



BOOK CLUB
RESOURCE GUIDE

LEGAL THRILLER



THANK YOU FOR
CONSIDERING *BENEATH*
THE GAVEL FOR YOUR
NEXT BOOK CLUB READ

BOOK CLUB
RESOURCE GUIDE

STEPHEN M. MURPHY

In the heart of San Francisco's criminal courthouse, Judge Ferdinand Pitt faces a chilling reality: the defendant in his latest murder case is his estranged father. As Pitt grapples with this shocking revelation, he must recuse himself, setting off a chain of events that draws him into a web of corruption, political intrigue, and long-buried family secrets.

Beneath the Gavel is a compelling legal thriller where Judge Pitt navigates a complex landscape of corrupt officials, challenges from his defense attorney opponent, and familial angst. Written by Stephen M. Murphy, a judge himself, *Beneath the Gavel* is a gripping tale of duty, kinship, and the lengths one will go to uncover the truth, even when it threatens to shatter everything.

WORD COUNT: 73,000

PAGE COUNT: 298

KEY WORDS: Legal Thriller | Courtroom Drama | Family Secrets | San Francisco

DEMOGRAPHICS: Age: 35-65+ | Gender: Slightly more female, but with appeal to both genders | Education: College educated or higher | Interests: Legal dramas, thrillers, crime novels, family sagas, books set in San Francisco

COMP BOOKS: Presumed Innocent by Scott Turow | The Reversal by Michael Connelly | The Lincoln Lawyer by Michael Connelly | The Judge's List by John Grisham

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Concept: Transform your space into a dimly lit, speakeasy-esque version of a courthouse. The goal is to create an atmosphere of intrigue, legal maneuvering, and illicit fun after hours.

Atmosphere & Decorations:

- Dim Lighting: Use lamps with low-wattage bulbs and string lights to create a moody, shadowy ambiance. Avoid bright overhead lighting.
- Legal Files Decor: Scatter aged-looking folders and manila envelopes labeled with cryptic case names (Pitt vs. The People, Brady Investigation, etc.) around the space.
- Courtroom-Inspired Signage: Create humorous signs like Judge's Chambers: Private or Bailiff's Break Room: Enter at Your Own Risk.
- Evidence Tape: Use yellow caution tape to section off areas or create borders, adding a playful crime scene element.

Activities:

- Mock Trial Game: Designate a simple, silly crime (e.g., who stole the last slice of cake?) and divide your book club into teams to present their cases, complete with opening statements, cross-examinations, and closing arguments.
- Exhibit A Scavenger Hunt: Hide clues around the space that are related to the book or to legal terminology. Teams must decipher the clues to find a hidden verdict (perhaps a small prize).
- Witness Intimidation Charades: Act out words/phrases related to the book.
- Justice Served Fortune Teller: The game features a simple fortune teller, with lines inspired by law terms.

Unique Touches:

- Personalized Legal Briefs: As a party favor, create small, personalized legal briefs for each guest, highlighting their best qualities or quirky traits.
- Subpoena Invitation: Design the party invitation to look like a subpoena, adding to the playful legal theme.

THEMED ACTIVITIES - Justice After Hours

Drinks:

The Courtroom Cocktails

- The Beneath the Bench (See Signature Drink below)
- Non-alcoholic beverages such as sparkling cider or club soda with lime.

Appetizers

Opening Arguments

- Miniature Evidence Skewers: (Symbolizing the presentation of facts) Thread cherry tomatoes, fresh mozzarella balls, and basil leaves on skewers. Drizzle with balsamic glaze. Recipe: Just thread ingredients and drizzle!
- Presidio Park Artichoke Dip with Sourdough Bread: (Nod to a San Francisco landmark) A creamy artichoke dip served with toasted sourdough slices. Recipe: Find your favorite artichoke dip recipe (or use store-bought) and pair with a crusty sourdough baguette.

THEMED MENU – A Mock Trial Mixer

Main Course: The Verdict

Outer Sunset Family-Style Paella: (Dish representing where the Pitt family lived)

Recipe

Ingredients:

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 red bell pepper, chopped
- 1 cup Arborio rice
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1/2 teaspoon saffron threads
- 1/2 teaspoon smoked paprika
- 1 cup cooked chicken or chorizo
- 1 cup cooked shrimp
- 1/2 cup cooked peas

Instructions:

- Heat the oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add the onion, garlic, and bell pepper and cook until softened. Stir in the rice and cook for 1 minute.
- Stir in the broth, saffron, and paprika. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes.
- Stir in the chicken or chorizo, shrimp, and peas. Cover and cook for 5 minutes more, or until the rice is tender and the seafood is cooked through. Serve hot.

