The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town

By John Grisham


Review By Natalie Smith Parra

On 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 she saw him 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 Kiesweister 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 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.

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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. Because 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 too 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.