
Book Review: Truth Be Told: My Journey through Life and the Law

McLachlin, Beverley. Truth Be Told: My Journey through Life and the Law. Simon & Schuster, 2019 ISBN 978-1-9821-0496-2

After 20 years as a law student, lawyer, and judge, Beverley McLachlin was appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1989. She was 46, a widow, and the mother of 13-year-old Angus. In 2000, she was appointed chief justice of the high court, the first woman to hold that office. She served until mandatory retirement in 2017 and stepped down as Canada's longest serving chief justice.

Having recognized early in her career "the power of the law to move with societal change and make the world a better place," the Supreme Court on which Justice McLachlin sat did just that. In the context of the relatively new Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Court deliberated on the key societal issues of our time: fetal rights, free speech, sexual assault, the right to a fair trial, the right to die, civil marriage, individual rights, and Indigenous rights, as well as the constitutionality of a Quebec secession.

Five months after retirement, McLachlin published an acclaimed novel. This memoir followed shortly thereafter, capping a meteoric career characterized in mid-point by a colleague who quipped that, looking at her resume, it was clear that she had a hard time keeping a job.

Indeed, she had many jobs and achievements and McLachlin includes them all with modesty in her easy-flowing narrative. But it was not all sunny days. Her book documents isolation and depression growing up in Pincher Creek, Alberta, experience working as a young lawyer in a male-dominated and sexist legal community, the conflicting demands of parenting and career, the loss of her young husband to cancer, followed by more depression, the loss of her beloved parents, and her integrity being falsely called into question by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

McLachlin is a deceptively good writer who speaks to us as though she were a friend recounting the events of her life in a seemingly effortless and disarming way that almost obscures the more powerful underlying story: this is a book about character. It is about the formation of an exceptional character and the application of that character to high purpose – in this instance, the law of the land as a progressive social force. This underlying story is all the more notable for its humble beginnings and the course of intellectual self-discovery that the young Beverley so actively pursued.

Even in the context of a loving family, life in Pincher Creek (population 2,000) in the 1940s was hard. Winters were long and cold and dark. No electricity or running water. No pre-school, kindergarten, or enrichment programs. Correspondence lessons sent to an isolated farm. But the "Pincher Creek Municipal Library saved me from premature intellectual death," McLachlin writes and opened her to "worlds beyond my comprehension" in an environment where "work was an integral part of our life." An understatement, to be sure.

Clearly, young Beverley's mind was both intellectually voracious and predisposed to logical thinking. Fascinated by the idea of school as a place "where they will tell you everything you need to know," she moves from making letters into words, words into sentences, sentences into narratives. Playing games at school "taught us to respect the rules," she observes. As a summer student at the *Edmonton Journal*, she learned to "write down the facts in order of importance." As a student of philosophy at the University of Alberta, she said "Bye-bye to fuzzy thinking. Every word, every clause must carry its weight as you drive home your conclusion." While on track to be a professor of philosophy, her soon-to-be husband, Rory, recognizing a keenly analytical mind, posed the life-changing question: "Have you thought about law?"

For smart-as-a-whip Beverley, seeing the law as an instrument of social change struck a deeply resonant chord. Here was someone who had experienced discrimination firsthand growing up – in a mild form towards her own European heritage; more harshly toward the local Hutterite community, and in the marginalization of the Indigenous population, among whom she counted some friends. Gender discrimination is a constant theme. She is keenly aware of the first wave of feminism of her mother's generation that fought for voting and property rights. In the interview for her first law position a senior male lawyer asks her, why would a married woman want to be a lawyer? Sexists comments abound in the world of lawyers. Conversely, she meets formidable women role models throughout her life.

In this book, McLachlin reminds us that the law has a human side and that justice is achieved when the law hears the stories of people in conflict and is used to resolve these conflicts. Feeling insecure in her first case as a judge, she took a non-interventionist position that led to a surprisingly good outcome. "I had learned my first lesson in judging: listen." But McLachlin places the highest value on thinking, particularly the thinking that sorts ideas, concepts, precedents, and facts into immutable written argument: a legal judgement.

There are two pleasures to be derived from reading this book: the first is getting to know this extraordinary person; the second is the light it shines on Canada as a progressive nation. Expressing her thanks at a retirement dinner to all those who helped her along the way, she writes, "I finished by thanking my country, a country that respects the rule of law and of openness, in which a young woman of no particular note could become a lawyer, a judge and a chief justice."