

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

JOHN GRISHAM



A TIME TO KILL

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JOHN
GRISHAM

A TIME
TO KILL



A DELL BOOK
NEW YORK

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TO RENÉE

*A woman of uncommon beauty,
A fiercely loyal friend,
A compassionate critic,
A doting mother,*

A perfect wife

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When *A Time to Kill* was first published in June of 1989, I was brimming with the typical enthusiasm of a rookie novelist whose dreams were not even remotely connected to reality. The warning signs of failure were everywhere—unknown writer, unknown publisher, a phantom budget for promotion, and subject matter that appealed to few and ran the risk of alienating many. But I was wonderfully oblivious to all that. Five thousand hardback copies were printed and we couldn't give them away. The book, originally, never made it to the paperback stage. The grand ideas of foreign translations and movie rights and so on were dashed within two months of publication.

My plan at the time, if any struggling writer can realistically claim to have a plan, was to try again with another type of book—the legal thriller. Hopefully, such a book would find a wider market, thus allowing me to return to Ford County, my own little fictional world where there were, and still are, so many stories to be told. Fortunately, *The Firm* found an audience, and I was suddenly free to write whatever I wanted.

However, the popularity of *The Firm* created a desire to succeed at this new career, to strike again while things were hot, to get on top, and to stay there. Such opportunities are rare, and I found myself staring at one head-on, with enough sense to know what I was looking at. I realized that it would be foolish not to stick with legal thrillers for a while. I was going to write again, and quickly, so why not aim for the top of the bestseller lists? *A Time to Kill* sold less than five thousand copies. *The Firm* sold a few million. Who couldn't understand this math?

And so the legal thrillers came, one after the other, and then the movies based on the legal thrillers, and a good life became even better. Along the way, my neglected and almost forgotten first novel got itself noticed, and reprinted and marketed properly, and before long it was indeed being read in more

languages than I could ever name. A fine movie was made from the story, and it is still being recycled on television even today. At least ninety percent of those readers who get close enough to offer an opinion say something like, “I enjoy all your books, but my favorite is *A Time to Kill*.” It’s mine too.

Through the years—and I hate to use those words because they sound too much like an old man looking back—I have wanted to return to Ford County, to Clanton, to the colorful lives of a people still dealing with a complicated past. I have visited it occasionally, in *The Chamber* and *The Summons*, and almost all of *The Last Juror* took place there, but I have yet to move back permanently and write the thick, layered, meandering stories that I carry around with me.

And I firmly intend to, one day. Maybe next year.

For now, though, the legal thrillers keep getting in the way. I still enjoy the challenge of piecing together a complex plot and constructing it in such a manner that readers will find themselves compelled to turn the pages as rapidly as possible. I am still fascinated by the law, by those who practice it, those who abuse and manipulate it, those who strive to protect it, those who study and teach it, those who are chosen to interpret it, and especially by those ordinary people who are forced to deal with it, for better or for worse. When you watch these folks as closely as I do, the material seems endless. In short, the legal thrillers are still fulfilling and quite popular. I have no plans to abandon the genre.

Meanwhile, I continue to think about Jake Brigance, and Harry Rex Vonner, and Judge Noose, and I often wonder where Carl Lee is and what happened to his daughter, Tonya. Could these characters possibly produce enough drama for another book? I’m not sure, but their neighbors and ancestors certainly can. I’ve had dozens of ideas for Ford County novels, almost all of which peter out for one reason or another, but when one fades away, two more pop up and hold my attention for a year or so.

The good stories stick, but they’re not always long enough to become novels. To give them life, and to make sure I don’t eventually forget them, I have collected seven of my favorites, seven longer short stories, and Doubleday has agreed to publish

them in the fall of this year.

The collection is titled simply *Ford County Stories*. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I did writing them.

Thank you, dear readers, for your loyalty.

John Grisham
Oxford, Mississippi
April 1, 2009

1

Billy Ray Cobb was the younger and smaller of the two rednecks. At twenty-three he was already a three-year veteran of the state penitentiary at Parchman. Possession, with intent to sell. He was a lean, tough little punk who had survived prison by somehow maintaining a ready supply of drugs that he sold and sometimes gave to the blacks and the guards for protection. In the year since his release he had continued to prosper, and his small-time narcotics business had elevated him to the position of one of the more affluent rednecks in Ford County. He was a businessman, with employees, obligations, deals, everything but taxes. Down at the Ford place in Clanton he was known as the last man in recent history to pay cash for a new pickup truck. Sixteen thousand cash, for a custom-built, four-wheel drive, canary yellow, luxury Ford pickup. The fancy chrome wheels and mudgrip racing tires had been received in a business deal. The rebel flag hanging across the rear window had been stolen by Cobb from a drunken fraternity boy at an Ole Miss football game. The pickup was Billy Ray's most prized possession. He sat on the tailgate drinking a beer, smoking a joint, watching his friend Willard take his turn with the black girl.

