

## Teaching By Tabloid

**March 19, 2007 issue**

Newsweek

When Anna Nicole Smith died, the question of where she would be buried was urgently discussed in hair salons, locker rooms, coffee shops—and Syracuse University law professor Terry Turnipseed's class on estate planning. At Berkeley, the custody battle between Britney Spears and Kevin Federline has made its way into Prof. Melissa E. Murray's family-law course. Around the country, law professors are finding value in our trashy tabloid culture. Teachers have always reached for pop culture to illuminate their subjects. But in the era of US Weekly and obsessive gossip blogs, students now come to class already knowing a lot about the legal issues involving celebrities—and sometimes even having read original case documents at Web sites like The Smoking Gun. At Columbia Law, the only thing more bizarre than Smith's lurid life was that her will contained a "no-contest provision when there was only a single legatee," says Zahr Stauffer, a third-year student there.

Professors are happy not to see students' eyes glaze over. "I get to teach law, and the students get to think they're having People magazine fun," says Prof. J. Herbie DiFonzo of Hofstra. "They know what Britney did, and it's only one more step to get them to ... reflect on the doctrinal issues, the heavy-duty law subjects. Why use a casebook example of someone no one's ever heard of?"

—*Nick Summers and Samantha Henig*