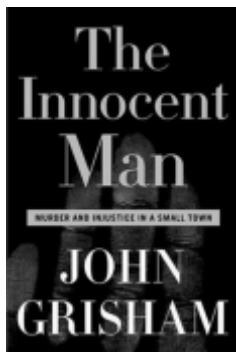


The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town

By John Grisham

Doubleday, 2006, 368 pages, hardcover,
paperback edition available November 2007

Review By Natalie Smith Parra



Ron Williamson's obituary in *The New York Times* on December 9, 2004 led well-known fiction writer John Grisham to the subject of his latest book and his first work of non-fiction – *The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town* (Doubleday, 2006). Grisham wrote 18 novels before embarking on the two years of research and writing that went into *The Innocent Man*. Grisham said of the project, "Never in my most creative moment could I have come up with a story like this."

The Innocent Man reads almost like one of Grisham's legal thrillers: A 21-year-old woman is raped and strangled, and messages in blood are scrawled on her naked body and on the walls and furniture in her apartment.

The victim was Debbie Carter. She lived alone in her Ada, Oklahoma apartment when she was murdered in December 1982.

Ada detectives determined the crime was too violent to have been committed by only one person. They contacted all of Debbie's known male acquaintances – friends, coworkers, boyfriends, enemies and ex-bosses. No one refused to go to the police station and provide their fingerprints and samples of their saliva, and head and pubic hair.

Glen Gore was an acquaintance of Debbie's who was the last person known to have seen her alive. He told police that the night before her murder he saw her at the Coachlight lounge where she worked. Gore had an extensive criminal record and a history of violence against women. The entire police report of Gore's interview reads as follows:

"Glen went to school with Debbie. Glen saw her 12-7-82 at the Coachlight. They talked about painting Debbie's car. Never said anything to Glen about having problems with anyone. Glen went to the Coachlight about 10:30 p.m. with Ron West. Left with Ron about 1:15 a.m.

Glen has never been to Debbie's apartment."

Ron Williamson was 18 when he signed with the Oakland A's in 1971. Many people in Ada thought he would be the next Mickey Mantle, but he was playing in the minors when an injured shoulder forced him out of professional baseball. The premature end to Ron's baseball career led to bouts of depression and drastic changes in his personality. By 1982 the Ada police knew Williamson as an unemployed guitar picker who lived with his mother, drank too much, and "acted strange."

Three months after Debbie's murder Detectives Dennis Smith and Mike Kiesweiser went to the Williamson home and interviewed Ron for the first time. Ron studied Debbie's picture carefully and said maybe he had met her, maybe not, but he couldn't be sure. Yes, he told police, he had frequented the Coachlight, the club where Debbie worked, as well as other clubs around Ada. Ron's mother Juanita showed the detectives a detailed diary that had an entry for the night of the murder that Ron was in the house by 10 p.m.

In 1973 Dennis Fritz had a child named Elizabeth with his wife Mary. Mary worked for a college and Dennis, who had a degree in biology, worked for the railroad. On Christmas Day 1975, while Dennis was working out of town, his 17-year-old neighbor shot and killed Mary while she was sitting in a rocking chair in the family's Ada home.

Dennis went into a deep depression and was unable to work for two years. He took care of his daughter and eventually pulled himself together. In 1981 he got a job teaching high school science.

Dennis and Ron were drawn together by loneliness and loss. They became friends and played the guitar together.

Meanwhile, in another interview with police, Gore added a new touch to his story: he claimed Debbie asked him to dance with her that night at the Coachlight because Ron was making her uncomfortable. The fact that no one else had seen Ron at the Coachlight that night was apparently insignificant to the police.

Police finally coerced a confession, or said they did, from Ron Williamson. Ron neither wrote nor signed the document. In fact, he never even read it.

Ada detectives arrested Dennis and Ron for Debbie's murder, even though there was no

evidence that either of them had ever met her. The detective claimed that Dennis and Ron had been suspects for over a year, but didn't explain how or why. Deadening years in jail followed.

Ron and Dennis were tried separately. Dennis was tried first based on the prosecution's theory that if he could be convicted, Ron's conviction would be easier, and the jury would be more likely to impose the death penalty on him. Dennis was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

Ron was unable to listen to much of his trial proceedings without outbursts of anger, so he stayed in a cell in the county jail during much of his trial. Even with Ron's history of mental illness and medical records readily available to the court, and even with the death penalty on the table, neither the prosecution nor the defense questioned his competency. The prosecution's plan of trying Dennis first worked: After Ron's conviction he was sentenced to death.



Ron Williamson
(Day of release in
April 1999)

Ron and Dennis were exonerated in 1999. Their release got a lot of national media attention, and there were stories about their trips to Yankee Stadium and Disney World. They were also on a number of television programs.

But the fear of going back to prison consumed Ron. He began to drink, and then gave away his back social security payments to TV evangelists and charities for starving children.

Forty-four people submitted fingerprints for analysis during the investigation of Debbie's murder. Gore's prints, however, were not among them, even though he had a history of violence against women, and he was the last known person to see Debbie alive.

This mystery was partially explained fourteen years after the arrest of Williamson and Fritz, when Gore signed an affidavit stating that during the 1980s he was selling drugs in Ada, specifically methamphetamine, and that some of his transactions involved Ada police.

In 2001, two years after Ron and Dennis were released and almost 19 years after Debbie's murder, a reinvestigation of the case was concluded. Gore was charged with Debbie's murder. After his conviction he was sentenced in June 2003 to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Innocent Man cont. on page 7

Innocent Man cont. from page 6

Ron was 51 years old in the fall of 2004 when his stomach pains began. He was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver. Although he had a few bright moments in his short years of freedom, most of it had been painful before his December 2004 death.

