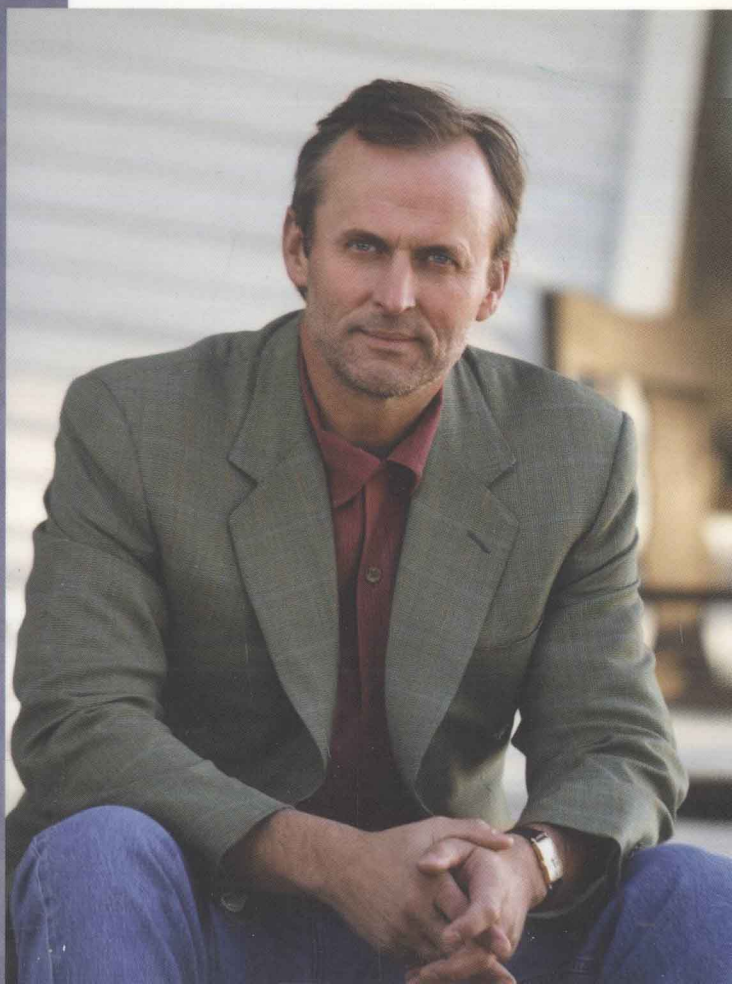


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Cover credit: CBS/Landov

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Readings on John Grisham / Nancy Best, book editor.

p. cm. — (The Greenhaven Press literary companion to contemporary authors)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7377-1665-7 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7377-1664-9 (lib. : alk. paper)

1. Grisham, John. 2. Legal stories, American—History and criticism. 3. Novelists, American—20th century—Biography. I. Title: John Grisham. II. Best, Nancy.

III. Series.

PS3557.R5355Z84 2003

813'.54—dc21

2002045483

Printed in the United States of America

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FOREWORD

Contemporary authors who earn millions of dollars writing best-sellers often face criticism that their work cannot be taken seriously as literature. For example, throughout most of his career, horror writer Stephen King has been dismissed by literary critics as a “hack” who writes grisly tales that appeal to the popular taste of the masses. Similarly, the extremely popular Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling have been criticized as a clever marketing phenomenon that lack the imagination and depth of classic works of literature. Whether these accusations are accurate, however, remains debatable. As romance novelist Jayne Ann Krentz has pointed out:

Popular fiction has been around forever but rarely has it been viewed as important in and of itself. Rarely have we acknowledged that it has a crucial place in culture. . . . The truth is, popular fiction—mysteries, science fiction, sword and sorcery, fantasy, glitz, romance, historical saga, horror, techno-thrillers, legal thrillers, forensic medical thrillers, serial killer thrillers, westerns, etc.—popular fiction is its own thing. It stands on its own. It draws its power from the ancient heroic traditions of storytelling—not modern angst. It is important, even if it is entertaining.

