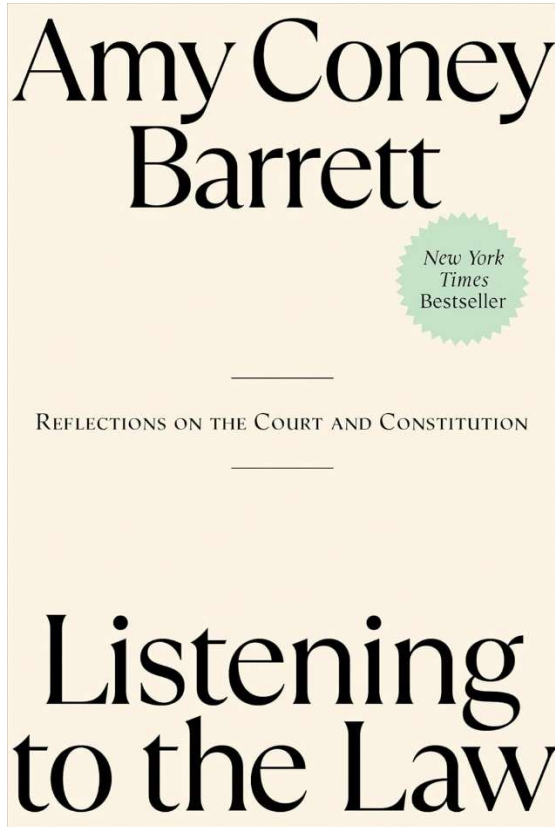


## ‘Listening to the Law’ highly readable, informative

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*“Listening to the Law: Reflections on the Court and Constitution” by Amy Coney Barrett. New York, NY: Sentinel (an imprint of Penguin Random House), 2025, 336 pages, \$32.00 (hardcover).*



“I didn’t grow up wanting to be a lawyer,” Amy Coney Barrett notes near the beginning of “Listening to the Law: Reflections on the Court and Constitution,” her recently released autobiography and treatise on her legal philosophy and approach to interpreting the law. “Since I loved to read, I dreamed mostly about being an author or an English teacher. That was true through college, where I majored in English and spent most of my time reading literature and wiring essays about it. Inspired by my college mentors, I considered pursuing a PhD in English, followed by a career as an English professor.”

“But when it came time to apply, I hesitated,” Barrett continues. “I loved literature but felt pulled by law. It too relied on words, but to a very different end. Law governs the relationship of the government to its citizens and its citizens to one another. It matters in everything from the sale of property to a criminal trial to the structure of government. No matter what the context, law has real-world consequences. I wanted to know how it worked and to help people navigate it.”

“I also thought it might be easier to get a job as a lawyer than as an English professor,” she adds.

So begins a surprisingly interesting journey about the life and career of someone I knew virtually nothing about before agreeing to review this remarkably personal and transparent account of how Barrett rose to become a Supreme Court justice. Like most readers, I only knew her as someone Trump nominated shortly before the 2020 election. The timing of her nomination was extremely controversial due to its proximity to the presidential election. Apparently when a justice dies (or retires/resigns) so close to such a potentially pivotal political event, the expectation is that the responsibility of naming a replacement would fall to the incoming administration. So in one sense, her ascent was somewhat of a Cinderella story.

Extensively researched, with 35 pages of source notes, “Listening to the Law” consists of an introduction, 14 chapters, and a conclusion. After the inaugural chapter, the narrative is presented in three major sections: “Part One: The Court and Its Work,” chapters 2–7; “Part Two: The Constitution and the American Experience,” chapters 8–10, and “Part Three: Thinking About the Law,” chapters 11–14. The manuscript also includes the U.S. Constitution as an appendix, which I consulted several times as I made my way through this thought-provoking summary and analysis of the foundation of our legal system. Finally, I enjoyed the many photographs Barrett liberally interspersed throughout the narrative; they helped me get a better sense of who she is as both a person and a professional.

Bottom line: The writing is clear and concise. You won't need a background in the law to understand where she is coming from, although having a rudimentary knowledge of basic legal concepts would no doubt be an advantage in a few places throughout the text. And where she does delve into some of the more technical details that are necessary to adequately convey what she is attempting to communicate, Barrett is careful to provide sufficient explanation in plain terms that virtually anyone can understand.

After completing her undergraduate degree at Rhodes College, where she majored in English Literature with a minor in French, Barrett attended Notre Dame Law School, earning her law degree in 1997 (first in her class). She subsequently clerked for Judge Laurence Silberman and Justice Antonin Scalia. In 2002, Barrett began teaching at Notre Dame Law School, and was eventually promoted to a professor in 2010. Even after becoming a judge with the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in 2017, she continued to teach civil procedure, constitutional law, and statutory interpretation. President Trump nominated her to the U.S. Supreme Court shortly after the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg; she was confirmed by the U.S. Senate and took her place on the high court in 2020.

It is worth noting that her nomination and confirmation were both controversial as the 2020 presidential election was only 38 days away; Senate Republicans had refused to even consider Merrick Garland's nomination during the 2016 election year.

As is always the case with these kinds of books, I tend to gravitate toward the human side of the equation. I am intrigued by the inner workings of the law and how it ultimately impacts all of us, but I am more fascinated by the dynamics of how people with serious and seemingly intractable differences are able to nonetheless find the courage and fortitude to move forward and ultimately put closure on the task at hand. Consider the following from "Working Together," the third chapter and one that I found especially enlightening:

"There is an indispensable human element to judging. Unlike some courtrooms, which are run by a single judge, the Supreme Court is made up of nine judges. And because we hear cases together, decisions require collaboration and sometimes compromise. We speak informally in chambers and by telephone. We talk as a group in conferences after arguments. We attempt to persuade one another by writing memoranda. We read one another's draft opinions and request changes. A justice who takes a 'my way or the highway' attitude will find it impossible to write an opinion representing the majority's view. Moreover, all this happens in a small group whose members serve alongside one another for many years, so ruptured relationships are not a short-term problem. We are stuck with one another whether we like it or not."

If there is one thing I learned from "Listening to the Law," it's that I'm not sure this is a job I'd want. Certainly, I now have a much greater respect and appreciation for the complexity of the role and the minefields Barrett has to navigate on a daily basis. One particularly poignant passage near the end of the book caught my eye; I believe it serves as a fitting synopsis of her approach to the position:

"The Constitution required compromise at its conception, and living under it requires compromise now. And even if we, like the framers, see imperfections in our nation's charter, we should not lose faith in the constitutional project. I'm with Benjamin Franklin: perfection is too high a bar for fallible humans to attain. But when I consider the freedom, prosperity, and stability that our Constitution has secured for more than two centuries, I share Franklin's astonishment that this system has attained so much. And when I contemplate the future, I am optimistic about its continued success."

I try to share Barrett's optimism, but given all that's currently happening in our country that can be a difficult proposition.

After considering all the reviews submitted for “Listening to the Law,” Amazon’s AI assistant produced the following:

“Customers find this book highly readable and informative, particularly praising its excellent explanation of the Constitution and legal system. The writing style is well-crafted, with one customer noting it's written for the civic-minded layperson. Customers appreciate the historical journey through the Supreme Court's history, and one review highlights Justice Barrett's insights into her decision-making processes. The book features interesting anecdotes, and one customer notes its balanced approach regardless of political affiliation.”

I could not have said it better myself. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.*

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