Paul R. Joseph, *PRIME TIME LAW: FICTIONAL TELEVISION AS LEGAL NARRATIVE* 145-154 (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 1998).

⁹⁵ Lowell Komie's fictional Chicago is ever bit as real and complex as is Louis Auchincloss's New York city.

the Chicago River,⁹⁶ and meet a legless man in his University of Michigan sweatshirt (my alma mater) shaking his cup. Thousands of commuters pass these two poor figures daily and pay them little attention. Later, in a pedestrian tunnel there's a blind man playing a keyboard, wailing as you pass him, his song filling the tunnel with his lament. So by the time I reach my office, I'm inundated with images of poverty and privation in this immensely rich and powerful city.

Chicago is corrupt⁹⁷ and nowhere more corrupt than in the daily practice of law. The gorilla suit man might as well be sitting on our Circuit Court benches. Our judges are political appointees and over the years of my practice many have been shown to be corrupt.⁹⁸ Of course there are always a few honest, decent judges,⁹⁹ as are most of the judges on the Federal bench.¹⁰⁰ Still, when you come out of law school and face this system, you have no idea what you are up against. Facing all this corruption can be embittering, especially when the practice of law becomes a game of survival.¹⁰¹ The practice has practically nothing to do with the civility and honor we were taught in law school. The only way to survive as a lawyer is to stay away from the political system and in Chicago that is difficult to do. My stories probably reflect the reality of practicing law here in Chicago; I hope they do.

J. Elkins: Lowell, I want to thank you for putting up with all these questions about your work and your life. The conversation has been most enjoyable.

⁹⁶ See generally "Friends of the Chicago River," <<http://www.chicagoriver.org/>> (visited November 9, 2000).

⁹⁷ Robert M. Lombardo, "The Genesis of Organized Crime in Chicago," <<http://www.laborers.org/Genesis.html>>; "FBI Sting" (ABC News 20/20) (May 31, 2000), <http://www.abcnews.go.com/onair/2020/transcripts/2020_000531_fbisting_trans.html> (websites visited November 9, 2000).

⁹⁸ See generally James Tuohy & Rob Warden, GREY LORD: JUSTICE, CHICAGO STYLE (New York: Putnam, 1989); *United States v. Maloney*, 71 F. 3d 645 (CA7 1995); Richard Lindberg, "No More Greylords," <<http://www.ipsn.org/greylord.html>>; "Justice Goes on Trial" <<http://www.suntimes.com/century/m1984.html>> (websites visited November 9, 2000).

⁹⁹ Arthur Williams, Jr., the judge in Komie's "Ash" is a story of one of Chicago's judges who would not be corrupted. Lowell B. Komie, *Ash*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 181 (2001).

¹⁰⁰ Alicia Beauchamp, the protagonist in Komie's "The Honorable Alicia Beauchamp," is a U.S. District Court Judge. Lowell B. Komie, *The Honorable Alicia Beauchamp*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 169 (2001).

¹⁰¹ Several of Komie's stories focus on this survival theme: *Solo*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 41 (2001); *The Divorce of Petra Godic*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 99 (2001); *Investiture*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 151 (2001); *The Balloon of William Fuerst*, 25 Legal Stud. F. 57 (2001).