Willard was four years older and a dozen years slower. He was generally a harmless sort who had never been in serious trouble and had never been seriously employed. Maybe an occasional fight with a night in jail, but nothing that would distinguish him. He called himself a pulpwood cutter, but a bad back customarily kept him out of the woods. He had hurt his back working on an offshore rig somewhere in the Gulf, and the oil company paid him a nice settlement, which he lost when his ex-wife cleaned him out. His primary vocation was that of a part-time employee of Billy Ray Cobb, who didn't pay much but was liberal with his dope. For the first time in years Willard could always get his hands on something. And he always needed something. He'd been that way

since he hurt his back.

She was ten, and small for her age. She lay on her elbows, which were stuck and bound together with yellow nylon rope. Her legs were spread grotesquely with the right foot tied tight to an oak sapling and the left to a rotting, leaning post of a long-neglected fence. The ski rope had cut into her ankles and the blood ran down her legs. Her face was bloody and swollen, with one eye bulging and closed and the other eye half open so she could see the other white man sitting on the truck. She did not look at the man on top of her. He was breathing hard and sweating and cursing. He was hurting her.

When he finished, he slapped her and laughed, and the other man laughed in return, then they laughed harder and rolled around the grass by the truck like two crazy men, screaming and laughing. She turned away from them and cried softly, careful to keep herself quiet. She had been slapped earlier for crying and screaming. They promised to kill her if she didn't keep quiet.

They grew tired of laughing and pulled themselves onto the tailgate, where Willard cleaned himself with the little nigger's shirt, which by now was soaked with blood and sweat. Cobb handed him a cold beer from the cooler and commented on the humidity. They watched her as she sobbed and made strange, quiet sounds, then became still. Cobb's beer was half empty, and it was not cold anymore. He threw it at the girl. It hit her in the stomach, splashing white foam, and it rolled off in the dirt near some other cans, all of which had originated from the same cooler. For two six-packs now they had thrown their half-empty cans at her and laughed. Willard had trouble with the target, but Cobb was fairly accurate. They were not ones to waste beer, but the heavier cans could be felt better and it was great fun to watch the foam shoot everywhere.

The warm beer mixed with the dark blood and ran down her face and neck into a puddle behind her head. She did not move.

Willard asked Cobb if he thought she was dead. Cobb opened another beer and explained that she was not dead because niggers generally could not be killed by kicking and beating and raping. It took much more, something like a knife or a gun or a rope to dispose of a nigger. Although he had never taken part in such a

killing, he had lived with a bunch of niggers in prison and knew all about them. They were always killing each other, and they always used a weapon of some sort. Those who were just beaten and raped never died. Some of the whites were beaten and raped, and some of them died. But none of the niggers. Their heads were harder. Willard seemed satisfied.

Willard asked what he planned to do now that they were through with her. Cobb sucked on his joint, chased it with beer, and said he wasn't through. He bounced from the tailgate and staggered across the small clearing to where she was tied. He cursed her and screamed at her to wake up, then he poured cold beer in her face, laughing like a crazy man.

She watched him as he walked around the tree on her right side, and she stared at him as he stared between her legs. When he lowered his pants she turned to the left and closed her eyes. He was hurting her again.

She looked out through the woods and saw something—a man running wildly through the vines and underbrush. It was her daddy, yelling and pointing at her and coming desperately to save her. She cried out for him, and he disappeared. She fell asleep.

When she awoke one of the men was lying under the tailgate, the other under a tree. They were asleep. Her arms and legs were numb. The blood and beer and urine had mixed with the dirt underneath her to form a sticky paste that glued her small body to the ground and crackled when she moved and wiggled. Escape, she thought, but her mightiest efforts moved her only a few inches to the right. Her feet were tied so high her buttocks barely touched the ground. Her legs and arms were so deadened they refused to move.

She searched the woods for her daddy and quietly called his name. She waited, then slept again.

