

# The Innocent Man Study

A Look at the Death Penalty through the Work of John Grisham



A publication of the  
Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy



## ABOUT THE BOOK

*The Innocent Man*

By John Grisham

Doubleday, 2006

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### From the publisher:

**J**ohn Grisham's first work of nonfiction, an exploration of small town justice gone terribly awry, is his most extraordinary legal thriller yet.

In the major league draft of 1971, the first player chosen from the State of Oklahoma was Ron Williamson. When he signed with the Oakland A's, he said goodbye to his hometown of Ada and left to pursue his dreams of big league glory.

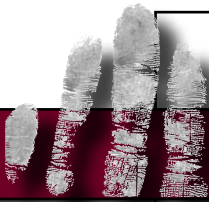
Six years later he was back, his dreams broken by a bad arm and bad habits—drinking, drugs, and women. He began to show signs of mental illness. Unable to keep a job, he moved in with his mother and slept twenty hours a day on her sofa.

In 1982, a 21-year-old cocktail waitress in Ada named Debra Sue Carter was raped and murdered, and for five years the police could not solve the crime. For reasons that were never clear, they suspected Ron Williamson and his friend Dennis Fritz. The two were finally arrested in 1987 and charged with capital murder.

With no physical evidence, the prosecution's case was built on junk science and the testimony of jailhouse snitches and convicts. Dennis Fritz was found guilty and given a life sentence. Ron Williamson was sent to death row.

If you believe that in America you are innocent until proven guilty, this book will shock you. If you believe in the death penalty, this book will disturb you. If you believe the criminal justice system is fair, this book will infuriate you.

*If you believe that in America you are innocent until proven guilty, this book will shock you.*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Grisham, born in Jonesboro, Ark., dreamed of being a professional baseball player, instead he became a publisher's dream.

Before the bestsellers and blockbuster movies, Grisham graduated from law school at Mississippi State University in 1981 and went to work at a small Southaven, Miss., law practice. In 1983, he was elected to the state House of Representatives and served until 1990.

Working 60 to 70 hours a week, he squeezed in time to work on his first novel. Numerous publishers rejected *A Time to Kill* before Wynwood Press gave it a modest 5,000-copy printing and published it in June 1988. Undeterred, Grisham immediately began work on another novel, the "story of a hotshot young attorney lured to an apparently perfect law firm that was not what it appeared." When he sold the film rights to *The Firm* to Paramount Pictures for \$600,000, Grisham suddenly became a hot property among publishers, and book rights were bought by Doubleday. Spending 47 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list, *The Firm* became the bestselling novel of 1991.

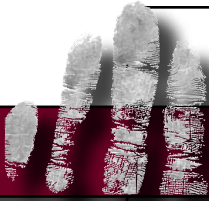
Publishers Weekly  
declared Grisham  
"the bestselling  
novelist of the 90s"

Since, then Grisham has produced a novel a year, spinning out bestseller after bestseller, including *The Pelican Brief*, *The Client*, *The Chamber*, *The Rainmaker*, *The Runaway Jury*, *The Partner*, *The Street Lawyer*, *The Testament*, *The Brethren*, *A Painted House*, *Skipping Christmas*, *The Summons*, and *The King of Torts*. *Publishers Weekly* declared Grisham "the bestselling novelist of the 90s" in a January 1998 profile. There are currently over 60 million John Grisham books in print worldwide, which have been translated into 29 languages, according to his publisher Doubleday.

Grisham lives with his wife Renee and their two children Ty and Shea. The family splits their time between their Victorian home on a farm in Mississippi and a plantation near Charlottesville, Va.

When he's not writing, Grisham devotes time to charitable causes, including taking mission trips with his church group. He also keeps up with his greatest passion: baseball. The man who dreamed of being a professional baseball player now serves as the local Little League commissioner. The six ballfields he built on his property have played host to over 350 kids on 26 Little League teams.

For more on the author and his books, go to [www.jgrisham.com](http://www.jgrisham.com).



## ABOUT THE STUDY

This study is intended to encourage groups to read *The Innocent Man* and discuss the many issues that surround the use of the death penalty. It is meant to promote critical thought and analysis and broaden the conversation about capital punishment by offering facts and opinions surrounding this controversial topic.

This study is organized in two ways so that you might choose the course that best fits your study group.

The first approach allows your group to read through the book together using a six-meeting approach. At each meeting you will discuss three chapters, examining the case of Ronald Keith Williamson and capital punishment.

The second approach is to discuss the book topically. This may be done in a series of meetings or a single meeting, depending on your needs.

Our hope is that through this study you will reach a greater understanding of death penalty issues, and that you will probe your own faith and values for answers to the many questions posed by this book.