Dessert: The Smoking Gun

- Hall of Justice Chocolate Fudge Brownies: (Decadent and slightly dark, representing the secrets and complexities of the legal system)
- Recipe: Use a brownie box recipe, and serve a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top.

THEMED MENU – A Mock Trial Mixer



Ingredients:

- 2 oz Rye Whiskey (representing the traditional nature of the law)
- 1 oz Cynar (Italian artichoke liqueur - for the bitterness of secrets)
- 0.75 oz Sweet Vermouth (for a touch of sweetness and San Francisco charm)
- 2 dashes Orange Bitters (adds complexity and aroma)
- Luxardo Cherry (garnishing the truth revealed)
- Orange Peel (garnishing the complexity of the flavor)

Instructions:

- Chill a coupe or martini glass.
- In a mixing glass, combine rye whiskey, Cynar, sweet vermouth, and orange bitters.
- Add ice and stir well until the mixing glass is well-chilled.
- Strain the mixture into the chilled glass.
- Garnish with a Luxardo cherry and a twist of orange.

SIGNATURE DRINK - Beneath the Bench

Hallelujah by Jeff Buckley

House of the Rising Sun by The Animals

Boulevard of Broken Dreams by Green Day

San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair) by Scott McKenzie

Paint It, Black by The Rolling Stones

Knockin' on Heaven's Door by Bob Dylan

Mad World by Gary Jules

Heartbreak Hotel by Elvis Presley

Bad Things by Jace Everett

Everybody Knows by Leonard Cohen

Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday

The Sound of Silence by Disturbed

Ain't No Sunshine by Bill Withers

I Put a Spell on You by Screamin' Jay Hawkins

California Dreamin' by The Mamas & the Papas



SPOTIFY MUSIC RECOMMENDATIONS

A watercolor illustration of a cozy living room. In the center, a wooden chair with a curved back sits on a light-colored rug. To the left and right are tall wooden bookshelves filled with books. A window with white curtains is in the background, letting in soft light. The overall style is soft and artistic.

THIS GUIDE CONTAINS POSSIBLE
SPOILERS FOR THIS BOOK IN
THE DISCUSSION SECTION.

WARNING

- Judge Ferdinand Pitt's personal connection to the case significantly impacts his role. How did you feel about his decision to insert himself into the investigation? Was it ethical?
- The book explores the theme of family - how does Dwight's abandonment affect Ferdinand and Claire? What do you think Stephen M. Murphy is trying to say about the ties that bind?
- Discuss the character of Nicole Smedley. Did your opinion of her shift throughout the book? Do you believe she was truly dedicated to her client, or did her political aspirations influence her actions?
- Beneath the Gavel touches on the ethical complexities of the legal system. How does the book portray the balance (or lack thereof) between justice, ambition, and personal relationships within the legal profession?
- The issue of class and wealth is present throughout the story. Discuss the portrayal of the homeless, the tech workers, and the judges in the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Discuss the role of women in the book: How did the women have any agency? Do you think the author succeeded in creating a compelling female character?
- The debate over the public vs. private admonishment is a main theme in the book. What discipline do you think the Commission should have given to Ferd and why?
- What did you think about the decision to make another member of Ferd's family a suspect, and not the father? How did that add to the suspense?
- If the ending were changed and Josh did commit the crime, would it change your opinion of Ferd's choices along the way?
- What did you think of the ending? Did the loose ends get tied up sufficiently? Did it meet your expectations? Did any other minor characters add to the narrative?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Stephen M. Murphy is a judge in the San Francisco Superior Court, where he presides over probate cases with a sharp legal mind and deep respect for justice. A graduate of the College of the Holy Cross and the University of San Francisco School of Law, Murphy began his legal career as a clerk in New Hampshire. It was there, while working on a murder trial, that he found the spark for his debut novel, *Alibi*.

His Dutch Francis series—*Alibi*, *About Power*, and *Abiding Conviction*—follows a defense attorney entangled in high-stakes courtroom battles, political intrigue, and moral dilemmas. Praised for its lifelike characters and tightly woven plots, Murphy's fiction draws readers into the complexities of the legal system with both authenticity and suspense. His latest release, *Beneath the Gavel*, is his first standalone legal thriller, offering a fresh perspective and a new cast of compelling characters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WEBSITE: <https://stephenmmurphy.com/>

OTHER BOOKS: THEIR WORD IS LAW | ALIBI | What IF Holden Caulfield Went to Law School? | ABOUT POWER | ABIDING CONVICTION