

# A Line in the Sand

—*a short story*—

by SAM STICKLE

THE Outlawyer rang the church bell with bullets as he rode into town. I was in the telegraph office waiting for the next customer when I heard the shots.

He stepped in through the doorway, his boots clunking across the wooden floor, having tied his horse up right outside the window. He kinda' laughed as he approached me. He pulled the pistol from his right holster and blew at the end of it like he was putting out a candle. A wisp of smoke drifted out of it.

Replacing it, he patted the pistol in his left holster, saying, "Civil." He patted his other pistol and said, "Liberty."

I had seen cowboys christen their guns with names, but never with those names. Others have told about that time the Outlawyer came to our town but they have left out the details that could paint him in a more humane way. I hope to do him a little more justice since I knew him

better than the others did. I was the first person he talked to in the town—minus the church bell, of course.

“How are you, sir,” I said.

“Just, fine, just fine.” He was grinning. He pulled a piece of paper out from under the vest of his black shirt—actually he was dressed in all black, down to his boots being black. “I’ve got a telegram to send, boy.”

I took the paper and began to tap out the message. It was going back East. It read, “Found teacher with book on desk STOP Violation separation of press and state STOP Will proceed STOP.”

About the time I finished sending the message two more men rushed into the office. The black dressed man waiting for his telegram to be sent had slid a card across the counter while I was tapping out the message. I glanced down at it. In bold letters across the center was printed “The Outlawyer.” Below that in slightly smaller print were the words, “Fear me, it’s for your own good.”

I thought that might be a tad dramatic, but I never say that to someone who has just been firing his weapon and is dressed in all black.

The men who had just come in were dusty, sweaty. The Outlawyer slowly turned his head around to face them. “You’re lagging a bit these days. Can’t you keep up?”

The thinner of the two men stepped forward, raising his hand as he did so. “You have been sir, if you don’t mind me saying so, on the move. Last week you hit Dusts Gold, Dry Creek and Easy Pickings.” The man paused briefly to wipe dust off his glasses. “The print has barely had a chance to dry on the last story. You could give us a schedule of your plans so we can be better prepared.”

“Will this be a long stay?” the man behind him asked.

“One teacher and only a small backward town? This should be over by tonight,” the Outlawyer said.

“What!?” the man who had asked the question responded. “It’s already evening, how do you expect me to have good enough lighting for photographs?”

“They’ll be dark, grim looking photographs. Nothing wrong with that at all.”

I noticed that there were now two more horses tied up outside, must be the horses of those two men. They were loaded down with bags. Emblazoned on the bags of one of the horses was *South-Bend Daily* and on the bags the other horse was carrying was *Earnest*.

After some more conversation, the three men decided the next thing they should do was to go over to the bar and have a drink, on account of there being so much to do that evening. I noticed right off how sensible these guys were and thought I might be able to better myself if I shut the telegraph office down for the evening and tagged along with them.

We had just stepped outside when I heard someone yelling; I turned to look down the street to where the sound was coming from and saw another man running down the middle of the street with his hands held up like he was at gunpoint. I never will forget that face—he had the classic “I’ve just seen a ghost” look. I noticed that as he ran he kept glancing backwards and with each glance he would give a sudden dart to either the left or the right as if avoiding gun fire from a silent and invisible attacker. The four of us watched him pass in front of us, our heads turning in unison.

It wasn’t until the man—who I was surprised to recognize as our upstanding mayor—had fallen head-first into a horse watering trough, that I realized the menace that he was running from was actually his own shadow.

Upon seeing this, the Outlawyer, contrary to the reputation he has been given by some of the more narrow minded people in our town, who thought he was out to cause us harm, stepped forward and offered help to our mayor.

It wasn't the Outlawyer's fault that the mayor was submerged at the time and didn't hear. As soon as the mayor pulled himself out of the trough, the Outlawyer said, “It looks like you have things well under control.” He smiled at the mayor, who was spitting water out and gasping for air. “As long as you keep things handled the way you are now I don't see any need for me to step in and assist you.” He patted the mayor on the back and gave him a wink.

It was friendly gestures like this that our town has forgotten to mention about the Outlawyer—he wasn't all rough, gruff and let's hang the teacher.