When she awoke the second time they were up and moving around. The tall one staggered to her with a small knife. He grabbed her left ankle and sawed furiously on the rope until it gave

way. Then he freed the right leg, and she curled into a fetal position with her back to them.

Cobb strung a length of quarter-inch ski rope over a limb and tied a loop in one end with a slip knot. He grabbed her and put the noose around her head, then walked across the clearing with the other end of the rope and sat on the tailgate, where Willard was smoking a fresh joint and grinning at Cobb for what he was about to do. Cobb pulled the rope tight, then gave a vicious yank, bouncing the little nude body along the ground and stopping it directly under the limb. She gagged and coughed, so he kindly loosened the rope to spare her a few more minutes. He tied the rope to the bumper and opened another beer.

They sat on the tailgate drinking, smoking, and staring at her. They had been at the lake most of the day, where Cobb had a friend with a boat and some extra girls who were supposed to be easy but turned out to be untouchable. Cobb had been generous with his drugs and beer, but the girls did not reciprocate. Frustrated, they left the lake and were driving to no place in particular when they happened across the girl. She was walking along a gravel road with a sack of groceries when Willard nailed her in the back of the head with a beer can.

“You gonna do it?” asked Willard, his eyes red and glazed.

Cobb hesitated. “Naw, I’ll let you do it. It was your idea.”

Willard took a drag on his joint, then spit and said, “Wasn’t my idea. You’re the expert on killin’ niggers. Do it.”

Cobb untied the rope from the bumper and pulled it tight. It peeled bark from the limb and sprinkled fine bits of elm around the girl, who was watching them carefully now. She coughed.

Suddenly, she heard something—like a car with loud pipes. The two men turned quickly and looked down the dirt road to the highway in the distance. They cursed and scrambled around, one slamming the tailgate and the other running toward her. He tripped and landed near her. They cursed each other while they grabbed her, removed the rope from her neck, dragged her to the pickup and threw her over the tailgate into the bed of the truck. Cobb slapped her and threatened to kill her if she did not lie still and keep quiet. He said he would take her home if she stayed down and did as told; otherwise, they would kill her. They slammed the

doors and sped onto the dirt road. She was going home. She passed out.

Cobb and Willard waved at the Firebird with the loud pipes as it passed them on the narrow dirt road. Willard checked the back to make sure the little nigger was lying down. Cobb turned onto the highway and raced away.

“What now?” Willard asked nervously.

“Don’t know,” Cobb answered nervously. “But we gotta do something fast before she gets blood all over my truck. Look at her back there, she’s bleedin’ all over the place.”

Willard thought for a minute while he finished a beer. “Let’s throw her off a bridge,” he said proudly.

“Good idea. Damned good idea.” Cobb slammed on the brakes. “Gimme a beer,” he ordered Willard, who stumbled out of the truck and fetched two beers from the back.

“She’s even got blood on the cooler,” he reported as they raced off again.

Gwen Hailey sensed something horrible. Normally she would have sent one of the three boys to the store, but they were being punished by their father and had been sentenced to weed-pulling in the garden. Tonya had been to the store before by herself—it was only a mile away—and had proven reliable. But after two hours Gwen sent the boys to look for their little sister. They figured she was down at the Pounders’ house playing with the many Pounders kids, or maybe she had ventured past the store to visit her best friend, Bessie Pierson.

Mr. Bates at the store said she had come and gone an hour earlier. Jarvis, the middle boy, found a sack of groceries beside the road.

Gwen called her husband at the paper mill, then loaded Carl Lee, Jr., into the car and began driving the gravel roads around the store. They drove to a settlement of ancient shotgun houses on Graham Plantation to check with an aunt. They stopped at Broadway’s store a mile from Bates Grocery and were told by a

group of old black men that she had not been seen. They crisscrossed the gravel roads and dusty field roads for three square miles around their house.

Cobb could not find a bridge unoccupied by niggers with fishing poles. Every bridge they approached had four or five niggers hanging off the sides with large straw hats and cane poles, and under every bridge on the banks there would be another group sitting on buckets with the same straw hats and cane poles, motionless except for an occasional swat at a fly or a slap at a mosquito.