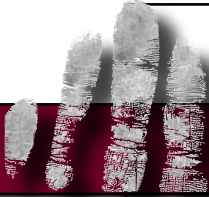
About the author of the study:



*Donna Dunn has a bachelor of science, with a double major in communication and political science, and a master's degree in public administration, both from James Madison University. Having worked in newspapers for 15 years, Dunn has served as a features editor, assistant managing editor, Newspaper in Education coordinator and marketing director. She was the Employee of the Year for the Northern Virginia Daily in 1999, and has won dozens of awards from the Virginia Press Association, the Virginia Press Women, National Federation of Press Women, the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, and the National Association of Real Estate Editors. She has been a presenter at a College Media Advisers conference and has conducted communication workshops for numerous organizations including the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy. She taught newspaper and magazine production and administered the journalism practicum for four years at JMU. Dunn is now a professional freelance writer and editor residing in Lynchburg, Va. She and her husband, Randy, have a 2 1/2 year-old son and a 6-month-old daughter.*

### Creating a Study Group

- Recruit members. The ideal size for a discussion group is eight to 12. If you have more than that, consider splitting the gathering into smaller groups.
- Choose a facilitator to lead discussion. The facilitator should not only guide the group in choosing which questions to address, but to also keep the group on topic. Further, the facilitator should ask the group to be respectful of each other's opinions, as the following questions may lead to some disagreement.
- Decide on how often you will meet and what time and day of the week work best. Also, consider where you would like to meet. If you hope to include food and drink, make sure to plan who will provide the refreshments.
- Decide how many times you want to meet and what format the group will follow (this study is arranged so that it may be done in six meetings as group members read the book from start to finish or as a topical study).
- Decide whether you will give the questions out ahead of time or wait until the meeting.
- Because some of these questions are likely to lead to lengthy discussions, facilitators might want to choose those most relevant/interesting to his/her particular group.



## ABOUT THE CENTER

The Virginia Interfaith Center is Virginia's only statewide interfaith partnership focused on faith-based citizenship and advocacy.

The Center's focus is three-fold:

- education for Virginia's mainstream faith community on the legislative process, issues, and even ways to speak to a legislator
- legislative advocacy focused on vulnerable populations like low-income families
- providing a spiritual presence to the Virginia state legislature

This unique partnership includes 21 member faith groups (Roman Catholic, Jewish, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, Friends, Baptist, Brethren, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist), several faith-based organizations (three Jewish federations, two Islamic organizations, the Virginia Council of Churches, the Virginia Poverty Law Center, Voices for Virginia's Children, CARITAS, and others), engaged congregations, and individuals.

The Center's membership drafts its Legislative Agenda each year. Once adopted by the Board, the agenda becomes the basis for the Center's legislative advocacy. In the advocacy area, the Center partners with other religious and secular organizations that share similar concerns.

The core issues on which the Center will focus at General Assembly Session include: tax equity, poverty and the working poor, health care, at-risk children and youth, capital punishment, Care for Creation, and housing and homelessness.

For more information, go to [www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org](http://www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org).



*Learn.  
Pray.  
Act.*

## MEETING ONE

### Chapters 1-3

1. Who does the initial evidence in Debbie Carter's murder point to? How would you have followed up on that evidence?
2. Is it easier in hindsight to see the evidence? What might have hampered detectives in their original investigation? Do you think their oversights can be justified?
3. In a day filled with hit shows about forensic science, are our expectations for physical evidence different now than in 1982? How do you think this heightened awareness affects crimes committed and investigations into those crimes?
4. Grisham paints a complex portrait of Ron Williamson. Does your image of him change as he grows up? Do you feel sympathetic or frustrated with the challenges he faces?
5. As of 2004, just 9 percent of Death Row inmates had college degrees, according to the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics. What, if any, do you think is the correlation between education and Death Row convictions? Ron was offered a scholarship to the University of Oklahoma. Do you think his life may have taken a different course had he gone to college?
6. The average age of a Death Row inmate at the time of his arrest is 28, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. How is youth a factor in crime? How did Ron Williamson's youth and immaturity play a part in the decisions he made as a young man?
7. Ron begins early in life to exhibit signs of mental illness. Discuss the impact this has on his family and on his own life.

*The rolling hills of southeast Oklahoma stretch from Norman across to Arkansas and show little evidence of the vast deposits of crude oil that were once beneath them.*

### *For Faith-based Study Groups*

8. John Grisham begins his book describing the city of Ada. What are your initial impressions? What does it mean to you when he says "The Bible Belt runs hard through Ada" (p. 4)?
9. Ron makes some poor choices in his youth. How can people of faith support young people?

## MEETING TWO

### Chapter 4-6

1. Dennis Fritz befriends Ron Williamson, but immediately learns of his difficulties. "He [Ron] was twenty-eight years old and had thoroughly given up" (p. 64). Why had he lost hope? What role had faith played in his life?
2. The American Psychology Association's article "The Truth About Lie Detectors" states: "Polygraph testing has generated considerable scientific and public controversy. Most psychologists and other scientists agree that there is little basis for the validity of polygraph tests. Courts, including the United States Supreme Court (cf. U.S. v. Scheffer, 1998 in which Dr. Saxe's research on polygraph fallibility was cited), have repeatedly rejected the use of polygraph evidence because of its inherent unreliability." When Dennis Fritz was asked to take a polygraph he feels compelled to do so, though he knew the test was "wildly unreliable" (p. 67). Why do you think polygraphs are still used? Why do you think it was used for Fritz?
3. "Fritz voluntarily submitted hair, blood, and saliva samples. Why not give them everything? He had nothing to fear. The thought of talking to a lawyer crossed his mind briefly, but why bother? He was completely innocent, and the cops would soon realize this" (p. 69). Was Fritz's reasoning incorrect? Why?
4. The National Institutes of Mental Health reports that 26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older — about one in four adults — suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. "Even though mental disorders are widespread in the population, the main burden of illness is concentrated in a much smaller proportion — about 6 percent, or 1 in 17 — who suffer from a serious mental illness." Ron is sometimes resistant to treatment for his mental illness and other times, welcomes it. Why would he resist treatment? What are some of the challenges of helping a loved one with a mental illness?
5. Glen Gore tells investigators that he saw Ron Williamson at the Coachlight on the night Debbie was killed (p. 75). According to The Innocence Project, 15 of the people they have exonerated of crimes through DNA evidence were convicted with false testimony. What can investigators do to