Although its importance often goes unrecognized, popular fiction has the power to reach millions of readers and to thus influence culture and society. The medium has the potential to shape culture because of the large and far-flung audience that is drawn to read these works. As a result of their large

readership, contemporary authors have a unique venue in which to reflect and explore the social and political issues that they find important. Far from being mere escapist fiction, their works often address topics that challenge readers to consider their perspectives on current and universal themes. For example, Michael Crichton's novel *Jurassic Park*, while an entertaining if disturbing story about what could happen if dinosaurs roamed the planet today, also explores the potential negative consequences of scientific advances and the ethical issues of DNA experimentation. Similarly, in his 1994 novel *Disclosure*, Crichton tells the story of a man who suffers predatory sexual harassment by his female supervisor. By reversing the expected genders of the victim and aggressor, Crichton added fuel to the debate over sexual politics in the workplace.

Some works of fiction are compelling and popular because they address specific concerns that are prevalent in a culture at a given time. For example, John Grisham has written numerous novels about the theme of corruption in America's oldest legal and business institutions. In books such as *The Firm* and *The Pelican Brief*, courageous though sometimes naive individuals must confront established, authoritarian systems at great personal danger in order to bring the truth to light. Written at a time when government and corporate scandals dominated the headlines, his novels reflect a faith in the power of the individual to achieve justice.

In an era when 98 percent of American households have a television and annual video sales outnumber book sales, it is impossible to ignore the fact that popular fiction also inspires people to read. The Harry Potter stories have been enormously popular with both adults and children, setting records on the *New York Times* best-seller lists. Stephen King's books, which have never gone out of print, frequently occupy four to five shelves in bookstores and libraries. Although literary critics may find fault with some works of popular fiction, record numbers of people are finding value

in reading these contemporary authors whose stories hold meaning for them and which shape popular culture.

Greenhaven Press's *Literary Companion to Contemporary Authors* series is designed to provide an introduction to the works of modern authors. Each volume profiles a different author. A biographical essay sets the stage by tracing the author's life and career. Next, each anthology in the series contains a varied selection of essays that express diverse views on the author under discussion. A concise introduction that presents the contributing writers' main themes and insights accompanies each selection. Essays, profiles, and reviews offer in-depth biographical information, analysis of the author's predominant themes, and literary analysis of the author's trademark books. In addition, primary sources such as interviews and the author's own essays and writings are included wherever possible. A comprehensive index and an annotated table of contents help readers quickly locate material of interest. In order to facilitate further research, each title includes a bibliography of the author's works and books about the author's writing and life. These features make Greenhaven Press's *Literary Companion to Contemporary Authors* series ideal for readers interested in literary analysis on the world's modern authors and works.

INTRODUCTION

John Grisham is one of the most popular writers of contemporary fiction in the world, yet he began his working life, not as a writer, but as an attorney. In fact, the basis of Grisham's fiction, which virtually defines the genre of the legal thriller, lies in his early career as a lawyer. Within a few years of opening his practice, he had grown weary of the profession. There in his office, he began writing his first novel, a story inspired by a case he had witnessed at the local county courthouse. Over the years since then, in one novel after another, written at the breakneck pace of one per year, Grisham has explored many of the issues he dealt with in his own practice. Issues that often had no satisfactory resolution in real life could be shaped and molded into stories with richly satisfying conclusions, stories that sold by the millions, making Grisham one of the wealthiest writers in the world.

Early on, Grisham discovered the type of story that worked for him, one that makes use of the archetypal characters of David and Goliath. Grisham's heroes are usually bright, yet naive, lawyers just out of law school. Typically they encounter long-standing American institutions that have become riddled with corruption, such as insurance companies, tobacco companies, local police departments, federal agencies like the FBI and CIA, or established law firms representing huge conglomerates. These young lawyers get involved in cases that lead them beyond the normal scope of legal practice into life and death issues, and that put them and other characters in the novel in harm's way.

In a Grisham story, the identity of the villain is seldom a

mystery, yet they are usually people the average American is brought up to trust rather than challenge. They are political leaders, heads of corporations, or respected members of the legal establishment—people in authority. While in many thrillers, the novel's suspense hangs on who has committed a crime, in Grisham's stories, the suspense is centered in how the already identified villain, who is immensely powerful, will be brought down.

The stories follow a pattern that is appealing to Americans' sensibilities: The individual challenges authority to defeat overwhelming odds. In Grisham's version of the David vs. Goliath myth, the idealistic young attorney outwits the villain, bringing institutionalized evil to light by breaking the rules created by those very institutions. The hero must bend the rules or go against established values in order to bring truth to light. In the end the individual prevails.