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When we made it into the saloon, I was brought up to speed on the news being passed around during the few minutes between when the Outlawyer arrived and when we saw the mayor dunk himself.

To help us out were three gentlemen with probably the most refined taste in the establishment—Tom, Dick and Harry.

Tom: “I heard the teacher left the curtains on a window open and a student was sunburned.”

Dick: “Worse—there were muntins in the window and they cast a shadow in the shape of an ‘X.’”

Harry: “Even worser—that alphabet-blast-it teacher had a dictionary on his desk! An unabridged dictionary—clearly forbidden by the Constitution: ‘Thou shalt not expand the

freedom of the press.’ He was hired to teach the three ‘R’s’ but he has gone and tried to teach the whole blasted alphabet, and, if you can believe this, whole words, and blog, blog, blog...”

Those of us in the saloon listened intently to the commentary—because of prior experience, I knew to order a drink first thing. What Tom, Dick and Harry had to say always made more sense after at least one drink and became especially clear after three or four. I noticed some in there were receiving the information like it came straight from God. They must have spent the whole day in the saloon.

Over in one corner were the members of the town council in what looked to be an intense game of poker. The mayor was playing with them but was creating a puddle of water on the floor.

When the evening’s bar fight broke out, the council adjourned their card game to the back room. We probably wouldn’t see them until the next day.

Details of the fight aren’t all that important—if you’ve seen one bar fight you’ve seen them all. Someone throws a punch at someone else, and others join in until chairs are being bashed over peoples’ heads and then someone throws a glass through the mirror that’s right behind the counter. I hear that the bartender buys those mirrors by the crate.

The sheriff showed up, minus his white hat that he hasn’t been able to find for a few years.

“All right, all you washed up cowboys, start sweeping this mess up,” the sheriff said. He still had a little spunk left in him even if he only ever used it on settling bar fights.

Those that noticed him enter the room and could hear over all the shouting settled down, and the rest of them noticed the diminished volume in the room. The sheriff pulled up to the bar

and ordered the bartender to serve him a drink. Without a hat to cover his gray hairs, the man was showing his age.

I took a spot next to him. Another man, one of the local ranch hands, took the other side of the sheriff.

“What’re we going to do about the Outlawyer?” the ranch hand asked.

“Have a drink,” the sheriff replied.

The ranch hand shook his head. “Do you know what the Outlawyer is trying to get the city council to do? He wants them to turn the teacher over to him—I hear talk that he plans on stringing him up.”

“Let’s trust the system.” The sheriff downed his glass.

“The system? What does the city council even have to do with this?” Although the ranch hand was leaning in towards the sheriff, the sheriff kept his face straight ahead looking at the broken mirror.

“Sometimes you have to throw a wolf a bone,” the sheriff replied.

The ranch hand slammed his fist down on the counter, causing the sheriff’s glass to rattle. “You want to go along with letting the Outlawyer have the teacher, don’t you? A man who was sworn to uphold the law and you’re going to back down in the face of one man with a couple of pistols and a lot of boasting.”

The sheriff finally turned to face the ranch hand. “He’s not just one man. There are several hundred people working with him—not including the judges, governors and legislators he has bought.” He motioned to the bartender, then returned to face the rancher. “Have a drink, forget about the matter. He’s not after us.”

The ranch hand was a good example of the suspicious nature of many of the townspeople. The people couldn't believe that the Outlawyer had our best interest in mind by coming in and telling us how to run our school house.

It wasn't like the Outlawyer would go beyond the school and start telling us how to run the church, what public officials could say, what displays we could put on the town square or restricting the people from assembling. Some of the townspeople were of such a suspicious nature that they thought the Outlawyer had been eyeing, with disdain, the guns people carried.

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Rumor has it that the council wasn't just playing a game of cards in the back room but was instead deciding the fate of the school teacher. Some of the town people, though, even to this day, insist that all they were doing back there *was* a game of cards. According to that line of reasoning, they stayed in there for several hours just so everything would look proper as if they had given all sides of the matter careful consideration.