He was scared now. Willard had passed out and was of no help, and he was left alone to dispose of the girl in such a way that she could never tell. Willard snored as he frantically drove the gravel roads and county roads in search of a bridge or ramp on some river where he could stop and toss her without being seen by half a dozen niggers with straw hats. He looked in the mirror and saw her trying to stand. He slammed his brakes, and she crashed into the front of the bed, just under the window. Willard ricocheted off the dash into the floorboard, where he continued to snore. Cobb cursed them both equally.

Lake Chatulla was nothing more than a huge, shallow, man-made mudhole with a grass-covered dam running exactly one mile along one end. It sat in the far southwest corner of Ford County, with a few acres in Van Buren County. In the spring it would hold the distinction of being the largest body of water in Mississippi. But by late summer the rains were long gone, and the sun would cook the shallow water until the lake would dehydrate. Its once ambitious shorelines would retreat and move much closer together, creating a depthless basin of reddish brown water. It was fed from all directions by innumerable streams, creeks, sloughs, and a couple of currents large enough to be named rivers. The existence of all these tributaries necessarily gave rise to a good number of bridges near the lake.

It was over these bridges the yellow pickup flew in an all-out

effort to find a suitable place to unload an unwanted passenger. Cobb was desperate. He knew of one other bridge, a narrow wooden one over Foggy Creek. As he approached, he saw niggers with cane poles, so he turned off a side road and stopped the truck. He lowered the tailgate, dragged her out, and threw her in a small ravine lined with kudzu.

Carl Lee Hailey did not hurry home. Gwen was easily excited, and she had called the mill numerous times when she thought the children had been kidnapped. He punched out at quitting time, and made the thirty-minute drive home in thirty minutes. Anxiety hit him when he turned onto his gravel drive and saw the patrol car parked next to the front porch. Other cars belonging to Gwen's family were scattered along the long drive and in the yard, and there was one car he didn't recognize. It had cane poles sticking out the side windows, and there were at least seven straw hats sitting in it.

Where were Tonya and the boys?

As he opened the front door he heard Gwen crying. To his right in the small living room he found a crowd huddled above a small figure lying on the couch. The child was covered with wet towels and surrounded by crying relatives. As he moved to the couch the crying stopped and the crowd backed away. Only Gwen stayed by the girl. She softly stroked her hair. He knelt beside the couch and touched the girl's shoulder. He spoke to his daughter, and she tried to smile. Her face was bloody pulp covered with knots and lacerations. Both eyes were swollen shut and bleeding. His eyes watered as he looked at her tiny body, completely wrapped in towels and bleeding from ankles to forehead.

Carl Lee asked Gwen what happened. She began shaking and wailing, and was led to the kitchen by her brother. Carl Lee stood and turned to the crowd and demanded to know what happened.

Silence.

He asked for the third time. The deputy, Willie Hastings, one of Gwen's cousins, stepped forward and told Carl Lee that some

people were fishing down by Foggy Creek when they saw Tonya lying in the middle of the road. She told them her daddy's name, and they brought her home.

Hastings shut up and stared at his feet.

Carl Lee stared at him and waited. Everyone else stopped breathing and watched the floor.

"What happened, Willie?" Carl Lee yelled as he stared at the deputy.

Hastings spoke slowly, and while staring out the window repeated what Tonya had told her mother about the white men and their pickup, and the rope and the trees, and being hurt when they got on her. Hastings stopped when he heard the siren from the ambulance.

The crowd filed solemnly through the front door and waited on the porch, where they watched the crew unload a stretcher and head for the house.

The paramedics stopped in the yard when the front door opened and Carl Lee walked out with his daughter in his arms. He whispered gently to her as huge tears dripped from his chin. He walked to the rear of the ambulance and stepped inside. The paramedics closed the door and carefully removed her from his embrace.

2

Ozzie Walls was the only black sheriff in Mississippi. There had been a few others in recent history, but for the moment he was the only one. He took great pride in that fact, since Ford County was seventy-four percent white and the other black sheriffs had been from much blacker counties. Not since Reconstruction had a black sheriff been elected in a white county in Mississippi.

He was raised in Ford County, and he was kin to most of the blacks and a few of the whites. After desegregation in the late sixties, he was a member of the first mixed graduating class at Clanton High School. He wanted to play football nearby at Ole Miss, but there were already two blacks on the team. He starred instead at Alcorn State, and was a defensive tackle for the Rams when a knee injury sent him back to Clanton. He missed football, but enjoyed being the high sheriff, especially at election time when he received more white votes than his white opponents. The white kids loved him because he was a hero, a football star who had played on TV and had his picture in magazines. Their parents respected him and voted for him because he was a tough cop who did not discriminate between black punks and white punks. The white politicians supported him because, since he became the sheriff, the Justice Department stayed out of Ford County. The blacks adored him because he was Ozzie, one of their own.

