

# LAWDRAGON

## Writer Limelight: Graham Moore

By Katrina Dewey



Writer Graham Moore discusses his new book, “*The Last Days of Night*,” with Lawdragon CEO Katrina Dewey. (Photo ©2016 David Lubarsky)

Graham Moore really does like popcorn, in particular Garrett’s from Chicago, where he grew up. But much like his fame after winning an Oscar for his screenplay about closeted codebreaking mathematical genius Alan Turing, it can sometimes seem a bit overwhelming.

His agent called him awhile back, and asked what he was doing. For a sweet, obsessive-compulsive, narrative savant, he’s a pretty straightforward guy, so he responded, “eating popcorn.” From which cornfields of Garrett’s have been launched, culminating in a vast trove of it being delivered from the president of the iconic Windy City popper to celebrate Moore’s Oscar win for his adapted screenplay of “[The Imitation Game](#).”

But what better way to fortify himself to be interviewed by the illustrious presiding partner of Cravath? We talked over popcorn as his book, “[The Last Days of Night](#),” was launched – and just before he spoke to lawyers from the firm that bears the name of his lead character. It’s an extraordinary book in many ways, not least of which is by turning-the travails of Paul Cravath, a then-anonymous 26-year-old – whose Tennessee dirt was not long off his trousers and whose law diploma was still unframed – into the lead character struggling to bring electricity to the U.S. almost despite the efforts of the three men who birthed it: Thomas Edison, George Westinghouse and Nikola Tesla. [[Read also “Consider the Lawyer,”](#) our article on Moore’s presentation to the Cravath firm.]

**Lawdragon:** I watched your Oscar acceptance speech again this morning, which to me was the highlight of the whole show. You said to “stay weird, stay different” and after sharing your own suicide attempt at 16, you promised kids would be OK if they stay true to themselves. I understand how being weird helped your identification with Alan Turing, but what about Paul Cravath. Was he weird?

**Graham Moore:** Everyone’s a little weird and maybe that’s the point of all stories. Paul Cravath was unique in so many ways and the things that drew me to him were I felt like I identified with him, I understood some of the issues he was grappling with. Paul was trying to conceive and imagine the inner lives of some of his century’s greatest geniuses – Westinghouse, Edison, Tesla – in the same way that I was also trying to imagine what was going on in their heads.

I felt like 26-year-old Paul Cravath, this young person in way over his head just trying to tread water and fathom the minds of these luminaries. It felt like I spent so much of my career trying to imagine how geniuses think – from Alan Turing to Thomas Edison; and professionally Paul Cravath had to do the same thing. He was new to New York, he do not grow up here. He was very much a cultural outsider when he got to New York, as well, and I think that also enabled him to approach the issues and problems in a way that hadn’t been done before.

**LD:** I’ve heard for several years now a hope among lawyers that a book or movie will come along and make being a lawyer popular again by showing the genius of what they do. To me, it seems like this could be that book. And I’m wondering if being the son of lawyers helped you there?

**GM:** Unsurprisingly – or perhaps surprising because I come from a family of them – I’ve always had an affinity for lawyers. Both of my parents are lawyers, both of my stepparents are lawyers, a lot of my best friends are lawyers.

In some sense I always wished I’d gone to law school because my parents always talk about problem solving techniques that lawyers learn how to do and other people do not. I never learned them so I’m not even sure what they are, but I can imagine them. And I think, yes, lawyers can get a bad name because the law tends to make things complicated. But the good news is that the law gets really complicated and it’s uniquely qualified to resolve some really complicated issues like the ones in the book.

**LD:** Early on, you stepped into a Paul Cravath suit as your skin, you identified so much with him, and that seems to have helped you render the components of what it is a lawyer actually does. As in this excerpt:

*As an attorney, the tales that Paul told were moral ones. There existed, in his narratives, only the injured and their abusers. The slandered and the liars. The swindled and the thieves.*

*Paul constructed these characters painstakingly until the righteousness of his plaintiff—or his defendant—became overwhelming. It was not the job of a litigator to determine facts; it was his job to construct a story from those facts by which a clear moral conclusion would be unavoidable. That was the business of Paul’s stories: to present an undeniable view of the world. And then to vanish, once the world had been so organized and a profit fairly earned. A bold beginning, a thrilling middle, a satisfying end, perhaps one last little twist, and then ... gone.*

Can you talk about the parallels between the stories a lawyer tells and those told by a writer?

**GM:** Lawyers are storytellers just as I am. I think Paul Cravath was an exceptionally good storyteller and early on in working on the novel, once I caught onto that, that was a way for me to understand Paul and to understand the process of his work. It unlocked a lot.

It is the job of an attorney to craft a narrative, to say these are the salient details of the story, these over here are the details that do not matter and confuse the present purposes, and to construct from those details that do matter a narrative. And that’s my job, as well. I understand just how hard it is.