*The thought of talking to a lawyer crossed his mind briefly, but why bother? He was completely innocent, and the cops would soon realize this.*

ensure a witness is telling the truth?

6. Denise Haraway's murder seems completely unrelated to the Debbie Carter murder investigation. But what impact does it have and why?
7. Grisham retells the story of Ada's colorful history as a town of gunslingers and outlaws. In 1909, four suspected killers were arrested and a lynch mob hangs them in a livery stable. A postcard handed out at the Ada Chamber of Commerce office immortalizes the event (p. 82). How might history repeat itself in the Carter and Haraway murder investigations?
8. Tommy Ward gives a false confession based on a dream after being interrogated for many hours. He believes "good police work will find the truth...If his dream confession was sufficiently ridiculous, how could anyone believe it?" (p. 93). How did he get to this point and what should have happened instead?
9. Karl Fontenot was also videotaped giving a confession. "In spite of careful coaching, Karl's confession was a mess" (p. 97). Should suspects be "coached" on their confession? How were Tommy and Karl's Fifth Amendment (to not incriminate themselves) rights violated?
10. Juanita Williamson, despite being in the midst of a battle with ovarian cancer, makes the amazing discovery of a rental receipt to prove that she and Ron were at home watching movies on the night that Debbie Carter was murdered. She presents this evidence to the police and testifies on tape to provide her son an alibi. Why were Juanita's efforts lost?
11. Ron Williamson is evaluated by doctor after doctor to assess his mental health with widely varying diagnoses. Though Norma Walker of Ada's Mental Health Services believed he required "long-term institutionalization" (p. 115), the family was given no plan and no medication for Ron. What does Ron's case say about the state of mental health care in rural communities and in the larger world? Do you think this is still true today?
12. *The Dreams of Ada* has a significant impact on the Carter murder investigation. What results from its publication?
13. "Reconciliation means accepting you can't undo the murder, but you can decide how you want to live afterwards," states the Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, Inc. The Virginia-based group, comprised of families of those who died in a homicide or by execution, opposes the death penalty. Basketball legend Michael Jordan, whose father James was murdered, has been quoted saying, "You believe an eye for an eye until you're put in that situation. If they kill those guys, it really doesn't mean much to me. My father is gone." Describe the impact of Debbie Carter's death on her family. How would you deal with this issue if Debbie were your daughter?
14. "Dream confessions" were not exclusive to Ada. According to the book

*Reconciliation means accepting you can't undo the murder, but you can decide how you want to live afterwards.*



Actual Innocence by Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld and Jim Dwyer, Rolando Cruz was convicted and sentenced to death twice, based on a dream confession concocted by police and prosecutors. Three prosecutors and four sheriff's investigators from DuPage, Ill., were tried on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice for the Cruz death sentences. Ron's dream confession effectively put a stop to the Carter investigation. Why would investigators be interested in a dream?

*For Faith-based Study Groups*

15. When Detectives Dennis Smith and Mike Baskin interrogate Tommy Ward about the disappearance of Denise Haraway, they lie and tell him that they have several witnesses who say Tommy left a party that Saturday night and borrowed a pick-up truck [presumably used to pick up Denise] (p. 86). What ethical principles should law enforcement abide by in regards to the truth, and are these different from the ethical principles we should live by in general? How do you handle matters of truth in your own life?
16. In its statement on capital punishment, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America states: "Christians live in anticipation of the day when "justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" (Amos 5: 24). In the meantime, God holds governments accountable to ensure justice. In a democracy, where government is by the people, justice is the responsibility of all citizens." What can faith groups do to ensure that justice is done in America?

NOTES:

