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Off the Shelf: Former Legal Secretary Reflects on the Wacky World of Law Offices

—By Kenya McCullum

Cautions: You are about to enter a kiss and tell zone — or more specifically, a type and tell zone. The names have been changed to protect the innocent, the guilty, and the absurd.

In *100 Words Per Minute: Tales from Behind Law Office Doors*, Adina Sara chronicles her career as a legal secretary which spanned three decades and included some 20 attorney employers.

Sara began her career as a legal secretary quite by accident. She was a single mother who needed a job that allowed her the flexibility to spend time with her children. Because she was already a fast typist, when a friend's husband needed a legal secretary, Sara let her fingers do the walking into a new career that allowed her to make a good living while working a flexible schedule.

Unless you've been living in a parallel universe, the following is not going to particularly come as a newsflash to you: Lawyers have a reputation for being, let's just say, difficult. And Adina Sara readily admits that she was often on the receiving end of a lot of difficult behavior from some of her employers. However, she wants to stress that the archetype, or rather stereotype, of the angelic assistants battling bullying bosses is not the point that she is trying to make with her book.

"It's not like the secretaries are these angels," said Sara. "It's not about they're the bad guys and us sweet secretaries are the good guys. It's absolutely not what my experience had been."

That's not to say that Sara didn't work for difficult lawyers throughout her career; she most certainly did. But Sara doesn't want readers to think *100 Words Per Minute* is her opportunity to exact revenge against her former employers.

"I'm exposing the life of working in a law office; I'm not exposing the lawyers. I've got probably as many chapters about really wacky secretaries as I do difficult attorneys. It's the life; it's what it looks like behind those doors," said Sara.

"The perspective that I'm writing about isn't so much about the law as it is about the treatment of clerical workers in the world," Sara added. "There's wonderful attorneys and crazy secretaries and vice versa. It's kind of a pressure cooker, and it attracts a certain kind of person who is drawn to drama and drawn into a fight — that's what litigation is. To work in the pressure cooker brings out the worst in most people."

Would Sara suggest that others considering a career as a legal secretary jump into that pressure cooker? Absolutely! For her, despite the inherent stress of working in a law office, she knew that when the pressure cooker was too hot for her, she could always find another good-paying job quickly — thanks to the somewhat high turnover rate that resembles the revolving door of assistants often lampooned on the sitcom “Murphy Brown.”

But more important, Sara saw her career as the opportunity to be part of a team that made a positive difference in people’s lives.

“If you’re very lucky, you love it and it’s wonderful. It’s not all ugly,” she said. “There are people out there who have a real bond with the person they’re working with, but I think that’s the exception.”

Intentional Reflections on an Unintentional Career

Throughout her career, Sara always dedicated some of her free time to the artistic work that she loved: she wrote, she made music, and she performed around the schedule that she created for herself as a legal secretary. And during those years, 100 Words Per Minute was already in the making as she jotted down her experiences, in many cases as they were happening. Now that she has put that career behind her and started concentrating on her writing full time, being able to reflect on her life as a legal secretary has given her a sense of closure.

“I feel like having written this book has given me a kind of personal satisfaction for that journey that I’d been on,” said Sara. “It was extremely cathartic for me to write about some of the people that had really hurt me, where I felt at the time really weak and powerless. Writing about it, sometimes years later, gave the situation meaning to me and made me feel like I was worthy again just by the act of writing.”

You can join this former legal secretary on her journey: Sara will be doing a book signing at 7:30pm on August 24 at a Great Good Place for Books (6120 LaSalle Avenue in Oakland). For more information about Sara and her work, visit <http://www.adinasara.com>. Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in San Francisco whose work can be found at .

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