One thing was for sure, when they came out of that room later that night, the council couldn't rush out fast enough. I thought they might break out into a fight amongst themselves. When they got there, they settled down, and the mayor straightened his jacket—which was no longer dripping but was damp—and then nodded to those assembled in the room. The mayor spoke:

“The citizens of our town have been honored this day by the presence of the Outlawyer. He has graciously decided to show us the error of our ways. Even in our very own school house, there was a man who was teaching the children the whole alphabet—I cannot explain, or emphasize, enough the total depravity this could have led to.

“They were innocent children, and may the Outlawyer helps us, who now have their innocence stripped away by knowledge of more than just the three ‘R’s’. They have to go to bed at night tormented by the letters ‘A’, ‘B’, and ‘C’. They don’t deserve this.

“Furthermore, the teacher had a dictionary on his desk. Even if it was just for his personal use and no student ever saw the contents of it, it was inappropriate for a classroom. The classroom is not the place for words.

“It is therefore declared that the teacher is guilty as charged and shall be turned over to the Outlawyer to do with as he sees fit.”

The Outlawyer took a bow and then spoke. “Your town has much to be proud of. While it is sad that the teacher chose the actions he did, the town made a much better choice and prevented a situation that we all might have regretted. I hope that other towns will take notice of what you have done and be able to take the necessary steps to eliminate the need for my assistance.”

The sheriff had left before the council came out, but the ranch hand had stayed. The things he muttered under his breath, while the Outlawyer spoke, were reflective of the conversation we had while waiting for the council to emerge. Although I had found our conversation to be less than engaging, it did show me the type of thinking he had—and I was afraid also of too many of the townsfolk, that if listened to would slow down the type of progress that the Outlawyer was trying to bring. The ranch hand had expressed a philosophy of “local” control over the running of the town and school. He made derisive comments towards folks back East that—in his opinion—didn’t know the first thing about running their own affairs let alone that of the rest of the country.

The Outlawyer continued. “While I would like to say that this matter is over with tonight, I cannot. Being a very conscientious man, there has come to my attention over the course of this evening a certain town bylaw that I would not want violate—namely that hangings are to only take place on Saturdays.”

At this point I noticed that several of the council members glanced over to those in the saloon—and then calmly returned their gaze to the Outlawyer as if they had never looked over at their audience.

“In three days, then,” said the Outlawyer, “we shall hang the teacher.”

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As soon as the meeting was over, the newspaper and magazine men walked over to me and without a word guided me away from the bar and out the front door. We paused on the boardwalk.

“Look like rain to you, Jack?” the newspaper man asked the other man.

“Yes.” He reached out his hand past the overhang that was protecting us from the rain. “Feels like water too.”

“It’s a good omen,” the newspaper man said above the soft patter of rain. “Nature’s way of saying this town is being cleansed.”

The good omen was briefly interrupted by a flash of thunder that lit the street clear to the jail house. In that moment I saw the face of a man in the jailhouse window, the bars grasped in his hands as he looked out across the street at us.

We stepped out into the rain, hurrying to get back to the telegraph office. The newspaper man said he wanted to get his story out across the wire right away. I guess Jack, the magazine man, trotted along in whatever his friend did because he came with us.

Once in the office the newspaper man started dictating the story before he even had his jacket off. The name he gave me when sending the telegram was Keller Wright. I suppose that’s a decent name for a writer although I worried I would find out that Jack’s last name was “Ripper.”

Mr. Wright gave the headline for the story as “Teacher Hanged.” His friend Jack had taken a seat in the office, and I noticed him nodding his approval. Tapping out a telegram didn’t require much attention to the device, so it allowed me to keep a close watch on those two.

“The school teacher from Wyatt was hanged today after being convicted of having a dictionary in his classroom.” Keller paused, staring at one of the lamps that was lighting the room. I wondered if he was going to get inspiration from the moths that were flitting about and occasionally coming too near the flame. He resumed the story. “Neighbors described him as being rowdy and that he could shoot up the town with the best of them. It came as a shock when they found out he was secretly teaching students more than the three ‘R’s’—”

“Whoa,” interjected Jack. “You’ve left out all the good stuff. He was also a horse thief.”

Keller slapped himself on the forehead. “Let’s start over.”