## MEETING THREE

### Chapters 7-9

1. The *Ada Evening News* runs front-page stories about the arrests of Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz and covers the story closely for the following weeks and months. What function does the media play in the justice system in general and in this case in particular?
2. Jailhouse snitches play a significant role in the Carter and Haraway murder investigations. According to the Innocence Project, 21 of the people exonerated by DNA evidence through the project were falsely accused by snitches. "The use of jailhouse informants, especially in return for deals, special treatment, or the dropping of charges, has proven to be a specious form of evidence, as has testimony that has only appeared after rewards were offered. Often, the testimony of these snitches and informants has been the key in sending an innocent man or woman to prison for a crime he or she did not commit." The Center on Wrongful Convictions has studied cases where snitch testimony led to wrongful convictions in the United States and issued the report, "The Snitch System: How Incentivized Witnesses Put 38 Innocent Americans on Death Row." Does snitch testimony present value in investigating crimes and if so, under what conditions should it be used?
3. In a letter to the *Ada Evening News*, Dennis Fritz asks "Am I guilty until proven innocent, or innocent until proven guilty?" (p. 135) How do you think this usually works in our justice system? How does it work in the media?
4. "Since few people of means get themselves charged with felonies, most of the serious crimes involved indigent defendants" (p. 136). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), "Almost all people on death row could not afford to hire an attorney. The quality of legal representation is a better predictor of whether or not someone will be sentenced to death than the facts of the crime." As Supreme Court Justice Ruth Ginsburg put it in 2001, "People who are well represented at trial do not get the death penalty. I have yet to see a death penalty case among the dozens coming to the Supreme Court on eve-of-execution stay applications in which the defendant was well represented at trial." How does the fact that Williamson and Fritz cannot afford attorneys impact their case? Barney Ward's motto was "innocent until proven broke" (p. 138). How does this motto affect his attitude toward Ron Williamson?
5. Thorazine was used to medicate Ron Williamson throughout his criminal trial. How was it misused and what effect did that have on his verdict?
6. Ron's sisters Annette and Renee were heartbroken to see him dragged into court in chains. "He was sick and needed help, a long stint in an institution with good doctors who could get him well. How could the state of Oklahoma put him on trial when he was obviously so sick?" (p. 145) Why wasn't Ron's mental health a factor in his defense?

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7. Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation agent Jerry Peters reversed his findings on the bloody handprint found at Debbie Carter's apartment. What pressures did he face in his findings and how should he have handled the situation?
8. Later, it is revealed that Glen Gore, during the time of the Carter investigation, was selling drugs to Ada police officers. How did this change the course of the investigation?
9. Scientific experts played an important part in the trials of Williamson and Fritz. What influence did they have and what should their role have been?
10. Ricky Joe Simmons confesses to the murder of Debbie Carter (p. 161). Why was there apparently no follow up? Why did the investigation stop with the arrest of Ron and Dennis?
11. After their arrests, it took more than a year for the defendants to come to trial. That time was spent in the Pontotoc County jail. Was this an unreasonable amount of time to wait for a trial? How would such a delay affect their lives and their reputations?
12. Prosecutor Bill Peterson seemed to be on a mission to vindicate his name after *Dreams of Ada* was published. In the 2003 report "Broken Justice" by a coalition of anti-death penalty Virginia groups, investigators found that prosecutorial misconduct is a widespread problem in Virginia. "*Harmful Error*, a recent report on misconduct by the Center for Public Integrity, found 131 cases of alleged prosecutorial misconduct in the state of Virginia, at least three of which involved the death penalty." What, if any, reforms are needed?
13. One of the jurors in Dennis Fritz's trial, Cecil Smith, (p. 168) was not forthcoming about his career in law enforcement. "Most of the jurors looked familiar" to Annette Hudson and Renee Simmons at Ron Williamson's trial (p. 191). What are the pros and cons of having a "jury of peers?"
14. The only physical evidence against Williamson and Fritz was the hair analysis. Despite the fallibility of such "junk science," forensic expert Melvin Hett provided damning testimony. How can states even the playing field for defense attorneys whose budgets cannot afford countering expert analysis?
15. The prosecution committed a clear *Brady* violation when it did not submit the 1983 tape of Ron Williamson's video to his defense team. Why would the judge not act on this until after the trial?

*For Faith-based Study Groups*

16. Hebrew scriptures call for the death penalty for many offenses. Yet, Catholics Against Capital Punishment argue that "the saying 'an eye for an eye' was meant to limit punishment to no more than what would restore the community, and not to call for excessive punishment. God's own punishment to Cain, who killed his brother Abel, was not death, but banishment. And a special mark was given to Cain, so no others would harm him." What do you think about the principle of "an eye for an eye"?
17. In their statement on capital punishment, The Friends United Meeting states: "Friends accept the Biblical teachings that every human life is valuable in the sight of God, that man need not remain in his sinful state but can repent and be saved, that God loves the sinner and takes 'no pleasure in the death of the wicked,' but longs 'that the wicked turn from his way and live.' (Ezekial 22:11) If those who have committed a wicked act can "turn from his way," what role should people of faith play in such conversions/ rehabilitations?
18. What within your faith tradition and holy texts speak for or against capital punishment?

