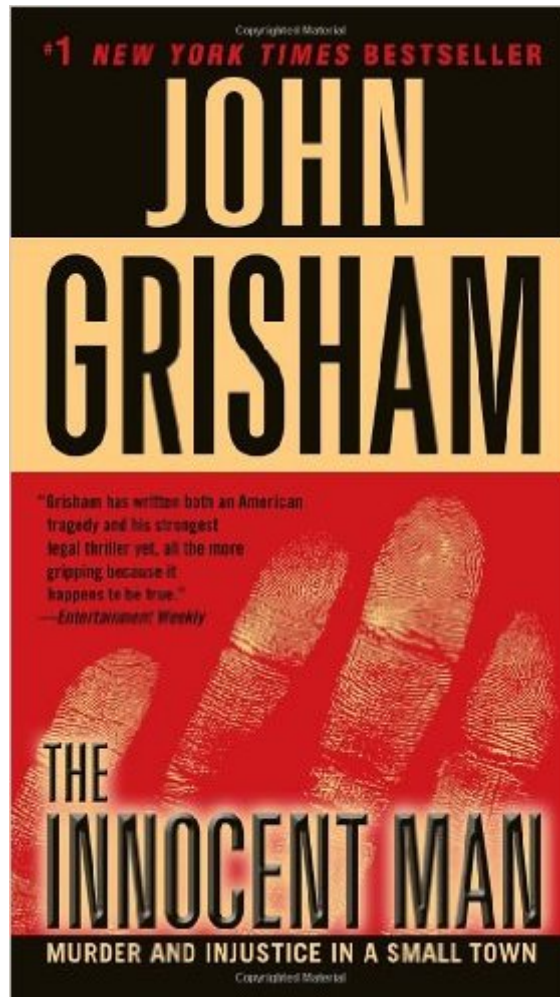


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# The Innocent Man: Murder And Injustice In A Small Town



## Synopsis

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • In the vein of *Serial* and *Making a Murderer*, John Grisham's first work of nonfiction will terrify anyone who believes in the presumption of innocence. Impeccably researched, grippingly told, filled with eleventh-hour drama, it's a book no American can afford to miss. In the town of Ada, Oklahoma, Ron Williamson was going to be the next Mickey Mantle. But on his way to the Big Leagues, Ron stumbled, his dreams broken by drinking, drugs, and women. Then, on a winter night in 1982, not far from Ron's home, a young cocktail waitress named Debra Sue Carter was savagely murdered. The investigation led nowhere. Until, on the flimsiest evidence, it led to Ron Williamson. The washed-up small-town hero was charged, tried, and sentenced to death in a trial littered with lying witnesses and tainted evidence that would shatter a man's already broken life, and let a true killer go free. Praise for *The Innocent Man* • "Grisham has written both an American tragedy and his strongest legal thriller yet, all the more gripping because it happens to be true." *Entertainment Weekly* • "Grisham has crafted a legal thriller every bit as suspenseful and fast-paced as his bestselling fiction." *The Boston Globe* • "A gritty, harrowing true-crime story." *Time* • "A triumph." *The Seattle Times*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The phrase "Grisham book" and word "important" aren't often found in the same sentence, but John Grisham's 2006 non-fiction book, "The Innocent Man", allows me to state that Grisham has now written the most important book of his mega-successful career, and one of the most important I've