I stopped tapping out the message and grabbed a pencil this time.

“‘A horse thief that was using a school house in Wyatt as a hideout was hanged today.’ How’s that?”

Jack shook his head. “You’re losing your touch. Try this opening: ‘The teacher was led away to the gallows screaming for one more chance to steal a horse. The tightening of the rope meant the town of Wyatt could rest safe. The teacher would no longer burn and brand their children or steal their horses—’”

“Wait a minute.” As soon as I let the words out of my mouth I regretted it. They were both now staring at me intensely. I stumbled with what to say. “He, ah, hasn’t been hanged yet, has he?”

They both broke into smiles and looked at each other. For the life of me I wasn’t sure why.

“Let me explain how this works,” Keller said. “Actually, let me answer it with a question to you. The teacher is going to be hanged, right?”

“Yes, they said Saturday.”

“Well, there you have it. With people of his kind, if somebody has said it will be done then that is all the public needs to know. Heck, all they needed to do was say it had crossed their mind to hang him and we would be printing a headline that said it was over with.” Keller extended his arms out, like he was addressing a crowd. “We are the public’s servants and anything we can do to make life simpler for the people we will do.”

When he explained it like that it made sense. People back East were living busy lives and didn’t need to be confused by details. I didn’t wonder but that they should just go ahead and print that the teacher never even existed and save everybody even more trouble.

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The next morning, on my way to get breakfast at the saloon, I saw the Outlawyer come riding down the street on his horse. I waited for him while he dismounted and tied up the horse. The horse looked like it had been ridden farther than just from the stable.

He was still wearing his black outfit. He nodded his head slightly in acknowledgment of my presence and said good morning.

“Very productive night,” the Outlawyer said. “When the wheels of justice turn slowly in one local there always seems to be somewhere else that they move faster.”

“Are you talking about your gun?” I asked him.

He laughed. “Well, in a manner of speaking, yes.”

We stepped inside and took a table together. When he ordered his breakfast he asked for bacon, but not just any bacon. He was the first person I’ve encountered who asked the details about how the hog was killed. When told that it was shot through the head once with a pistol, he seemed pleased.

“One clean shot, just how I would have done it.” He looked over at me while he continued speaking. “For accuracy, like that, a person has to keep in practice. So often towns like this don’t allow the executions to be done with a pistol so we get stuck using the gallows. I hate to see them suffer like that when a quick shot would end it all so much sooner.”

When we received our plates, piled high with pancakes and bacon the first thing the Outlawyer did was to stab his fork into the bacon and raise it up to eye level. “Guilty as charged,” he said and then shoved the six pieces of bacon into his mouth.

I started with the pancakes, not sure if eating large amounts of bacon might not have an effect on the functioning of the brain.

“And what was the bacon guilty of?” I asked him.

“Being a hog.”

“It was thoughtless of it.”

“Your learning. Could have a future in my line of work.”

He had never actually explained what it was that he did. He must have noticed a puzzled look on my face because he answered my unasked question.

“Justice, my boy. I see that people are free.”

“Like the hog?”

“Precisely. The hog is not only free from excess fat—”

“Did the hog think it had excess?” He waved the question away while taking a bite of his pancakes.

“I, of course, deal with people. Making sure that individuals and communities are not weighted down with excess.”

I began to wonder what he had been doing before his arrival at the saloon when I noticed that his shirt sleeve was wet. Since the shirt was black, whatever was on his sleeve only showed in glossy patches.

“Were you doing some of that work last night?” I asked him.

“Like I said, it was a very productive night.”

He seemed uncomfortable and he kept eating his pancakes.

Finally, he spoke again. “People misunderstand the work I do, they sometimes think that I’m a little harsh or question my motives. Some even go so far as to think that *I’m* the threat.” He shook his head in disgust. “Somebody has to be willing to take action and save communities from danger; I know the types of things that they should be concerned about but people aren’t always smart enough to think that the things I find to be problems, are problems. Like the teacher with a dictionary on his desk. *That* is the threat.”

He shoved back from the table and stood up. “If I didn’t have the backing of members of the government I might not be able to do what I do. If communities like this didn’t think that others would come in to crush them if they didn’t go along with what I say, we’d have a real problem.”

