he startling success of Anatomy of a Murder played a pivotal role in the trajectory of John Voelker’s life. John served for 14 years as Marquette County Prosecutor. It was a part-time office, so if he had not spent so much time fishing, he probably could have prospered more than he did. His consistent success as a prosecutor explains why he found himself out of a job after serving seven terms, when he lost the 1950 election by 36 votes: “Sooner or later,” he observed ruefully, “if you are any good at the job, you will have annoyed enough of your constituents and their friends and relatives that they will combine to throw you out of office. And that’s what they did.”

So there was John, like his fictional character Polly Biegler, at the age of 46, with a wife and three young daughters to support. He had no job, and practically no private practice to sustain his family, having spent his spare time fishing and writing fiction.

He did some harebrained things to make money, including prospecting for uranium. He alludes to this episode in his introduction to Anatomy, and he wrote a funny story about it, but the fact was that, but for an unlikely sequence of events, John probably would have passed his life in genteel obscurity, practicing law and fishing in the remoteness of the U. P.

It was about this time, in 1952, that he defended the case of People v Peterson, which, as he put it, “some say was the basis for a book I wrote called Anatomy of a Murder.” After being sued by Mr. Peterson (or, as you know him, Lieutenant Mannion), the client he successfully defended on a murder charge, for a piece of Anatomy’s profits, John was careful to distance the book from the actual case. Peterson’s suit was unsuccessful, to John’s infinite satisfaction, since, like Lt. Mannion, Peterson ab-sconded after his acquittal without paying John’s fee. After Peterson sued, John always carefully maintained that Laughing White-fish was his “only historical novel.”

Like Polly Biegler, John went on to run and lose a race for Congress. Polly’s description of “the feeling of utter forlornness and emptiness that sweeps over a man when he is finally beaten at the polls” is one that came from the heart. Having lost two elections in a row, John was pretty downcast.

His mood did not improve when, after a winter spent writing the story that John crafted from the Peterson trial, Anatomy was rejected by several publishers.

But just at his darkest hour, an amazing confluence of events combined to elevate this northwoods ex-DA from obscurity to worldwide fame and acclaim. “Soapy” Williams (so called because of his connection to the Mennen toiletry family) was Michigan’s governor. It was pointed out to him that the tradition of having at least one seat on the Michigan Supreme Court filled by someone from the U. P. had fallen into disuse. He sent the late Tom Downs, who practically invented election law, and labor leader Gus Scholl to interview John and another candidate for the vacant seat. Downs told me this story, and swore it was true: After Downs and Scholl finished their interview, they asked John one last question, “Why do you want the job?” John laid his finger beside his nose for a minute to consider, and then replied, “Because I have spent

Frederick Baker with a copy of a Life magazine cover featuring Justice Voelker, author of Anatomy of a Murder, toasting the health of a logger and a miner at friend Gigs Gagliardi’s Roosevelt Bar, in Ishpeming, Michigan.

John literally created a new fictional genre with Anatomy. Before then, no novel had so truly depicted the actual preparation and trial of a case.
I think we are all lucky that *Anatomy* liberated John to live life as he believed it should be lived, on his own terms.

The very slowness of the law, its massive impersonality, its insistence upon proceeding according to settled and ancient rules—all this tends to cool and bank the fires of passion and violence and replace them with order and reason.

And consider “the lecture,” in which Polly tells his client the law so that Mannion could tell him the facts that might sustain an insanity defense. It is such a deft example of how a lawyer can walk the fine ethical line between coaching a client and counseling the client on what testimony might offer salvation that it is included in Ladd and Carlson’s evidence text, which is where I first encountered *Anatomy* of a Murder, while studying evidence with Ronald Carlson.

John literally created a new fictional genre with *Anatomy*. Before then, no novel had so truly depicted the actual preparation and trial of a case. The Grishams and Turows who followed all owe a debt to John, who wrote a novel that was both true to life and true to himself.

John was a funny, generous, wise, just, and thoughtful man. And he believed in the four classifications of judges he described in *Anatomy*: Judges, like people, may be divided roughly into four classes: judges with neither head nor heart—they are to be avoided at all costs; judges with head but no heart—they are almost as bad; then judges with heart but no head—risky, but better than the first two; and finally, those rare judges who possess both head and heart.”

I think we are all lucky that *Anatomy* liberated John to live life as he believed it should be lived, on his own terms. Like *Laughing Whitefish*, it is a book that can still speak to us half a century after its publication about the important role our profession plays in—sometimes, at least—slaking our species’ instinctive thirst for justice.
Anatomy of a Murder. Read 255 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Librarian's note: An alternate cover edition can be found here... Paperback, 437 pages. Published March 15th 1983 by St. Martin's Press (first published December 1958). More Details Original Title. Anatomy of a Murder. ISBN. The murderer confessed to his crime and turned himself in on the night of the murder, so our hero, former DA Paul Beigler, plans his defense around a variation of the insanity plea. The reader gets instructed along with the judge and jury, on the workings of such a plea. Because of some intriguing side stories about the murderer, his wife and the victim; because a rape preceded the murder; because the setting is integral to the plot, it was all in all a satisfying read.