NOTES:

## MEETING FOUR

### Chapters 10-12

1. "Oklahoma is very serious about its death penalty" (p. 213). While Oklahoma (with 81 executions) is the state that has put to death the most convicts per capita since 1990, Texas (with 372) has had the most executions and Virginia (with 97) the most per capita since the Supreme Court approved the resumption of the death penalty in 1976. Thirteen states do not have the death penalty, and fourteen states with a death penalty have executed five or fewer people since 1976. What do you think accounts for the vast difference in policy/ applicability concerning the death penalty across the United States?
2. According to [deathpenalty.org](http://deathpenalty.org), "The death penalty is a lethal lottery: of the 22,000 homicides committed every year approximately 150 people are sentenced to death." The 2003 report "Broken Justice" found that within the state of Virginia, there is great difference in how the death penalty is applied from one jurisdiction to another. "The decision to seek death in any given capital murder case is made by a single prosecutor elected in the jurisdiction where the murder took place. There are no standards to guide prosecutors, and there is no oversight agency to review their decisions." How can this inequality of application be addressed?
3. Describe the setting at "Big Mac," the maximum-security prison where Ron Williamson lived. What was the subculture of the prison?
4. Greg Wilhoit, who became friends with Ron, was also an innocent man on Death Row. Of the 81 inmates incarcerated at McAlester, at least four were "innocent men," according to Grisham. Is this number surprising?
5. How was Dennis Fritz's incarceration different than Ron Williamson's? Compare how they spent their time.
6. "Most of the other inmates thought Ron was simply 'playing the nut role,' pretending to be crazy in hopes of somehow walking away from The Row" (p. 241). Is it difficult for the justice system to distinguish between those who are truly mentally ill and those who are looking for a way out?
7. Ron was put on suicide watch several times while on Death Row. "The injustice from which he was suffering had caused him to lose hope and want to die" (p. 246). What on Death

- Row could give hope? What did you find surprising about conditions there?
8. In Oklahoma, Ron and Dennis both began immediate appeals. Virginia has tight restrictions on appeals, including the “21-day rule.” This rule requires any party seeking review of a trial court decision to do so within 21 days of the date of entry of the final judgment or sentence. This is the shortest time limit in the country. Do Ron and Dennis’ cases demonstrate a need for a longer time period? How so?
  9. “The Coleman execution was a media event, and the press converged outside Big Mac” (p. 249). How does the coverage of executions influence opinion on the death penalty?
  10. At the time of their meeting, Greg Wilhoit and Ron Williamson had very strong opinions in support of the death penalty. How would that change over time and why? Greg states — and studies have shown — that the death penalty is not a deterrent to murderers. Why does this persist as a reason for execution?
  11. Compare F Cellhouse with H Unit. What affect did this move have on Ron Williamson?
  12. Rick Rojem, who became Ron’s roommate in H Unit, was a Buddhist. What influence did Rick have on Ron?
  13. Ken Foster evaluated Ron’s deteriorating mental condition. Dr. Foster wrote, “The psychotic reaction and the accompanying deterioration are worsened when a person is under the multiple stresses which accompany being in a death row environment and having knowledge that you are scheduled to die” (p. 256). He called this a “catastrophic” stressor. Is this “cruel and unusual punishment?”
  14. When Dr. Foster fought strongly to have Ron moved to a special unit for care, Warden Dan Reynolds “stubbornly resisted.” “Don’t bother with death row inmates, Reynolds said. They’re going to die anyway” (p. 257). How does this line of thinking affect inmate treatment? How does it affect public perception of such treatment?
  15. Ron Williamson was tortured by guards playing on his mental illness, calling him in the middle of the night saying, “Ron, this is God...why did you kill Debbie Carter?” (p. 259) How did this impact Ron and the other inmates?

*Don't bother with death row inmates. They're going to die anyway.*

*For Faith-based Study Groups*

16. Annette Hudson found comfort in her faith. “She read her Bible, prayed continually, and met often with her pastor” (p. 224). How does our faith sustain us in difficult times?
17. When Ron met Mark Barrett for the first time, they connected by talking about God and the Bible (p. 235). Why do you think Ron had remembered certain scripture verses throughout the years? What holy words are important to you?

NOTES:



## MEETING FIVE

### Chapters 13-15

1. While Ron had been greatly disappointed by the justice system, many individuals pressed hard for better treatment and for a retrial. Who were some of these individuals and what were their motivations?
2. Dennis Fritz became very interested in DNA testing after reading about it and seeing a 1993 segment on *Donahue*. Dr. Alec Jeffries actually began using what was described as the “DNA fingerprint test” in England in the 1980s. However, it took so much biological matter to get results, evidence was often destroyed in the process and provided no results. However, in 1983, Kary Mullins developed the polymerase chain reaction to replicate and expand any DNA sample, no matter how small. By the 1990s, use of DNA evidence was growing rapidly. How do you think DNA testing has changed law enforcement and the justice system?
3. Robert Brecheen tried to kill himself the day before his execution (p. 275), but his stomach was pumped and he was stabilized enough for “a proper killing.” Discuss the irony of ensuring inmates are healthy and able to be executed.
4. Judge Frank Seay overturned the conviction saving Ron Williamson from death five days before his planned execution. After long and careful review, Seay wrote an opinion with a laundry list of injustices committed in the Williamson trial. At the end of the opinion, he wrote, “God help us, if ever in this great country we turn our heads while people who have not had fair trials are executed. That almost happened in this case.” Are Americans turning their heads while people are being executed?
5. The 2000 Commission on Human Rights urged all states that maintain the death penalty “not to impose it on a person suffering from any form of mental disorder; not to execute any such person.” The American Bar Association in 122A stated: “Defendants should not be executed or sentenced to death if, at the time of the offense, they had a severe mental disorder or disability that significantly impaired their capacity (a) to appreciate the nature, consequences or wrongfulness of their conduct, (b) to exercise rational judgment in relation to conduct, or (c) to conform their conduct to the requirements of the law.” Ron Williamson was clearly mentally ill and finally moved to the special care unit in 1996; yet, he was still moving toward execution. Why were the prison administrators unconcerned about his state of mind?
6. “After two trips to the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, a one-

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conviction.*

year layover in Judge Seay's office, a two-year stop at the Tenth Circuit in Denver, two useless but required visits to the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, and a truckload of routine filings back and forth among these various courts, the matter of the state of Oklahoma versus Ronald Keith Williamson had now returned home." (pp. 285-286). Many studies have shown that the death penalty is much costlier to administer than life in prison. How does this case illustrate this premise?