He pulled out one of his pistols and flipped the chambers out. “See that. It’s empty.” He spun the chambers for me to see. “Now—” He stopped to remove some bullets from his gun belt and then thumbed them one by one into the chambers. He snapped it closed. “Those bullets are the justice system. All I have to do is pull the trigger.”

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That afternoon Jack and Keller came to use the telegraph office for an interview with one of the boys from the school. It didn’t make much sense to me why they wanted to write another story about the whole situation with the school teacher. The last one was titled “Teacher Hanged” were they going to title this one “Teacher Hanged Again”?

Their interview started out well enough. The boy was poking around in the wires on my desk while the two men tried to get his attention.

“We have all day,” Keller said.

“But you don’t,” Jack added.

I was reading a magazine and not paying a whole lot of attention to them until the kid started pressing down on the telegraph key. I swatted him with the magazine, causing him to give me a sneer before turning around to face the reporters.

“Now, Thor, did your teacher take a branding iron—one used by the Bar-X ranch—and brand you with it?” Keller asked.

“No.”

“Let me ask the question a different way. Were you in pain after the teacher used a branding iron on you?”

“No.”

“You’ve been very cooperative, so let’s try this another way. After you were branded and in pain, would you describe the mark as a very large ‘X’?”

“It was a sunburn.” The boy paused from speaking just long enough to flip into a handstand. “The mark came from the window that was beside my desk. The muttons cast a shadow across my arm that looked like an ‘X.’”

“So your teacher forced you to sit there and expose yourself to the rays of the sun?”

“I asked him to open the curtain.”

“So, let me see if I have this straight, contrary to your begging the teacher to keep the curtain closed, he went over and opened the curtain?”

“I had to ask him twice.”

“Let’s move on to another important topic. Would you mind standing upright?”

The boy started to bend his legs down but instead of a graceful flip he landed with a thud, sprawling out across the floor. I peered out over the desk and at his inert form. He was however breathing; in a few minutes he’d regain consciousness.

“Is he dead?” Jack asked.

“No, he’s only collecting his thoughts,” Keller answered.

“How long will he take to do that?”

“Might take all day. Let’s go ahead and write the story and send it. I know what he was going to say anyway.”

I grabbed a pad of paper, knowing that by “writing” they meant I was going to be writing down as they dictated.

Keller began giving the story:

“Teacher Brands Students.

“Students told how they were branded with a cattle iron during a lesson on the alphabet. The lesson included the forbidden letter ‘X.’ The teacher has since been hanged for having a dictionary on his desk and telling the students that there is more than just the letter ‘R’ in the alphabet.

“One of the students that suffered from the branding has recently taken a turn for the worse and may not live. But he was able to tell his story just in time. It contained details of being forced to hear about the letters ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’—”

“I asked about those.” The boy sat up.

“You let us handle the details and you go back to sleep,” Keller said.

Jack stepped over to where the boy was sitting on the floor. He nudged his boot into the boy’s chest, pushing him back to the floor. “I’ll let you know when it is your turn to speak.”

Keller resumed the story. “The students did not ask for, nor want, to know about letters in the alphabet other than the three ‘R’s’.”

“I want to know—”

He was muffled by Jack before he could say anything more. Now I understood why they are called the “press.”

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The sheriff had been moping around town since the Outlawyer’s arrival. People had seen him checking and rechecking the locks on the bank even though we’ve never had a bank robbery. The closest was when old lady Augustus tried to withdraw more money than was in her account and nearly hit the teller over the head with a walking stick when he wouldn’t give her the money.

Friday evening, the town threw the sheriff a birthday party. It was held in his office, complete with decorations and streamers throughout the room. The only thing a person might have noticed, to dampen the mood of the evening, was that one of the two jail cells at the side of the room was occupied. It must have made the sheriff edgy.

The festivities opened with a speech by the mayor about all the faithful service the sheriff had performed for the town and about his long and accomplished heroics elsewhere. The sheriff fell asleep halfway through. He missed the retelling of the time when he posed as a wanted man so he could join a gang of outlaws and bring them to justice:

“Things were going along well,” the mayor explained, “until he was out with them on a train robbery and a passenger identified him. Up until that moment, he thought he was only days away from identifying all of the gang members and being able to give the orders to have the gang rounded up.

