



Jeffrey Toobin talks about 'Reporting on the American Legal System'

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By Chelsea Sherlock (BSJ16)

Show, don't tell.

That was one of the big points made by Jeffrey Toobin in describing his reporting and writing approach during his "Reporting on the American Legal System" lecture Monday. Toobin is the author of several books, court reporter for The New Yorker and a legal analyst for CNN.

Toobin began the lecture by reading an excerpt from "Secrets of the Magus" by Mark Singer, an article that appeared in The New Yorker. The story was an example of a journalist using detail to enable readers to see the action in a story, and served as a starting point for Toobin to explain his writing approach.

"Good stories are hard to get," Toobin said. "They take great reporting."

Much of the lecture consisted of Toobin telling stories. He recounted his days as a writer for Harvard, and later as editor of the Harvard Law Review. It was his time as a sports writer that taught him about the importance of showing instead of telling in his writing.

At The New Yorker, Toobin said the most difficult aspect of his job was coming up with stories. This challenge led to a more experienced reporter explaining to Toobin the difference between thinking of a

subject (such as basketball) and a story (a specific game).

A lot of what Toobin writes on is the Supreme Court, including his two most recent books, “The Oath: The Obama White House and the Supreme Court,” and “The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court.” He stated that the theme of his career is the rise of the conservative movement of the Supreme Court.

“When I write about the justices, I like to write about the people,” Toobin said.

The most important thing about the current Supreme Court, according to Toobin, is that it consists of five Republicans and four Democrats. This has played a critical role in the recent court rulings. Other unique aspects are that none of the justices are Protestant, three are women, and they represent four different boroughs of New York.

In response to audience questions, Toobin discussed the influence Justice Clarence Thomas has, despite not asking a question in more than six years of oral arguments. He also discussed current and upcoming Supreme Court cases, along with his favorite justice, David Souter.

Seven members of a local book club that recently read “The Oath” attended the lecture. Members of the group said the main thing they took away from the event was an idea of what it takes to cultivate a story and the power of the narrative.

“I thought it was wonderful,” said Sylvia Hoffman, a Northwestern alumna and member of the book club.

Toobin’s lecture was the second in the Literature of Fact lecture series, sponsored by the Center for the Writing Arts, Medill, the Communications Residential College and The Alumnae of Northwestern University.

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