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Book review: *The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town*

~ Aarya Dubey¹

INTRODUCTION

The *Innocent Man* is a true crime biography written by one of the leading American novelists and well-renowned lawyers, John Grisham; narrating a true tale about murder and injustice in the small town of Ada, Oklahoma, and unveiling the violence, discrimination, and oppression experienced by innocent people in democratic countries like America.

Ronald Keith Williamson, an Oklahoma boy with the only dream of becoming a baseball player, falls prey to the demons of alcohol, drugs, and mental sickness, which wreak havoc in his married life and destroy his local reputation and respect. When, on December 7, 1982, a girl named Debbie Carter, bartender at Coachlight, is found raped and murdered in her own apartment, the investigation is conducted, the evidence obtained, and the witnesses examined just as it happens in any criminal proceeding. However, even after an extensive investigation over a long period of 5 years, the police are unable to find the culprit, and unsurprisingly, they consider Williamson their person of interest for the mere reason that he is an erratic, unpredictable man in the eyes of society. Ron, who has never grown up and finds no courage in his veins to face the truth that his only ambition of becoming a baseball player will never be realized, is finally imprisoned as a murderer in Pontotoc County.

One of the paradoxes of the law is that while attorneys and judges failed Williamson, others in the very same profession rescued him only five days before he was set to be executed from the administration of his death sentence. *The Innocent Man* thus depicts a severely defective criminal justice system in dire need of a revamp. While no aspect of the system depicted in the book is spared, the police stand out as exceptionally terrible, with the prosecution a close second.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town is a non-fiction book authored by a prolific American author and former attorney, John Grisham, centered around the true story of Ronald Keith Williamson, a former minor league baseball player, and Dennis Fritz, who were both falsely convicted of a horrible murder in 1982 in Ada, Oklahoma. The book was published in English by Doubleday, an imprint of Penguin Random House, on October 10, 2006. The title, succinct and apt as it is, successfully summarizes the book's narrative, making it a fitting and attention-grabbing portrayal of the true crime story it tells.

Grisham, through the case of Williamson and Fritz, examines the legal system's flaws and inequities, highlighting issues such as untrustworthy eyewitness testimony, coerced confessions, poor legal representation, unreliable forensic evidence, and misconduct by law enforcement and prosecutors. He also explains how the investigation and prosecution of the defendants shook the quiet town of Ada, Oklahoma. The early trust of the public in the police and legal authorities was undermined when questions concerning the investigation's authenticity were raised. The handling of this case revealed the flaws and probable biases in the criminal justice system, creating disagreements and divisions in the town, with some residents hailing the system while others expressed their sharp criticism.

In the book, Grisham not only narrates the story of Williamson and Fritz's struggle but also explores the bigger issues inside the American criminal justice system, making it a forceful condemnation of the flaws and shortcomings that can lead to the conviction of innocent people.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Through his moving legal non-fiction, The Innocent Man, Grisham, in his above-the-rest style, has attempted to nudge at the American criminal justice system. It is not a book in which the author criticizes something; rather, it is a critique of the American legal system, which sheds light on its flaws and injustices that lead to tragic outcomes for innocent individuals.

On the doomed day of December 1982, the corpse of Debbie Carter, a bartender in the Coachlight of the small town of Ada, Oklahoma, was found in her own apartment. Just as it usually happens in a murder case, the investigation was conducted, the evidence was gathered, and the witnesses

were interviewed and asked to produce a sample of bodily fluids (as it was alleged that the victim was raped). Unfortunately, even after five years of extensive investigation, the police, unable to get hold of the usual suspects, dragged a man named Ronald Keith Williamson, 'Ron,' another Oklahoman, into the case, considering him the prime suspect.

Ron Williamson, as portrayed in the novel, was a charming man with an amiable character noted for his pleasant and happy-go-lucky personality. He was well-liked in the community and had friends who always backed him up. As a former minor league baseball player, he had dreams of making it big in the major leagues. His unique and distinctive ability, passion, and dedication as a baseball player got him a deal with the Oakland Athletics. However, his professional baseball career did not go as well as he had intended, and he battled with a variety of personal and emotional issues, which were further aggravated by alcohol and drug abuse. This resulted in run-ins with the law, including minor arrests. However, Williamson's arrest (and later conviction) in Debbie Carter's murder case was heavily based on mere suspicions, forced confessions, questionable witness testimonies, and flawed forensic analysis.

The police assumed he was inebriated the night Debbie was raped and murdered and stayed in her flat. Sadly, what should have been just a rough estimate became a police obsession to establish Ron as the suspect at the earliest. As if the injustice meted out to Williamson was not enough, Dennis Fritz, another Oklahoma man, was also wrongfully charged as a co-defendant in the same case, which he had no bearing on. Fritz, who was a well-known member of the community, recognized for being a kind father and neighbor, had no previous criminal record and was not involved in any criminal activities, was dragged into the case as he was a friend of Williamson who often shared drinks with him, and the police strongly suspected his link to the crime in some way.