Although there are some critics who laud Grisham's work, comparing him to Charles Dickens and John Steinbeck (both of whom also dealt with social corruption in their works), others contend he is writing formulaic tales whose outcomes are too easy to predict. Grisham shrugs off such criticism, saying that he is convinced that were the critics to like him, the book-buying public would not.

Though Grisham does not aspire to write literary fiction, he has often felt the pressure from those who judge his work on literary terms. This was especially true when he took up residence in Oxford, Mississippi, the home of the Nobel Prize-winning author, William Faulkner. Grisham wrote an essay in the acclaimed literary magazine, the *Oxford American*, entitled "The Faulkner Thing," in which he lamented the challenge of being constantly queried about and compared to the great writer. A reporter had cornered him at a bookstore and in response to her insinuating comments about the difficulties he must face in such a comparison, Grisham wrote,

I'm not a Southern writer. . . . I'm a commercial writer who lives in the South. I try to write commercial fic-

tion of a high quality—no attempt at literature here—just good books that people enjoy reading. The libraries are already filled with great literature. There's no room for me.

Judged on his own terms, however, Grisham is phenomenally successful. In a society where corporate scandals abound and where there is growing mistrust of the institutional authority, Grisham has himself become an institution: a writer who knows exactly the type of story that is certain to sell.

JOHN GRISHAM: A BIOGRAPHY

By most measures, John Grisham is one of the most successful living writers in America. He has published fourteen books—a book every year since his first novel, *A Time to Kill*, and all have become best-sellers. His book sales now surpass horror writer Stephen King's and romance author Danielle Steele's. In 1996 alone, Grisham's books brought him over \$40 million in royalties, and sales have increased each year since then, making him one of the wealthiest writers in the world.

Grisham's success is not limited to his work. He has been happily married to his childhood sweetheart, Renee, for more than twenty years. He and his wife, along with their two children, live in a palatial home in Virginia on one hundred acres of land, complete with a handyman and a live-in housekeeper. The Grishams have another home on nearly sixty acres of land in Oxford, Mississippi. Grisham also owns his own jet airplane. As if all this were not enough, Grisham is perhaps the only writer in America to be listed in *People* magazine's annual list of the "50 Most Beautiful People."

GRISHAM'S EARLY YEARS

John Grisham's prodigious success has surprised many people, not least of all himself, since nothing in his early years suggested he would become either rich or famous. John Grisham was born in 1955 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, the second of five children of John Grisham Sr. and Wanda Grisham. The elder Grisham was a construction worker who moved to wherever he could find a job. As a consequence, for the first twelve years of John Grisham's life, the family moved often, from one

southern town to another. Construction work was hardly lucrative, and when they grew big enough, the Grisham children picked cotton at their grandparents' farm to earn their own spending money. Despite the financial difficulties, the Grishams were a happy and stable family. Grisham fondly recalls much storytelling around the dinner table.

Early on, John Grisham's parents instilled in him the value of reading, encouraging him and the other children to read for entertainment, rather than watch television. Each time the family moved to a new town, Grisham's mother took the children to the library, where, after receiving library cards, the children would check out as many books as the rules allowed.

Grisham's mother was a powerful influence on his life beyond encouraging him to read. Grisham describes his mother as a very pious woman who, each time the family moved to a new town, would immediately join the local Southern Baptist church. Wanda Grisham saw to it that her children attended church too. John and his siblings, scrubbed and dressed in their best clothes, would attend services every Sunday morning. The children did not seem to mind these Sunday mornings and indeed took church seriously. John, for example, at age eight committed himself to following the principles of Christianity in his life.

A MEDIOCRE STUDENT

Eventually, the Grishams' nomadic lifestyle changed. John Grisham Sr.'s work took the family to Southaven, Mississippi, a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee, in 1967. John attended both junior high and high school there, graduating from Southaven High School in 1973.

Despite his mother's encouraging him to be a reader, however, John was at best a mediocre student. He had little interest in most of his classes and was a "C" student, though one of his English teachers recalls that young Grisham enjoyed reading. What John Grisham loved most was playing baseball, and he dreamed of one day achieving a place in the Base-