**LD:** You seem to have a knack for making smart people and topics accessible – like understanding a light bulb. We all turn them on, but few of us understand how they operate. Is that part of the thrill in writing to explain concepts you’re passionate about and make them accessible to a broader audience?

**GM:** One of the things I love about my job is that I get to pick areas that interest me and learn a lot about them myself in order to hopefully be able to explain them to a broader audience, as well. I’m not a scientist, I’m not a mathematician, I’m not even a lawyer. So being able to try and explain some of the basics of patent law in this book as well as being able to explain some of the basics of electrical science was one of the great challenges.

And it’s something in the work that I’ve done from “The Imitation Game” to “The Last Days of Night” that I take very seriously because I think a lot of popular narrative storytelling can condescend to its audience and think that an audience of non-scientists won’t be able to follow along with difficult concepts. And I think that’s not true. I think people can follow along if you present information succinctly and in an entertaining way, and if you show the perspective of the people for whom this information really matters.

To me, the most fun scenes to write in this book were between Paul Cravath and George Westinghouse – and Paul is not a scientist and Westinghouse is not a lawyer. And so whenever Paul goes off to explain some principle of law, Westinghouse says, “I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care ... shorter,

shorter.” Westinghouse takes the position of the audience, which is like “simplify, simplify, I don’t care about these details.”

Likewise, whenever Westinghouse goes off on some scientific principle, Paul is saying, “I don’t care, these people are not scientists. Just give me the nutshell of it so I can do my job.” Being able to swap the audience’s perspective from Paul and Westinghouse in those scenes was a really fun technique that I ended up developing to put the audience inside all the scientific and legal information that we needed to get through.

**LD:** One key to the success of the book, it seems to me, is how you were able to strike that balance of not laboriously including all the technical details. As the storyteller, you want the book to be respected by readers with deep technical backgrounds but for those technicalities to not weigh down the story. How do you do that?

**GM:** That’s always a tricky thing. Early on in my writing process for this book and other work I fill hundreds and hundreds of notecards with historical data points, such as “here’s a thing that occurred.” I lay them all out in chronological order and it’s like, OK, if I could do this in 5,000 pages that’s what the book would look like. Now if I want to condense it, what can we combine, what are a couple different real-life data points that essentially the gist of them can be communicated in one point, and sometimes that one point is taking a single one of those events and using it as a synecdoche, a whole?

Sometimes it’s inventing a fourth event that combines elements of the three. It’s a lot of amalgamation of historical details and then rearrangement of them. So one of the big techniques I used in this novel was taking out some major events that did occur but swapping the timeline of them for narrative purposes. The goal of the piece was to put you inside Paul Cravath’s head – in literary terminology it’s a very tight third-person narration around Paul’s head. You never learn anything that Paul doesn’t learn, you never see anything from any perspective other than Paul’s.

**LD:** So that’s a choice you make?

**GM:** Very early on. And it’s something myself and my editor had to be quite rigorous about as we went through. It’s something an editor is very helpful with. Every sentence that implies something that Paul couldn’t have seen in a room, couldn’t have noticed, the name of a restaurant or a dish that he wouldn’t know had to get cut.

**LD:** The lobster. We have to talk about the lobster. Here’s an excerpt from Chapter 12, A Lobster Dinner at Delmonico’s, which perfectly captures the blood matches that are corporate dinners:

*An array of silver knives glittered on the table. The gaslight threw shadows against the white tablecloth. ... Every man in the smoky chamber beneath William Street was there for battle of one kind or another, taking their places behind the sharpened cutlery with which they would joust. Paul Cravath, stiffly shifting in his dinner jacket, peered down at his crustaceous second: the softest, most butter-soaked lobster upon which he’d ever laid eyes.*

*The lobster on Paul’s plate had been caught off the coast of Maine – possibly that very morning – before it had been shipped in a densely packed smack to the Fulton Street fish markets. Purchased personally by the chef, Charles Ranhofer, this lobster was then dropped alive into a pot of hot water and boiled for a full twenty-five minutes. The claws had been cracked, the tail sliced open, and all the wet meat had been removed from the shell and fried in a cast-iron pan of clarified butter. Fresh cream had been poured over the browning flesh, and then, after the liquid had been reduced by half, a cup of Madeira had been added to the mixture. ...*

I wasn’t sure if we were talking about lobsters or young lawyers with all the cracking and boiling. Which I suspect was your point.

**GM:** It’s funny, whenever I talk to lawyers they get really into the lobster sauce. I was talking with my dad the day before yesterday and my dad is both a lawyer and a big foodie. He did not make that lobster sauce but he has made other elaborate lobster things and he was saying a friend of his just read it and wanted to talk to him about the lobster sauce – and that he had made it.

It seemed kind of like the perfect combination of foodie language and this legalistic way of describing a lobster soup, all about these precise elements and systems. It’s not the way a recipe would describe it, it’s not the way a food magazine would describe it. It’s the way Paul would describe it.