Taryn Simon is a noted photographer who traveled the country profiling exonerees for a book. That book, *The Innocents* (Umbrage, 2003), included pictures of Ron and Dennis and a short summary of their case. Each was asked to contribute a few words to accompany his photograph. The pain of Ron's experience is etched in what he said:

"I hope I go to neither heaven nor hell. I wish that at the moment of my death that I could go to sleep and never wake up and never have a bad dream. Eternal rest, like what you've seen on some tombstones, that's what I hope for. Be-

cause I don't want to go through the judgment. I don't want anyone judging me again. I asked myself what was the reasons for my birth when I was on death row, if I was going to have to go through all that? What was even the reason for my birth? I almost cursed my mother and dad – it was so bad – for putting me on this earth. If I had it all to do over again, I wouldn't be born." (From *The Innocents* (Umbrage, 2003))

The Innocent Man is a must-read. The style is as satisfying as good fiction: characters we relate to and root for, characters we hate, suspense, a huge injustice, and a victory, albeit somewhat hollow in the end, all combine to make this book one of the most important books of the year. Grisham himself admits that, even as a lawyer, he didn't know much about the world of wrongful conviction before he began to research *The Innocent Man*. We all have much to learn from this heartbreaking and infuriating story.

The Innocent Man is being released in paperback in the U.S. in November 2007. *Justice:Denied's* Bookshop sells the hardcover for \$20 plus \$5 s/h. Send a check or money order to: Justice Denied, PO Box 68911, Seattle, WA 98168. Or order with a credit card from *Justice:Denied's* website at, www.justicedenied.org/books.html



Dennis Fritz
(Dec. 2006)

***The Innocent Man* Was Bestseller**

With sales of 618,000 copies, *The Innocent Man* was the #2 bestselling Adult Non-Fiction Hardcover book in 2006. Source: Nielsen BookScan.

With \$21 million in royalties from his books, John Grisham was the fifth highest paid author in 2006. Source: Delin/Corbis Outline

Non-fiction Books Related To Wrongful Convictions Published In 2006

Title	Sub-title	Author	Publisher	Summary	Country	Cover	Pgs
An Expendable Man	The Near-Execution of Earl Washington, Jr.	Margaret Edds	New York University Press	About the wrongful conviction of Earl Washington Jr. for the rape and murder of a woman that was based on his alleged false confession. Sentenced to death, at one point Washington came within nine days of being executed before his exoneration by DNA evidence in 2001.	US	soft	288
Arthur & George		Julian Barnes	Vintage	Fact based novel of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's role in the 1903 exoneration of George Edalji's conviction of mutilating livestock. Doyle authored the <i>Tarzan</i> and <i>Sherlock Holmes</i> books.	US	soft	464
Darkest Before Dawn	Sedition and Free Speech in the American West	Clemens P. Work	University of New Mexico	About the wrongful conviction of 78 people for violating Montana's 1918 Sedition Act, the mood of the times that caused their prosecutions, the pardons granted them by Governor Schweitzer in 2006.	US	soft	328
Enemy Combatant	My Imprisonment at Guantanamo, Bagram, and Kandahar	Moazzam Begg and Victoria Brittain	New Press	Moazzam Begg tells of his secret abduction by U.S. forces in Pakistan, his detainment at U.S. air bases for more than a year and at Guantánamo Bay for two more years as an enemy combatant. Begg was released from Guantánamo in 2004 under pressure from the British government.	US	hard	352
Innocent	Inside Wrongful Conviction Cases	Scott Christianson	New York University Press	Analyzes 42 New York state cases for the factors that contributed to the occurrence of a wrongful conviction.	US	soft	208
Journey Toward Justice		Dennis Fritz	Seven Stories Press	About the wrongful conviction of Dennis Fritz and Ron Williamson for an Ada, Oklahoma rape/murder. See also, <i>The Innocent Man</i> .	US	hard	482
Losing Their Grip	The Case of Henry Keogh	Robert N. Moles	Elvis Press (Australia)	About the 1995 conviction of Henry Keogh for allegedly murdering his fiance two weeks before their scheduled marriage.	AUS	soft	285
My Story		Schappelle Corby with Kathryn Bonella	Pan Macmillan (Australia)	First-person account of Schappelle Corby's conviction and imprisonment in Indonesia for drug trafficking based on marijuana found in her boogie bag at the Bali airport when she arrived for a family vacation.	AUS	soft	320
Shattered Dreams	A Savage Murder and the Death of Three Families' Innocence	John Philpin	Avon	Story of how Stephanie Crow's older brother and his two teenage friends were pressured by the police into falsely confessing to her brutal murder in their Escondido, California home.	US	soft	240
Sweet Freedom	Breaking the Bondage of Maurice Carter	Doug Tjapkes	Faithwalk Publishing	Story of how Doug Tjapkes aided Maurice Carter's release in 2004 after 28 years of wrongful imprisonment for murder.	US	soft	240
The Dreams of Ada		Robert Mayer	Broadway Books	About the wrongful convictions of Tommy Ward and Karl Fontenot for the April 1984 murder of a young woman in Ada, Oklahoma. The circumstances of their convictions were similar to those of Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz for murder in Ada several months before.	US	soft - reprint	494
The Innocent Man	Murder and Injustice in a Small Town	John Grisham	Doubleday	True life account of Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz's wrongful convictions for the 1982 rape and murder of a young woman in Ada, Oklahoma. Williamson was sentenced to death and Fritz to life in prison. Both men were exonerated by DNA and released in 1999.	US	hard	368
Triumph Over Tragedy		Trina Rea	Gill & Macmillan	Story of Eilish Enright, who was wrongly convicted of sexually abusing one of her daughters and sentenced to six years in prison.	GBR	soft	256

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