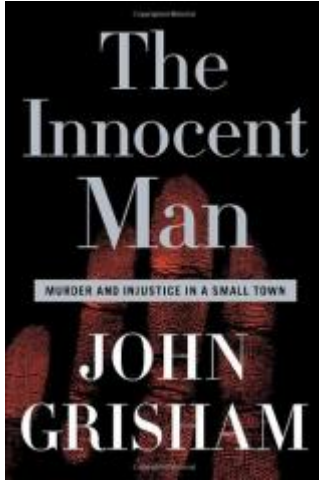


The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town

by John Grisham



About the Book

The Innocent Man unfolds with the taut suspense, intriguing characters, and vivid scenes that have made John Grisham one of the most widely read novelists in America. But this time, he's reporting on actual events—and a courtroom drama that results in a real-life nightmare for all the wrong people. Sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit, Ron Williamson experienced a flagrant miscarriage of justice so regrettably common in criminal prosecutions across the country. His story will leave you hungering for answers; whether you read it with a group of friends or as part of a forum, **The Innocent Man** is not a book you will want to keep to yourself. This guide is designed to enhance your discussion of Ron Williamson's story, furthering the conversation begun by John Grisham. We hope it will enhance your experience of this chilling walk with the accused.

Discussion Guide

1. What were your initial impressions of Ron Williamson? How did your attitudes toward him shift throughout **The Innocent Man**?
2. Discuss the setting of Ada, Oklahoma, as if it were one of the characters in the book. What were your opinions as Grisham described Ada's landscape—a vibrant small town dotted with relics of a long-gone oil boom—and the region's history of Wild West justice?
3. In your opinion, why was Glen Gore overlooked as a suspect? Were mistakes made as a result of media pressure to find justice for Debbie Carter and her family? How did Dennis Fritz's knowledge of the drug scandal affect the manhunt? Was injustice in Ada simply due to arrogance?
4. How was Dennis different from Ron? Why didn't Dennis confess, while Tommy Ward and Karl Fotenot did? Did refusing to confess help Dennis in the long run?
5. As you read about the court proceedings, what reactions did you have to the trial-by-jury process? Have you served on a jury, or been a defendant before a jury? If so, how did your experience compare to the one described in **The Innocent Man**?
6. What are the most significant factors in getting a fair trial, or an intelligent investigation? Does personality matter more than logic in our judicial system? How would you have voted if you had heard the cases against Ron and Dennis?
7. How does new crime-lab technology make you feel about the history of convictions in America? What might future generations use to replace lie-detector tests or fingerprint databases? What are the limitations of

technology in solving crimes?

8. How did the early 1980s time period affect the way Debbie's last day unfolded, and the way her killer was hunted? Would a small-town woman be less likely to trust a Glen Gore today than twenty-five years ago? Were Ron's high-rolling days in Tulsa spurred by a culture of experimentation and excess?

9. How did the descriptions of Oklahoma's death row compare to what you had previously believed? What distinctions in treatment should be made between death-row inmates and the rest of the prison population?

10. What is the status of the death penalty in the state where you live? What have you discovered about the death penalty as a result of reading **The Innocent Man**?

11. In his author's note, Grisham says that he discovered the Ada saga while reading Ron's obituary. What research did he draw on in creating a portrait of this man he never knew? In what ways does **The Innocent Man** read like a novel? What elements keep the storytelling realistic?

12. Discuss the aftermath of Ron's and Dennis's exoneration. How did you balance your reaction to the triumph of Ron's large cash settlement (a rare victory in such civil suits) and the fact that it would have to be paid for by local taxpayers?

13. **The Dreams of Ada** (back in print from Broadway Books) figures prominently in Ron's experience, though the men convicted in that murder are still behind bars. What is the role of journalists in ensuring public safety? Why are they sometimes able to uncover truths that law enforcement officials don't see?

14. Grisham is an avid baseball fan. How did his descriptions of Ron playing baseball serve as a metaphor for Ron's rise and fall, and his release?

15. To what extent do you believe mental health should be a factor in determining someone's competence to stand trial, or in determining guilt or innocence?

16. In his author's note, Grisham writes, "Ada is a nice town, and the obvious question is: When will the good guys clean house?" What are the implications of this question for communities far beyond Ada? What can you do to help "clean house" in America's judicial system?

Author Bio

Long before his name became synonymous with the modern legal thriller, John Grisham was working 60-70 hours a week at a small Southaven, Mississippi law practice, squeezing in time before going to the office and during courtroom recesses to work on his hobby --- writing his first novel.

Born on February 8, 1955 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, to a construction worker and a homemaker, John Grisham as a child dreamed of being a professional baseball player. Realizing he didn't have the right stuff for a pro career, he shifted gears and majored in accounting at Mississippi State University. After graduating from law school at Ole Miss in 1981, he went on to practice law for nearly a decade in Southaven, specializing in criminal defense and personal injury litigation. In 1983, he was elected to the state House of Representatives and served until 1990.

One day at the DeSoto County courthouse, Grisham overheard the harrowing testimony of a twelve-year-old rape victim and was inspired to start a novel exploring what would have happened if the girl's father had murdered her assailants. Getting up at 5 a.m. every day to get in several hours of writing time before heading off to work, Grisham spent three years on *A TIME TO KILL* and finished it in 1987. Initially rejected by many publishers, it was eventually bought by Wynwood Press, who gave it a modest 5,000 copy printing and published it in June 1988.

That might have put an end to Grisham's hobby. However, he had already begun his next book, and it would quickly turn that hobby into a new full-time career --- and spark one of publishing's greatest success stories. The day after Grisham completed *A TIME TO KILL*, he began work on another novel, the story of a hotshot young attorney lured to an apparently perfect law firm that was not what it appeared. When he sold the film rights to *THE FIRM* to Paramount Pictures for \$600,000, Grisham suddenly became a hot property among publishers, and book rights were bought by Doubleday. Spending 47 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list, *THE FIRM* became the bestselling novel of 1991.

The successes of *THE PELICAN BRIEF*, which hit number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and *THE CLIENT*, which debuted at number one, confirmed Grisham's reputation as the master of the legal thriller. Grisham's success even renewed interest in *A TIME TO KILL*, which was republished in hardcover by Doubleday and then in paperback by Dell. This time around, it was a bestseller.

Since first publishing *A TIME TO KILL* in 1988, Grisham has written one novel a year, and all of them have

become international bestsellers. There are currently over 300 million John Grisham books in print worldwide, which have been translated into 40 languages. Nine of his novels have been turned into films, as was an original screenplay, *The Gingerbread Man*. *THE INNOCENT MAN* (2006) marked his first foray into nonfiction, and *FORD COUNTY* (2009) was his first short story collection.

Grisham lives with his wife Renee and their two children, Ty and Shea. The family splits their time between their Victorian home on a farm in Mississippi and a plantation near Charlottesville, VA.

Grisham took time off from writing for several months in 1996 to return, after a five-year hiatus, to the courtroom. He was honoring a commitment made before he had retired from the law to become a full-time writer: representing the family of a railroad brakeman killed when he was pinned between two cars. Preparing his case with the same passion and dedication as his books' protagonists, Grisham successfully argued his clients' case, earning them a jury award of \$683,500 --- the biggest verdict of his career.

When he's not writing, Grisham devotes time to charitable causes, including most recently his Rebuild The Coast Fund, which raised 8.8 million dollars for Gulf Coast relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He also keeps up with his greatest passion: baseball. The man who dreamed of being a professional baseball player now serves as the local Little League commissioner. The six ballfields he built on his property have played host to over 350 kids on 26 Little League teams.

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