“They had the train stopped. He was going along through the passenger cars with several other gang members and collecting the passengers’ money and jewelry. One of the passengers was holding a young child who, as he passed their seat, reached up and grabbed the handkerchief covering his face. A nearby woman gasped and exclaimed, ‘Patrick!’ She then reached up and slapped him across his face.

“He was startled, but managed to say, ‘Mother!’

“The lady then proceeded to go into a speech about how she hadn’t raised him to be a train robber and that he could forget about her coming to visit him. She said as soon as he and his cohorts allowed the train to be on its way she was going to take the next train out of there.

“He stammered some reply about thinking it was supposed to be next month that she was coming. Two other gang members were in the car with him and were listening with no small

amusement. He had no chance to tell her what he was really doing without exposing himself to the gang members.

“He left the car, yelling back to her, ‘I love you Mother,’ to which she had a few pointed words to say to him about where he was going to spend his time after judgment day.”

The sheriff woke up when everyone started applauding at the end of the mayor’s speech.

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Later that evening, a fight broke out at the saloon. It wouldn’t have even caused the bartender enough pause to stop polishing the glasses and watch except that it was the sheriff who started the fight.

When he walked in, he shoved the swinging doors so hard they slammed against the wall. He was shouting something about “Who says I’m too old to do anything.” Several drunks, towards the middle of the room, raised their mugs and said “We do.”

The first one received his drink over his head; the second guy started to crawl away, taking his drink with him, when he saw what was about to happen. He made it about two tables when the sheriff caught up to him and kicked his drink away and then gave him a kick in the rear.

The others in the saloon joined in, but there was some confusion among them. Occasionally they would stop in the middle of landing a fist or bashing a bottle over someone’s head and look over at where the sheriff was duking it out. It messed up the choreography. Eventually they gave up on the evening fight and joined in to restrain the sheriff.

I followed them as they carted him out the front of the saloon. I was a little concerned because I had heard someone mentioning getting some rope but I found that all they were doing was tying him up to one of the porch posts.

They told him to simmer down and then in a few hours they would come back and untie him. As they were going back through the doors, a group of kids came running down the street. They were shouting and laughing but the voice of one of the kids rose above the others.

“Stop, leave me alone, you’re hurting me.”

The boy who was being ganged up on broke free for a moment and ran towards the light coming from the saloon before being tackled.

“No one cares, James, you heard what the Outlawyer said.” One of the older boys in the group, who appeared to be the leader, was speaking. “We can do what we want, no one in this town will stop us.”

Another boy stepped to the side of the larger boy. “This is our game and we make up the rules. You’re out voted. If we decide you’re at the bottom of the pile today, then we can stomp on you as often as we want.”

Normally I wouldn’t have intervened except that the odds were so heavily stacked against the boy. I gave a shrill whistle, drawing their attention.

“Why don’t you pick a more even fight?” I said.

“Who made you the boss?” was the reply from the older boy.

Thinking quickly, I pointed over to the sheriff. “See him, I just beat him in a fight and tied him up. Don’t think I can’t do the same to you.”

That quieted them down. The older boy didn’t seem to have the same confidence in his voice when he replied. “Mister, we’re just playing a game.”

“Doesn’t look like much of a game for the boy you have on the ground.”

“The Outlawyer told us we could do this. He said it was alright as long as we only picked on one kid at a time. He promised that if we did it that way we could get away with anything and would learn to be leaders in our community.”

Somewhere along the way, I think they misunderstood the Outlawyer. At the very least, the kids didn’t understand the subtleties of how the adult world worked.

“Get on home. You listen to what we say and don’t go thinking you know what the Outlawyer means. We’ll tell you how to act. Go on.”

As soon as they started leaving, the sheriff spoke up and asked me to untie him. He said his head was cleared now and that he had some things he needed to do that night.

I didn’t see any harm in it, so I undid the knots around his wrists and legs. He walked on down the street as I stepped back into the saloon.