7. "Typical of a small town, he [Judge Tom Landrith] had represented Ron on a drunk-driving charge in the early 1980s; they briefly played on the same softball team; Landrith played high school football with Johnny Carter, Debbie's uncle; and Landrith and Bill Peterson were old friends" (p. 287). What are some of the ways that being in a small town affected the case against Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz?

8. "The Carter family sat across the aisle, once more dragged into court to suffer through another hearing as the state floundered in its efforts to solve their crime and find justice" (p. 309). What would have been your feelings if you were a member of the Carter family?

9. The state never apologized for the wrongful conviction. "It would never happen, and it became an open sore that never healed" (p. 311). How did this impact Ron and Dennis?
10. Glen Gore escaped from work release after learning that he was becoming the prime suspect in the Carter murder. What are the pros and cons of work release?
11. Ron was amazed at his sisters' "nice" cars and at all the food in the refrigerators. After his release, he enjoyed just sitting outside and playing the guitar. What are some of the everyday pleasures in our lives that we take for granted?
12. Ron and Dennis were "average white guys from good families, all chewed up and abused by the system" (p. 322). While these men were white, a disproportionate number of inmates on death row are minorities. In 1990, a report from the General Accounting Office concluded that "in 82 percent of the studies [reviewed], race of the victim was found to influence the likelihood of being charged with capital murder or receiving the death penalty, i.e. those who murdered whites were more likely to be sentenced to death than those who murdered blacks" (deathpenalty.org). Why do you think that is?

*For Faith-based Study Groups*

13. Annette Hudson was devastated when the pastor of her church declined to allow Ron's family to celebrate his newfound freedom in the fellowship hall. "'But the church has been praying for Ronnie for twelve years,' she reminded him. Yes, indeed, and we will continue to do so, he said. But there are a lot of people who still think he's guilty. It's too controversial. The church could be tainted" (p. 315). Why would her church respond in such a way? How would your place of worship react? If your place of worship would react similarly, what would be your response?
14. The night of Ron's exoneration, his sister received a death threat. "We gathered around and prayed and asked the Lord to calm our nerves and for the angels to surround our house and protect us. We made it through the night unharmed. The Lord once again honored our prayers," said Renee (p. 317). Even though their church had disappointed the sisters, had it affected their faith?
15. "He was willing to forgive everyone. The intoxicating smell of freedom smothered old grudges and fantasies of retribution" (p. 322). How was Ron able to forgive those who had taken away so many years of his life? Would you be able to do the same? How does your faith impact your ability to forgive?

## MEETING SIX

### Chapter 16-17, Author's Note

1. After so many years, Ron Williamson finally made it to Yankee Stadium. Yet, in the midst of all of the celebrations, he began again to drink. What sorts of conflicting emotions did Ron and Dennis face after their release?
2. There was much media interest in Ron and Dennis in the days after they were freed. One of the outlets interested was a German television station. Most democracies in the world have abandoned the death penalty. The United States, Japan and South Korea are the only exceptions. Why would that be true?
3. Alcoholism was a constant problem for Ron. What impact did this have on his life? What resources were available to him to combat his addiction...were they enough?
4. In 2000, Ron and Dennis filed suit alleging violations under the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, and Fourteenth amendments to the Constitution. "Civil suits for wrongful convictions are extremely difficult to win..." (p. 336). Should there be automatic compensation for those wrongly incarcerated?
5. Ron finds life outside of prison to be challenging. Dennis requires counseling to deal with the post-traumatic syndrome he faced after his incarceration. What can states do to help former prisoners transition back into the "outside world?"
6. "A tragic life was over, and the one who'd lived it had now gone on to better things. This was what Ronnie had prayed for. He was finally free" (p. 352). What had been his prison in those last years?
7. In the opening paragraphs of *The Innocent Man*, John Grisham describes the land around Ada: "The rolling hills of southeast Oklahoma stretch from Norman across to Arkansas and show little evidence of the vast deposits of crude oil that were once beneath them" (p. 3). How might this description serve as a metaphor for Ron Williamson's life?
8. Steven W. Hawkins, executive director of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, said this: "Since 1976, more than

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100 people have been freed from death row due to actual innocence, while close to 800 people have been executed. That means that for every eight people we are executing, one person is completely exonerated. What if a prescription drug cured 8 of every 9 people who took it, but killed the ninth? What if an airline carrier successfully completed 8 of every 9 flights it launched, but the ninth resulted in mechanical failure? What if you were able to reboot your computer successfully 8 out of 9 tries, but every ninth time it crashed and destroyed your work? As a society that depends upon a functioning criminal justice system, can we have confidence when that same justice system sends innocent people to death row?" Have your views on the death penalty been impacted by *The Innocent Man*? How so?

