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Book Notes: Lex Populi: the Jurisprudence of Popular Culture, by William P. Macneil

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Book Note

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LEX POPULI: THE JURISPRUDENCE OF POPULAR CULTURE, BY WILLIAM P. MACNEIL. STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007. Pp. xiv + 241. Notes, references, and index. USD \$45.00 cloth.³

BY ROBIN SENZILET

In *Lex Populi*, William MacNeil explores the connection between jurisprudence and a variety of popular culture references such as the Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings books, as well as films such as *Legally Blonde* and *Minority Report*. MacNeil refers to these as examples of “lex populi,”⁴ meaning “people’s law”⁵ He argues that popular culture uniquely contributes to the discourse regarding jurisprudence because, unlike traditional legal texts, these works appeal to a broader audience—thereby resulting in a much larger reach.

In each chapter MacNeil considers a major legal issue and the relevant popular culture references. For example, one chapter discusses the concepts of justice and the rule of law through a thoughtful examination of the battle between good and evil in Harry Potter’s magical world, as well as discussing the notion of equal rights by using the plight of the servant house elves as an example. Another chapter examines legal feminism through a discussion of the films *The Paper Chase* and *Legally Blonde*. These films, both of which are set during the protagonists’ first year at Harvard Law School, show the contrast between legal education in the early 1970s, as exemplified in *The Paper Chase*, and legal education at the turn of the millennium, as exemplified in *Legally Blonde*. While there are certain commonalities (for example, the use of the Socratic teaching method) there are also distinct differences, perhaps most notably the dramatic increase in the presence and acceptance of female law students. A third chapter addresses the “right to life”⁶ and the ethical issues surrounding assisted suicide through a discussion of films such as *Million Dollar Baby*.

MacNeil concludes that because these works of popular culture reach the “masses”⁷ they may serve as a vehicle to stimulate public debate on vital issues such as justice, human rights, and ethical concerns.

³[*Lex Populi*]

⁴*Ibid.* at 1.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.* at 134.

⁷*Ibid.* at 157.