The true administration of justice is the firmest pillar of good government.² However, it is sad that the investigation and trial of Ron and Dennis were marred by flaws, misconduct, and insufficient legal representation. While American law renders the confessions made by the accused under any sort of threat, violence, or improper influence³ invalid, the accused in this case were subjected to

² George Washington Papers, Series 2, Letterbooks 1754-1799, available at: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mgw2.022/?sp=177&st=text> (last visited on August 12, 2023).

³Miranda and Involuntary Confessions, available at: <https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/miranda-involuntary-confessions.html> (last visited on August 12, 2023).

coercive questioning techniques, causing them to make false admissions that contradicted the facts and details of the crime. Despite the contradictions and suspicious circumstances surrounding them, the jury was presented with these confessions as solid evidence of guilt. The initial investigation was plagued by evidence mismanagement and a lack of competent forensic analysis, as fingerprints and hair discovered at the crime site were not thoroughly investigated or properly kept. The defense also did not bother to call any expert witnesses to refute the forensic findings or call the admissions into doubt, due to which the prosecution's narrative went largely uncontested.

Although the innocents were portrayed as criminals, they maintained their innocence throughout the investigation and trial, claiming they had nothing to do with the murder. However, despite their authentic claims and repeated pleas, justice was not served to them, and they were convicted and sentenced to life incarceration in 1988.

Years later, when public awareness of Williamson and Fritz's dubious convictions grew, additional investigations were started. New evidence and advances in DNA technology began to call their guilt into question, and eventually, it was established that some other person, Glen Gore, was the genuine culprit of the crime. After serving eleven difficult years behind bars for the murder they did not commit, Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz were finally exonerated and released in 1999.

Imprisonment is a torment for all the convicts, but for someone with a mental condition like Ron, it means that the penalty can progressively take away his or her life. Ron's physical and mental health suffered greatly as a result of his years on death row. He struggled to acclimate to life outside prison and suffered continuous difficulties. He eventually died on December 4, 2004, just a few years after his release, at the age of 51. Dennis, like Ron, struggled to reintegrate into society and rebuild his life after being wrongfully imprisoned. The discovery of his innocence was a bittersweet victory for him, as he had lost nearly a decade of his life due to an erroneous conviction.

This case of Debbie Carter's murder thus not only exposed faults in the criminal justice system, such as the dangers of relying on untrustworthy evidence and pressured confessions but also served as a warning about the complexities and pitfalls of the system.

REVIEW OF THE BOOK

After reading this book, I understand what is meant by “a pen is mightier than a sword”. John Grisham, through the tale of two gripping and tragic convictions in Ada, Oklahoma, during the 1980s and 1990s, explored the flaws in the criminal justice system. The book serves as a critique of the American legal system as it discusses the consequences of such a travesty of justice on the lives of the accused, their families, and the community in general. It will make the readers question the functioning of the present judicial system from almost all sides of the prism when read with neutrality and without any prejudice.

Grisham, known for his writing skills, meticulously examines the specifics of the case, demonstrating how the two innocent men, Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz, who had nothing to do with the murder, became entangled in a nightmare of fake evidence, untrustworthy testimonies, and inept police work. His ability to put into words the emotional toll that years of wrongful incarceration imposed on these men, as well as the legal battles they had to fight in order to cleanse their reputations, adds emotion and complexity to the subject, transforming it from a real crime account to a story about human resilience and weaknesses in the justice system.

The book is divided into 36 chapters, where each chapter delves into a different aspect of the murder case, the people involved, and the events leading up to the unjust convictions. It delves into the specifics of the case as well as the problems in the criminal justice system that resulted in the miscarriage of justice, thus making the figure of 36 absolutely justified. While some may criticize Grisham's writing style and personal viewpoints, this book is a sheer endeavor to offer a fairly politically neutral picture of the American criminal justice system and serves as a vital reminder of the need for reform within the judicial system to avert future tragedies like those depicted in its pages.

CONCLUSION

The Innocent Man sheds a harrowing light on the inadequacies of the criminal justice system, emphasizing the serious consequences false convictions can have on the lives of individuals. Through the lens of the real-life stories of Williamson and Fritz, the book emphasizes the necessity

of protecting everyone's rights by guaranteeing fair trials, unbiased investigations, and accurate evidence. The disturbing depiction of lives ruined by a dysfunctional system compels us to advocate for reforms to prevent similar miscarriages of justice. As we finish this chapter, it serves as a somber reminder that the quest for truth must always be balanced with an unshakable dedication to justice.