*For Faith-based Study Groups*

9. "Ron was facing death with almost perfect contentment...He had no fear of dying" (pp. 348-349). How was facing death on Death Row different for Ron than facing it on the outside? How did his faith play a part in this peace?

NOTES:

## Resources online

There are a multitude of Web sites with information related to capital punishment. Below is just a sampling of what is available. Many of these sites were used for research in creating this study.

- The Innocence Project: [www.innocenceproject.org](http://www.innocenceproject.org)
- Death Penalty Focus: [deathpenalty.org](http://deathpenalty.org)
- Death Penalty Information Center: [deathpenaltyinfo.org](http://deathpenaltyinfo.org)
- American Civil Liberties Union: [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)
- National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty: [www.ncadp.org](http://www.ncadp.org)
- Amnesty International on the Death Penalty: [web.amnesty.org/pages/deathpenalty-index-eng](http://web.amnesty.org/pages/deathpenalty-index-eng)
- Catholics Against Capital Punishment: [www.cacp.org](http://www.cacp.org)
- Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty: [www.vadp.org](http://www.vadp.org)
- National Mental Health Information Center: [mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)
- Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation: [www.mvfr.org](http://www.mvfr.org)
- People of Faith Against the Death Penalty: [www.pfadp.org](http://www.pfadp.org)
- National Archive of Criminal Justice Data: [www.icpsr.umich.edu](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu)
- Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics: [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/welcome.html](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/welcome.html)
- The Abolitionist Action Committee: <http://www.abolition.org>



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Issues of concern when discussing the death penalty include the following topics. For those meeting only once, facilitators may want to be selective in choosing topics of the most interest to the group.

### Inadequate counsel

1. “Since few people of means get themselves charged with felonies, most of the serious crimes involved indigent defendants” (p. 136). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), “Almost all people on death row could not afford to hire an attorney. The quality of legal representation is a better predictor of whether or not someone will be sentenced to death than the facts of the crime.” As Supreme Court Justice Ruth Ginsburg put it in 2001, “People who are well represented at trial do not get the death penalty. I have yet to see a death penalty case among the dozens coming to the Supreme Court on eve-of-execution stay applications in which the defendant was well represented at trial.” How does the fact that Williamson and Fritz cannot afford attorneys impact their case? Barney Ward’s motto was “innocent until proven broke” (p. 138). How does this motto affect his attitude toward Ron Williamson?

### Investigative Mistakes & Misconduct

1. “Fritz voluntarily submitted hair, blood, and saliva samples. Why not give them everything? He had nothing to fear. The thought of talking to a lawyer crossed his mind briefly, but why bother? He was completely innocent, and the cops would soon realize this” (p. 69). Was Dennis Fritz’ reasoning incorrect? Why?

2. Glen Gore tells investigators that he saw Ron Williamson at the Coachlight on the night Debbie was killed (p. 75). According to The Innocence Project, 15 of the people they have

exonerated of crimes through DNA evidence were convicted with false witness testimony. What can investigators do to ensure a witness is telling the truth?

3. When Detectives Dennis Smith and Mike Baskin interrogate Tommy Ward about the disappearance of Denise Haraway, they lie and tell him that they have several witnesses that Tommy left a party that Saturday night and borrowed a pick up truck [presumably used to pick up Denise] (p. 86). What ethical principles should law enforcement abide by in regards to the truth, and are these different from the ethical principles we should live by in general? How do you handle matters of truth in your own life?

4. Karl Fontenot was also videotaped giving a confession. “In spite of careful coaching, Karl’s confession was a mess” (p. 97). Should suspects be “coached” on their confession? How were Tommy and Karl’s Fifth Amendment (to not incriminate themselves) rights violated?

5. Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation agent Jerry Peters reversed his findings on the bloody handprint found at Debbie Carter’s apartment. What pressures did he face in his findings and how should he have handled the situation?

6. Later, it is revealed that Glen Gore, during the time of the Carter investigation, was selling drugs to Ada police officers. How did this change the course of the investigation?

### Mental Illness and the Justice System

1. The National Institutes of Mental Health reports that 26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older — about one in four adults — suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. “Even though mental disorders are widespread in the population, the main burden of illness is concentrated in a much smaller

proportion — about 6 percent, or 1 in 17 — who suffer from a serious mental illness.” Ron is sometimes resistant to treatment and other times, welcomes it. Why would he resist treatment? What are some of the challenges of helping a loved one with a mental illness?

2. Thorazine was used to medicate Ron Williamson throughout his criminal trial. How was it misused and what effect did that have on his case?

3. Ron’s sisters Annette and Renee were heartbroken to see him dragged into court in chains. “He was sick and needed help, a long stint in an institution with good doctors who could get him well. How could the state of Oklahoma put him on trial when he was obviously so sick”? (p. 145) Why wasn’t Ron’s mental health a factor in his defense?