read by any author. The book recounts two murders in the small town of Ada, Oklahoma. Both victims are young women. In both cases, the local and state police investigating the case are stumped. But with a toxic blend of extremely circumstantial "evidence", shocking crime scene photos, junk science, inept experts, jailhouse snitches and critical "dream confessions" induced by near-torture tactics, the police pin the murders on four young men of the area, two per murder. The "innocent man" of the title is 30-something ne'er-do-well Ron Williamson, a schoolboy baseball star whose dreams of playing in Yankee Stadium dissolve in the low minors in a mix of arm injuries, booze and the onset of mental illness. By the time of the murder that consumes most of Grisham's tale, Williamson has washed up back home in Ada, and deservedly earned a reputation as a loudmouth loose cannon of sorts. Still his worst crime is passing a \$300 phony check. Skipping forward quickly, Williamson becomes the focus of the police's investigation and ultimately finds himself on death row in an Oklahoma criminal justice system whose aim seems to be to continuously reduce the amount of respect shown to death row inmates until it reaches zero. Shrewd detectives that they are, the police "know" that there's a second killer because of a misspelled warning message written in catsup at the scene, "dont chase us or ealse." Enter suspect two, single father Dennis Fritz, whose main crime is to be a friend of Williamson. I'll stop here regarding the "plot", even though this is a news story and you could look it up. While novelistic in format, "The Innocent Man" reads more like a newspaper report, or like a lawyer dispassionately recounting the facts of a case. (Well after awhile not so dispassionately, as the injustices against the accused and then convicted men pile up.) The issues raised by the case and brought to light by Grisham cover the gamut of criminal justice - abuse of police power, single-minded focus on particular suspects and deliberate ignorance of others, near-torture-induced confessions, prosecutorial arrogance, lack of resources provided to defendants, mishandling of evidence, coercion of expert witnesses, use of junk science to dazzle a jury, the general and mistaken belief by the community that the police only arrest guilty parties, and most compellingly in Williamson's case, the inability of the criminal justice system to recognize and deal humanely with mentally ill prisoners. My wife read the almost 450-page paperback version in one day. She then bugged me to read it for several days until I interrupted my second attempt at Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer: A Novel* and dove in. Even while sick, I finished it in a day-and-a-half. After his disappointing novella "Bleachers", I'd pretty much written off Grisham (never have considered him much better an airplane read in the first place), but I'm deeply grateful to him for recognizing the power of this story and bringing to the attention of so many people with this fine book. I also salute him for sticking to the non-fiction format, resisting the novelist's urge to fictionalize the story and

embellish it with tie-ins to the Oklahoma City bombing, 9/11 and the like. "The Innocent Man" may not stand up as literature to recently-deceased Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, but it's still a great book--the best true-crime story I've read with the most important messages about America's criminal justice system and its generally unrecognized threat to innocent men and women everywhere (and especially in Ada, OK where the DA that prosecuted the cases is still in office).

Ambivalence really sums up my feelings toward Mr. Grisham's latest book. Depressing is another. I applaud Mr. Grisham in his attempt to analyze the hows and whys of just what happened to Ron Williamson during his hectic, confusing, and sometimes just unlucky life. From outstanding major league baseball prospect, to drug and alcohol abuser, to mentally unstable convict, to exonerated felon, Ron Williamson never really knew any peace off the baseball diamond. His dream of a major league career shattered he simply withdrew into his own private hell of dope, booze, loose women, honky tonks, and insanity. Sometimes a difficult book to follow, the darkness that Mr. Grisham maintains throughout the book is at times oppressive. How many times must Ron Williamson have to exhibit mental instability before someone, anyone, gets him real help and not just temporary "band-aid" his CHRONIC mental problems. It is a wonder that he didn't harm someone during his drunken, drug induced haze. Finally convicted of a murder he never committed, the complex judicial process to free him was very well told by Mr. Grisham. Ron's years spent on "death row" were both illuminating, sad, and frightening all at the same time. His eventual release and exoneration was the ONLY happy point in an otherwise sad biography of a profoundly unhappy life. Again, I was ambivalent about this book. I can not say I enjoyed it but I did learn from it. This is not your typical light Grisham reading so be very careful. Be ready for a heavy, dark, oppressive book that while educating about the legal system, at the same time leaves one empty about the sad state of this nation's mental health programs. This up close and personal view of America's seamy underbelly will stay with you for quite awhile.

The fact that this is a true story is both the book's greatest asset and it's biggest liability as well. To think that such irresponsible legal shenanigans could occur in America is truly a sobering thought. The manner in which the Williamson case and others described in the book were handled by the parties involved is disgusting. That aspect of the story makes the book an intriguing read. On the flip side, the true nature of the story also holds Grisham back. In sticking with the facts, his creativity was limited. Among Grisham's greatest strengths as a writer are character development and intricate setting of the locale. In both of these instances, the facts limit what Grisham can do. Simply

put, at times I felt I was reading the daily news, not a book. Grisham should be applauded for writing a book that helped bring this injustice to a larger audience. The book may not entertain, certainly not to the degree of his best work, but what he did here was more important than anything else he could have written. Somewhere, at some point in the future, this book will prevent another innocent individual from being unfairly railroaded. If nothing else, Grisham should be proud of that fact, and we all should be grateful to him.

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