I wrote that very early on and I assumed it would get cut at some point, for pacing – why are we spending an entire page on this lobster? But I thought it would get you inside Paul’s head.

**LD:** It’s also a passage many young lawyers can relate to – sitting there with fine people eating fine food and having no idea what you’re doing there. And here you have the inventor Tesla going on about the cubic meters of the lobster, which he cannot eat because it’s not divisible by three. And Paul’s pants are so tight, but he doesn’t know when he’ll get to eat like this again. You really nail the gorgeous brutality of these dinners.

**GM:** It’s all about feeling out of your depth in the world whose rules are infinitely complex and infinitely detailed – that was something I certainly felt like I understood and identified with. Moviemaking is a lot like that in some ways. Getting a bunch of people together and everyone’s working

together, with complicated systems of organization. I've found myself sitting across the dinner table from people whom I greatly admire trying to keep my cool while making dinner conversation and eating something I've never heard of.

**LD:** Can you talk a bit about how the book will move into the movie and if Paul will change?

**GM:** I'm on draft 11, which is low for me. For "Imitation Game" we must have done 30, I'm just guessing. The novel we did nine or 10 major drafts.

At the moment, I can't talk in detail about the changes, but it's the same essential story. In some respects it's a similar process. If the book had to condense a lot of historical events, the film has to condense a lot of historical events of the book yet again and so some of that amalgamation and condensing means switching the order of things. It means having a sort of historical event you saw from one perspective in the book come from a different perspective in the film.

One of the things we found early on is that precisely sticking with Paul's perspective is more complicated on-screen because the camera is already a spectator. You're already looking at Paul, you're not inside his head, so we're trying to figure out how on screen to represent that and make it still Paul's story. You want to learn things through him – you don't want to learn anything he doesn't know.

There is currently as of this moment no voice-over narration in the film, but you never know.

**LD:** Do you like Paul?

**GM:** I miss him.

It's funny. I was 29 years old when I started writing this novel. Paul's 26. I felt like I identified with him so much and I understood him so well and now it's five, six years later and I'm 34 and he's still 26 and I keep growing up and he's still the same age. We have less in common in some ways; it's like I miss the version of him who used to talk with me every day.

**LD:** What did you talk about?

**GM:** His feeling of being in over his head. He had this insurmountable challenge in front of him, and how was he ever going to do it? A lot of the work I've done has been about that feeling – how do you approach seemingly insurmountable problems?

This is one of the main topics in Alan Turing's mathematical work. He made a name for himself, it gets really technical and I'm not a mathematician, but his work on Gödel's Completeness Theorem, the question of: How can you tell ahead of time if a certain problem is simply impossible to solve, is it worth even spending time on because it's unsolvable? That was a problem he was grappling with and it's something I think about a lot too – how do you look at these problems that seem unsolvable?

**LD:** Was there an analogue to that with Paul, what he was grappling with as a lawyer to resolve?

**GM:** Yes, I think that what became this massive sequence of lawsuits between Edison and Westinghouse became impossible. At the time there was no way to win; he was outgunned, outmatched, by Edison and Edison's team of much more experienced attorneys and much larger team of attorneys. But Paul approached it anyway and developed some techniques they didn't have.

**LD:** Your admiration for him as the underdog here is very interesting given the firm he founded went on to become in many ways America's quintessential law firm. But he started out as the underdog and he didn't blink on any of it.

**GM:** And that interests me in terms of making a novel like this emotional and personal. What's the difference between the private side of Paul and the public side, that certainly can't blink, and is never going to show weakness, or fear, or insecurity. What does that look like when he gets home at night, how does he emotionally handle all that, what is he thinking about, what are his obsessions, became one of the great things I got to conjure about him in the novel.

**LD:** What was the hardest thing about writing this book?

**GM:** All of it. How to compress a lawsuit is an unfathomably complicated beast, and how to compress 300-plus lawsuits is like 300-plus unfathomably complicated beasts. So how do I as a layperson try and convey the essence of what was going on, the essence of the arguments, to an audience of laypeople, like myself?

What was helpful in that process is realizing that while the issues that they were fighting over, while they could get very technical, were in some sense very philosophical. These really profound questions of what does it mean to have an idea, what does it mean to invent something? what does it mean to create something. These are the ideas that IP law really gets at.

When you say the phrase "IP law" it doesn't sound like the jazziest thing in the world but it is, it's passionate. That seems to be a hallmark of the projects I've worked on – taking subject matter that at first blush you could look at and say, "Oh that seems a little esoteric, a little technical, it could get caught in the weeds a bit," and to say, "No, this is fascinating and deeply emotional and deeply powerful for the people involved in the process."

And I think that's the key to telling a story like this. If you're inside the head of the character and some possibly arcane piece of legal detail is so important to that character, it's the most important thing in his or her life, it will be important to the reader and to the audience as well because you understand what matters emotionally even if some of the details are trickier.

It's drawing out, from the patent application, how to make the reader care about the light bulb.