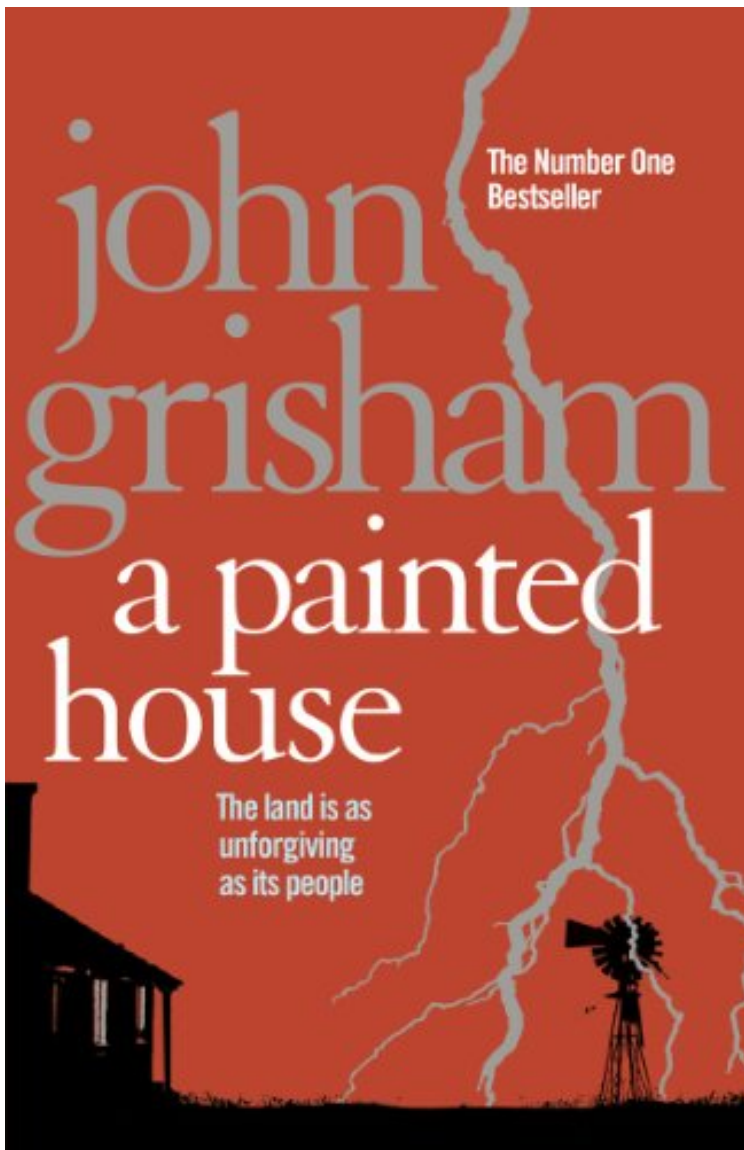


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A Painted House



Par John Grisham
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA young boy growing up on a cotton plantation ... from the bestselling author and master of the legal thriller.The hill people and the Mexicans arrived on the same day. It was a Wednesday, early in September 1952. The Cardinals were five games behind the Dodgers with two weeks to go, and the season looked hopeless. The cotton, however, was waist high to my father, almost over my head, and he and my grandfather could be heard before supper whispering words that were seldom heard. It could be a "good crop." Thus begins the new novel from John Grisham, a story inspired by his own childhood in rural Arkansas. The narrator is a seven year old farm boy named Luke Chandler, who lives in the cotton fields with his parents and grandparents in a little house that's never been painted. The Chandlers farm eighty acres

that they rent, not own, and when the cotton is ready they hire a truckload of Mexicans and a family from the Ozarks to help harvest it. For six weeks they pick cotton, battling the heat, the rain, the fatigue, and sometimes, each other. As the weeks pass Luke sees and hears things no seven year old could possibly be prepared for, and finds himself keeping secrets that not only threaten the crop but will change the lives of the Chandlers forever. *A Painted House* is a moving story of one boy's journey from innocence to experience.

Ever since he published *The Firm* in 1991, John Grisham has remained the undisputed champ of the legal thriller. With *A Painted House*, however, he strikes out in a new direction. As the author is quick to note, this novel includes "not a single lawyer, dead or alive," and readers will search in vain for the kind of lowlife machinations that have been his stock-in-trade. Instead, Grisham has delivered a quieter, more contemplative story, set in rural Arkansas in 1952. It's harvest time on the Chandler farm, and the family has hired a crew of migrant Mexicans and "hill people" to pick 80 acres of cotton. A certain camaraderie pervades this bucolic dream team. But it's backbreaking work, particularly for the 7-year-old narrator, Luke: "I would pick cotton, tearing the fluffy bolls from the stalks at a steady pace, stuffing them into the heavy sack, afraid to look down the row and be reminded of how endless it was, afraid to slow down because someone would notice." What's more, tensions begin to simmer between the Mexicans and the hill people, one of whom has a penchant for bare-knuckles brawling. This leads to a brutal murder, which young Luke has the bad luck to witness. At this point--with secrets, lies, and at least one knife fight in the offing--the plot begins to take on that familiar, Grisham-style momentum. Still, such matters ultimately take a back seat in *A Painted House* to the author's evocation of time and place. This is, after all, the scene of his boyhood, and Grisham waxes nostalgic without ever succumbing to deep-fried sentimentality. Meanwhile, his account of Luke's Baptist upbringing occasions some sly (and telling) humor: I'd been taught in Sunday school from the day I could walk that lying would send you straight to hell. No detours. No second chances. Straight into the fiery pit, where Satan was waiting with the likes of Hitler and Judas Iscariot and General Grant. Thou shalt not bear false witness, which, of course, didn't sound exactly like a strict prohibition against lying, but that was the way the Baptists interpreted it. Whether Grisham will continue along these lines, or revert to the judicial shark tank for his next book, is anybody's guess. But *A Painted House* suggests that he's perfectly capable of telling an involving story with nary a subpoena in sight.

