

BOOK REVIEW

LAWYER-BASHING FOR FUN AND PROFIT: THE COLLECTED WORKS OF JOHN GRISHAM

The Client, JOHN GRISHAM, Doubleday, New York (1993)
(422 pages).

The Pelican Brief, JOHN GRISHAM, Doubleday, New York (1992)
(371 pages).

The Firm, JOHN GRISHAM, Doubleday, New York (1991)
(421 pages).

A Time to Kill, JOHN GRISHAM, Doubleday, New York (1989)
(486 pages).

*Reviewed by The Honorable Donald G. Collester, Jr.**

Recall the fictional lawyer heroes of old. Country lawyer Atticus Finch stood up for decency and did his job without fanfare in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Criminal Lawyer Paul Biegler upheld principles of good lawyering in Michigan's Upper Peninsula as the hero of Robert Traver's *Anatomy of a Murder*. Louis Auchincloss's Wall Street solicitors opted for conscience over connivance. These are outdated models now. The new legal protagonist is an anti-hero whose ethics are neutral at best and whose principles are directed to preserving the principal in his secret bank account.

While fiction writers have bashed lawyers since quill first marked paper, the new round of anti-lawyer legal thrillers has reached a peak of popularity as the public image of the legal profession seeks nadir. The biggest success has been garnered by a Mississippi lawyer whose law school diploma hangs next to his wall picture of William Faulkner.

John Grisham began fiction writing three years into a law practice devoted largely to criminal defense work and while serving in the Mississippi House of Representatives. In 1989, *A Time to Kill*, his first novel, was published and largely ignored. Not so his next book, *The Firm*. Published two years later, it became a number one

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best seller as well as a subsequent top grossing film. Two best sellers later, Mr. Grisham has more than 30 million of his books in print. He lives just outside Oxford, Mississippi near the home of William Faulkner, but the resemblance ends with the residence. Mr. Grisham's plots are essentially the same, his characters are stock, and his crises are predictable. His prose at times is hackneyed. He never met an adjective he did not like, and one will not do if he can use two. His storylines are entertaining, however, and the pace of his narratives flows easily as if written for screenplay adaptation. What Mr. Grisham does best is lawyer-bashing, using a formula whereby a crafty innocent can defeat evil-doers by using their own weapons against them. Mr. Grisham has obviously struck a lucrative public nerve.

The Firm is a fairy tale in which the legal profession is symbolized by a corrupt Memphis law firm functioning as the designated ogre. Brilliant Harvard law graduate Mitch McDeere disclaims any noble pursuit in the legal profession to sign on with "the Firm" in the pursuit of big bucks. Mitch is perfectly willing to overlook ethics and even compromise his marriage to accumulate incredible billable hours pursuing tax loopholes for greedy clients in his rush to accumulate for himself the biggest house and the plushest BMW. This dreary drive toward avarice is interrupted when Mitch discovers that "the Firm" is actually "the Mob" and the FBI puts pressure on him to do something noble. Because the government cannot be trusted (too many lawyers), Mitch must find another way out. He does so by ripping off everyone and sailing off into a Caribbean sunset with his wife and a few million in untraceable funds on board.

Having hit pay dirt, Mr. Grisham follows the same formula in *The Pelican Brief*. Once again the protagonist is a legal neophyte not as yet totally corrupted by the legal profession. Darby Shaw is a brilliant and beautiful Tulane law student who is sleeping with one of her professors, a fact which seems to cause neither her nor Mr. Grisham any ethical qualm. When two Supreme Court Justices are murdered, clever Darby sits at her computer and prepares a legal brief that reveals a conspiracy which no one else in the country could uncover. After her discovery and the subsequent violent death of her professor/lover, Darby is confronted with evil conspirators as well as the slow-witted and slow-footed FBI. The neophyte outwits environmental conspirators, White House political operatives, and other baddies with the assistance of a handsome investigative reporter. Having shaken down the villains and the

government for millions, Darby disappears to an unnamed Caribbean island, no doubt in the same area where Mitch McDeere is sailing his yacht.

The Grisham formula continues in *The Client* with a slight variation. This time the innocent protagonist is a street-wise eleven year old boy who witnesses a corrupt lawyer commit suicide after revealing where his Mafia client had buried a United States Senator. The child finds his way to an anti-establishment lawyer, Reggie Love, who entered the profession after having been victimized by the law in her own divorce case. Reggie's nobility is established by the fact that she practices alone and represents children without pay. Once again it is the clever outsiders against the evil Mafia and the corrupt government. Because these antagonists can never do anything right, the innocents triumph. Not surprisingly, lots of money is paid to the child and his family, who are relocated under the Federal Witness Protection Program to yet another undisclosed location, a conclusion sensed by the reader at about page six.

Neither judges nor lawyers fare well in "Grishamland." All the attorneys in *The Firm* are money-grubbing and venal. The United States Attorney in *The Client* is a vain, ambitious fool who would sacrifice the life of a child for a sound bite on the six o'clock evening news. The Supreme Court Justices assassinated in *The Pelican Brief* are hypocritical and morally despicable. Whether by greed, ambition, false pride or some other moral flaw, all members of the legal establishment are tainted. The only lawyers Mr. Grisham admires are outsiders like Reggie Love and "street lawyers" like Jake Brigance, an admittedly autobiographical character in his first book, *A Time to Kill*.

After a ten year old girl is viciously raped and her black father takes vengeance, young Mississippi lawyer Brigance gets the high-profile case and is ultimately victorious. But even the hero lawyer slides into ethical ooze. Jake openly panders to the press and resorts to devious tricks to keep the case, as well as courtroom chicanery to win it. Perhaps because Mr. Grisham did not have his formula down pat as yet, Jake Brigance is his most interesting character. He does not sail off into the sunset with a cache of cash, and he seems to sense that his ethical compass is askew. Unfortunately, Grisham only notes these ethical and character ambiguities as his fastmoving narrative steams on to its predictable conclusion. Formalities such as conflict of interest, client confidentiality, judge-baiting, and questionable ethics are left to the side. All is right to Jake, the Machiavellian "street lawyer," as long as the result is right.

In Mr. Grisham's dichotomous world of fiction, good can triumph over evil when innocent outsiders outwit the legal establishment and are rewarded with a pot of gold. It is a long way from Atticus Finch.

A recent news release indicates that the film rights to Mr. Grisham's new book have been sold for millions of dollars even though he has not written the first word. One suspects that the story will end with a neophyte lawyer out-foxing the legal establishment, the Mob, and the FBI to sail off into the sunset to a rapidly growing Caribbean island with a big bag of U.S. currency on board.