He skipped supper and waited in his office at the jail for Hastings to report from the Hailey house. He had a suspect. Billy Ray Cobb was no stranger to the sheriff's office. Ozzie knew he sold drugs—he just couldn't catch him. He also knew Cobb had a mean streak.

The dispatcher called in the deputies, and as they reported to the jail Ozzie gave them instructions to locate, but not arrest, Billy Ray Cobb. There were twelve deputies in all—nine white and three black. They fanned out across the county in search of a fancy

yellow Ford pickup with a rebel flag in the rear window.

When Hastings arrived he and the sheriff left for the Ford County hospital. As usual, Hastings drove and Ozzie gave orders on the radio. In the waiting room on the second floor they found the Hailey clan. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, and strangers crowded into the small room and some waited in the narrow hallway. There were whispers and quiet tears. Tonya was in surgery.

Carl Lee sat on a cheap plastic couch in a dark corner with Gwen next to him and the boys next to her. He stared at the floor and did not notice the crowd. Gwen laid her head on his shoulder and cried softly. The boys sat rigidly with their hands on knees, occasionally glancing at their father as if waiting on words of reassurance.

Ozzie worked his way through the crowd, quietly shaking hands and patting backs and whispering that he would catch them. He knelt before Carl Lee and Gwen. "How is she?" he asked. Carl Lee did not see him. Gwen cried louder and the boys sniffed and wiped tears. He patted Gwen on the knee and stood. One of her brothers led Ozzie and Hastings out of the room into the hall, away from the family. He shook Ozzie's hand and thanked him for coming.

"How is she?" Ozzie asked.

"Not too good. She's in surgery and most likely will be there for a while. She's got broken bones and a bad concussion. She's beat up real bad. There's rope burns on her neck like they tried to hang her."

"Was she raped?" he asked, certain of the answer.

"Yeah. She told her momma they took turns on her and hurt her real bad. Doctors confirmed it."

"How's Carl Lee and Gwen?"

"They're tore up pretty bad. I think they're in shock. Carl Lee ain't said a word since he got here."

Ozzie assured him they would find the two men, and it wouldn't take long, and when they found them they would be locked up someplace safe. The brother suggested he should hide them in another jail, for their own safety.

Three miles out of Clanton, Ozzie pointed to a gravel driveway. "Pull in there," he told Hastings, who turned off the highway and drove into the front yard of a dilapidated house trailer. It was almost dark.

Ozzie took his nightstick and banged violently on the front door. "Open up, Bumpous!"

The trailer shook and Bumpous scrambled to the bathroom to flush a fresh joint.

"Open up, Bumpous!" Ozzie banged. "I know you're in there. Open up or I'll kick in the door."

Bumpous yanked the door open and Ozzie walked in. "You know, Bumpous, everytime I visit you I smell somethin' funny and the commode's flushin'. Get some clothes on. I gotta job for you."

"W-what?"

"I'll explain it outside where I can breathe. Just get some clothes on and hurry."

"What if I don't want to?"

"Fine. I'll see your parole officer tomorrow."

"I'll be out in a minute."

Ozzie smiled and walked to his car. Bobby Bumpous was one of his favorites. Since his parole two years earlier, he had led a reasonably clean life, occasionally succumbing to the lure of an easy drug sale for a quick buck. Ozzie watched him like a hawk and knew of such transactions, and Bumpous knew Ozzie knew; therefore, Bumpous was usually most eager to help his friend, Sheriff Walls. The plan was to eventually use Bumpous to nail Billy Ray Cobb for dealing, but that would be postponed for now.

After a few minutes he marched outside, still tucking his shirttail and zipping his pants. "Who you lookin' for?" he demanded.

"Billy Ray Cobb."

"That's no problem. You can find him without me."

"Shut up and listen. We think Cobb was involved in a rape this afternoon. A black girl was raped by two white men, and I think Cobb was there."

"Cobb ain't into rape, Sheriff. He's into drugs, remember?"

"Shut up and listen. You find Cobb and spend some time with him. Five minutes ago his truck was spotted at Huey's. Buy him a beer. Shoot some pool, roll dice, whatever. Find out what he did