4. Ron Williamson is evaluated by doctor after doctor to assess his mental health with widely varying diagnoses. Though Norma Walker of Ada’s Mental Health Services believed he required “long-term institutionalization” (p. 115), the family was given no plan and no medication for Ron. What does Ron’s case say about the state of mental health care in rural communities and in the larger world? Do you think this is still true today?

5. “Most of the other inmates thought Ron was simply ‘playing the nut role,’ pretending to be crazy in hopes of somehow walking away from The Row (p. 241). Is it difficult for the justice system to distinguish between those who are truly mentally ill and those who are looking for a way out?

6. Ron was put on suicide watch several times while on Death Row. “The injustice from which he was suffering had caused him to lose hope and want to die” (p. 246). What on Death Row could give hope? What did you find surprising about conditions there?

### Role of the Media

1. The Ada Evening News ran front-page stories about the arrests of Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz and covered the story closely for the

following weeks and months. What role does the media play in the justice system in general and this case in particular?

2. In a letter to the Ada Evening News, Dennis Fritz asks “Am I guilty until proven innocent, or innocent until proven guilty? (p. 135) How do you think this usually works in our justice system? How does it work in the media?”

### Use of Snitches & Junk Science

1. Jailhouse snitches play a significant role in the Carter and Haraway murder investigations. According to the Innocence Project, 21 of the people exonerated through the project were falsely accused by snitches. “The use of jailhouse informants, especially in return for deals, special treatment, or the dropping of charges, has proven to be a specious form of evidence, as has testimony that has only appeared after rewards were offered. Often, the testimony of these snitches and informants has been the key in sending an innocent man or woman to prison for a crime he or she did not commit.” The Center on Wrongful Convictions has studied cases where snitch testimony led to wrongful convictions in the United States and issued the report, “The Snitch System: How Incentivized Witnesses Put 38 Innocent Americans on Death Row.” Does snitch testimony present value in investigating crimes and if so under what conditions should it be used?

2. The only physical evidence against Williamson and Fritz was the hair analysis. Despite the fallibility of such “junk science,” forensic expert Melvin Hett provided damning testimony. How can states even the playing field for defense attorneys whose budgets cannot afford countering expert analysis?

### Administration of the Death Penalty

1. “Oklahoma is very serious about its death penalty” (p. 213). While Oklahoma (with 81 executions) is the state that has put to death the most convicts per capita since 1990, Texas (with 372) has had the most executions and Virginia (with 97) the most per capita since the Supreme

Court approved the resumption of the death penalty in 1976. Thirteen states do not have the death penalty, and fourteen states with a death penalty have executed five or fewer people since 1976. What do you think accounts for the vast difference in policy / applicability concerning the death penalty across the United States?

2. According to [deathpenalty.org](http://deathpenalty.org), “The death penalty is a lethal lottery: of the 22,000 homicides committed every year approximately 150 people are sentenced to death.” The 2003 report “Broken Justice” found that within the state of Virginia, there is great difference in how the death penalty is applied from one jurisdiction to another. “The decision to seek death in any given capital murder case is made by a single prosecutor elected in the jurisdiction where the murder took place. There are no standards to guide prosecutors, and there is no oversight agency to review their decisions.” How can this inequality of application be addressed?

3. Steven W. Hawkins, executive director of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, said this: “Since 1976, more than 100 people have been freed from death row due to actual innocence, while close to 800 people have been executed. That means that for every eight people we are executing, one person is completely exonerated. What if a prescription drug cured 8 of every 9 people who took it, but killed the ninth? What if an airline carrier successfully completed 8 of every 9 flights it launched, but the ninth resulted in mechanical failure? What if you were able to reboot your computer successfully 8 out of 9 tries, but every ninth time it crashed and destroyed your work? As a society that depends upon a functioning criminal justice system, can we have confidence when that same justice system sends innocent people to death row?” Have your views on the death penalty been impacted by *The Innocent Man*? How so?

## Faith and the Death Penalty

1. What within your faith tradition and holy texts speak for or against capital punishment?

2. In its statement on capital punishment, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America states: “Christians live in anticipation of the day when “justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). In the meantime, God holds governments accountable to ensure justice. In a democracy, where government is by the people, justice is the responsibility of all citizens.” What can faith groups do to ensure that justice is done in America?

3. Annette Hudson was devastated when the pastor of her church declined to allow Ron’s family to celebrate his newfound freedom in the fellowship hall. “‘But the church has been praying for Ronnie for twelve years,’ she reminded him. Yes, indeed, and we will continue to do so, he said. But there are a lot of people who still think he’s guilty. It’s too controversial. The church could be tainted” (p. 315). Why would her church respond in such a way? How would your place of worship react? If your place of worship would react similarly, how would you respond?

4. Hebrew scriptures call for the death penalty for many offenses. Yet, Catholics Against Capital Punishment argue that “the saying ‘an eye for an eye’ was meant to limit punishment to no more than what would restore the community, and not to call for excessive punishment. God’s own punishment to Cain, who killed his brother Abel, was not death, but banishment. And a special mark was given to Cain, so no others would harm him.” What do you think about the principle of “an eye for an eye”?

5. Annette Hudson found comfort in her faith. “She read her Bible, prayed continually, and met often with her pastor” (p. 224). How does our faith sustain us in difficult times?

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