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High Noon came at twelve o’ clock on Saturday. The Outlawyer had gone around town furiously pounding on doors demanding to know why the gallows had not been built yet.

No one was out on the street and he was only able to get a few doors to creak open. I was watching the show from the doorway of the telegraph office when he spotted me and came over.

“What has gotten into this town?” he asked.

“I’ve heard some rumblings, but I’m not quite sure what is going on,” I told him. Aside from him about to be run out of town, I really didn’t know what was going on. “While you’re here, do you have the money on you to pay up your bill?” I asked, not wanting him to feel uncomfortable about coming back later after being told, say, to not step foot back in town.

He frowned and turned away from the doorway. I noticed that he had caught sight of the sheriff going into the jailhouse. He strode off down the dusty street. All up and down the street I noticed curtains rustling and faces peering out.

This is what it had come to. A brave man trying to bring justice to our little town of Wyatt but not being understood. He was halfway down the street when the form of the teacher stepped out of the jailhouse doorway and into the light.

The Outlawyer stopped in his tracks. His hands went to his hips and hovered there. The teacher kept approaching, steadily gaining ground. About ten yards away from the Outlawyer, the teacher stopped. He kept his eyes steady on the Outlawyer as he took his boot and made a deliberate line in the dirt.

They continued to look each other in the eyes until the Outlawyer closed his hands around his guns and began to pull them out. At that moment he froze.

All up and down the street was the sound of gun hammers clicking back. For the next two minutes he stayed in that position as the clicks kept sounding as more guns were cocked. After the sounds stopped, he slowly turned his head, looking at the windows and doorways out of which were poking the barrels of guns.

The teacher cleared his throat. “I think I’ve been a pretty good teacher.”

“Um, well, you know, meeting and exceeding state standards isn’t good enough.”

“I think I’ve been a pretty good teacher.”

“Right, but you need to take responsibility for that.”

“I’m about to take some responsibility.”

“No rush.”

“A lot of people are about to take some responsibility.”

“Maybe now isn’t the time or place for that.”

At that moment the church bell began to ring, but this time it wasn’t the Outlawyer who was doing it.

“What’s that ringing for?” the Outlawyer asked.

“Around here we ring the bell once for each year of a person’s life. How old are you?”

He let loose of his pistol, letting them drop to the ground. He cautiously started to turn around before answering. “About ninety.”

He didn’t look ninety. He swiftly walked over to his horse and mounted it. The two members of the press also got on their horses and rode off with him.

He never went up in status in the town. Everybody pretty much thought we were better off having him leave, although there were a few last believers.

As the dust was still being stirred up out in the distance from the retreating of the horses, several figures emerged from the saloon. It was the town’s old standby for news and information—Tom, Dick, and Harry.

Tom: “Did we miss something?”

Dick: “Hell, were missing something right now. Our drinks!”

Harry: “It’s past noon, we’ve gone and missed the hanging. Listen, the bell is already ringing—let’s go over to the church and pay our condolences.”

## *About the author*

A student at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, Sam Stickle is majoring in English with a minor in journalism. He is a member of Alpha Mu Omega, the MVNU chapter of Sigma Tau Delta (International English Honor Society).

Creator of the website [AccountabilityInTheMedia.com](http://AccountabilityInTheMedia.com), Stickle provides an independent voice on a controversy over First Amendment rights in Mount Vernon, Ohio that has received national media attention. The controversy surrounds an eighth-grade science teacher, John Freshwater, who was ordered to remove his personal Bible off his classroom desk by a school administrator. Out of concern that the mass media was not reporting on the story fairly or accurately, Stickle began posting articles and video on the web to provide the public with more information.

## *The nature of fiction*

“In the preface to his fictional dream-journal, *The Burning Tapers*, novelist Carlo Zeamba calls narrative prose the Graceful Lie, because ‘in fiction, the imagination creates worlds blessed with more beauty and horror than the everyday world can possibly reveal to us.’ In this passage, Zeamba suggests that even though creative writing contains made-up elements—fictions, ‘lies,’—it embodies essential human truths in ways that other kinds of written expression can’t.” —Michael Petracca, *The Graceful Lie*.

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