|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Ken Swift  Legal Writing Instructor  Hamline Law School   |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0128442/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:173500)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback.htm) |       Most media portrayals of law students and new lawyers show them to be boundless optimists with a single-minded determination to seek justice. The reality, however, is that many people enter law school either because they haven't found anything else to do or to please someone else | |  | | --- | | ***Rounders*: The Intersection of Law and Poker**  by Ken Swift  One can hardly turn on the television these days without turning to a televised poker game. Other than shows about forensic investigators, they are the most prevalent programs (a show where crime scene investigators play poker seems inevitable). High-stakes poker is a game that has always attracted lawyers, perhaps because many of the skills of a good lawyer are transferable to the poker table: quick calculations, decisive decision-making, and the ability to "read" another human being. And many top poker players have legal backgrounds, perhaps epitomized by patent lawyer (now former patent lawyer) Greg "Fossilman" Raymer, who won $5 million as the 2004 World Series of Poker champion.  It was perhaps not surprising then that the 1998 movie *Rounders* - which certainly helped to propel the interest in poker - included a legal subplot. At the start of the film, set in New York City, the lead character, Michael McDermott (played by Matt Damon), is a "rounder", someone who makes a living by playing in lower stakes poker in. After he loses his full bankroll ($30,000) to a Russian card room operator nicknamed Teddy KGB (played by John Malkovich), McDermott gives up poker to attend law school and appease his girlfriend. While McDermott, of course, returns to playing cards (ostensibly to help a friend pay off a debt to the Russian) and has the requisite finale high-stakes game against Teddy KGB, it is McDermott's role as a law student and his relationship with one of his law professors that provide non-stereotypical portraits new and experienced legal professionals.  Most media portrayals of law students and new lawyers show them to be boundless optimists with a single-minded determination to seek justice. The reality, however, is that many people enter law school either because they haven't found anything else to do or to please someone else. Here, it is clear that McDermott's heart is not in law school but, his high stake poker dreams having been dashed, he seems to have no other alternative. He misses meetings with his moot court team and shows up unprepared for the moot court hearing. Despite this, McDermott's live-in girlfriend and fellow law student is pleased by his abstinence from poker, yet keeps an ever vigilant eye on his comings and goings. Her fears are soon realized as the release from prison of McDermott's best friend soon leads him back to the poker table.  On the other hand, most media portrayals of experienced lawyers show them to be either disillusioned (Paul Newman in *The Verdict*), egomaniacal attorneys who treat the law as a vehicle for personal gain rather than justice (Robert Duvall in *A Civil Action* or Gene Hackman in *The Firm*) or curmudgeonly law professors (Kingsfield). Here, McDermott forms a bond with Abe Petrovsky, an aging law professor played by Martin Landau. Petrovsky does not fit the stereotype. Instead, in response to McDermott's question about what led him to the law, Petrovsky speaks of the disappointment his family felt when he decided to discontinue his rabbinical studies, and then speaks of the law as his "life's work." Landau's excellent performance convincingly conveys an uncommon sense of passion and honor about spending a life studying and teaching law. Professor Petrovsky appears to have a genuine concern for McDermott and, presumably, his other students as well. However, one plot point that is more implausible than anything seen on *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* occurs when McDermott asks his professor to loan him $10,000 to help pay off a friend's gambling debt, and the professor agrees. One would presume that Petrovsky had a line of debt-ridden students waiting at his office by early next morning.  The film even offers career guidance for law students. In one scene, McDermott delivers some research to Petrovsky's office and walks in on a poker game between Petrovsky and a group of judges and lawyers (a scene which requires any law professor to suspend animation because the professor is gambling in his office and the office itself is at least three times normal size). McDermott gains the inside track on a summer clerkship with one of the judges by successfully reading what cards each player is holding by watching body language. Yet another networking tool for enterprising law students!  While *Rounders* is primarily a part coming-of-age/part look at the poker underground, it's law student/law professor subplot provides a refreshing change from the usual film portrayals.  Posted October 10, 2005 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/submit-comments.htm) |  |  | | --- | | [Top of page](#gjdgxs) |  |  | | --- | | [Home](http://docs.google.com/index.html) | [Silver Screen](http://docs.google.com/silver_screen.htm) | [Small Screen](http://docs.google.com/smallscreen/small_screen.htm) | [News & Views](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm) | | |