--James Marcus

Chapter I
The hill people and the Mexicans arrived on the same day. It was a Wednesday, early in September 1952. The Cardinals were five games behind the Dodgers with three weeks to go, and the season looked hopeless. The cotton, however, was waist-high to my father, over my head, and he and my grandfather could be heard before supper whispering words that were seldom heard. It could be a "good crop." They were farmers, hardworking men who embraced pessimism only when discussing the weather and the crops. There was too much sun, or too much rain, or the threat of floods in the lowlands, or the rising prices of seed and fertilizer, or the uncertainties of the markets. On the most perfect of days, my mother would quietly say to me, "Don't worry. The men will find something to worry about." Pappy, my grandfather, was worried about the price for labor when we went searching for the hill people. They were paid for every hundred pounds of cotton they picked. The previous year, according to him, it was \$1.50 per hundred. He'd already heard rumors that a farmer over in Lake City was offering \$1.60. This played heavily on his mind as we rode to town. He never talked when he drove, and this was because, according to my mother, not much of a driver herself, he was afraid of motorized vehicles. His truck was a 1939 Ford, and with the exception of our old John Deere tractor, it was our sole means of transportation. This was no particular problem except when we drove to church and my mother and grandmother were forced to sit snugly together up front in their Sunday best while my father and I rode in the back, engulfed in dust. Modern sedans were scarce in rural Arkansas. Pappy drove thirty-seven miles per hour. His theory was that every automobile had a speed at which it ran most efficiently, and through some vaguely defined method he had determined that his old truck should go thirty-seven. My mother said (to me) that it was ridiculous. She also said he and my father had once fought over whether the truck should go faster. But my father rarely drove it, and if I happened to be riding with him, he would level off at thirty-seven, out of respect for Pappy. My mother said she suspected he drove much faster when he was alone. We turned onto Highway 135, and, as always, I watched Pappy carefully shift the gears pressing slowly on the clutch, delicately prodding the stick shift on the steering column until the truck reached its perfect speed. Then I leaned over to check the speedometer: thirty-seven. He smiled at me as if we both agreed that the truck belonged at that speed. Highway 135 ran straight and flat through the farm country of the Arkansas Delta. On both sides as far as I could see, the fields were white with cotton. It was time for the harvest, a wonderful season for me because they turned out school for two months. For my

grandfather, though, it was a time of endless worry....On the right, at the Jordan place, we saw a group of Mexicans working in the field near the road. They were stooped at the waist, their cotton sacks draped behind them, their hands moving deftly through the stalks, tearing off the bolls. Pappy grunted. He didn't like the Jordans because they were Methodists and Cubs fans. Now that they already had workers in their fields, there was another reason to dislike them. The distance from our farm to town was fewer than eight miles, but at thirty-seven miles an hour, the trip took twenty minutes. Always twenty minutes, even with little traffic. Pappy didn't believe in passing slower vehicles in front of him. Of course, he was usually the slow one. Near Black Oak, we caught up to a trailer filled to the top with snowy mounds of freshly picked cotton. A tarp covered the front half, and the Montgomery twins, who were my age, playfully bounced around in all that cotton until they saw us on the road below them. Then they stopped and waved. I waved back, but my grandfather did not. When he drove, he never waved or nodded at folks, and this was, my mother said, because he was afraid to take his hands from the wheel. She said people talked about him behind his back, saying he was rude and arrogant. Personally, I don't think he cared how the gossip ran. We followed the Montgomery trailer until it turned at the cotton gin. It was pulled by their old Massey Harris tractor, and driven by Frank, the eldest Montgomery boy, who had dropped out of school in the fifth grade and was considered by everyone at church to be headed for serious trouble. Highway 135 became Main Street for the short stretch it took to negotiate Black Oak. We passed the Black Oak Baptist Church, one of the few times we'd pass without stopping for some type of service. Every store, shop, business, church, even the school, faced Main Street, and on Saturdays the traffic inched along, bumper to bumper, as the country folks flocked to town for their weekly shopping. But it was Wednesday, and when we got into town, we parked in front of Pop and Pearl Watson's grocery store on Main. I waited on the sidewalk until my grandfather nodded in the direction of the store. That was my cue to go inside and purchase a Tootsie Roll, on credit. It only cost a penny, but it was not a foregone conclusion that I would get one every trip to town. Occasionally, he wouldn't nod, but I would enter the store anyway and loiter around the cash register long enough for Pearl to sneak me one, which always came with strict instructions not to tell my grandfather. She was afraid of him. Eli Chandler was a poor man, but he was intensely proud. He would starve to death before he took free food, which, on his list, included Tootsie Rolls. He would've beaten me with a stick if he knew I had accepted a piece of candy, so Pearl Watson had no trouble swearing me to secrecy. But this time I got the nod. As always, Pearl was dusting the counter when I entered and gave her a stiff hug. Then I grabbed a Tootsie Roll from the jar next to the cash register. I signed the charge slip with great flair, and Pearl inspected my penmanship. "It's getting better, Luke," she said. "Not bad for a seven-year-old," I said. Because of my mother, I had been practicing my name in cursive writing for two years. "Where's Pop?" I asked. They were the only adults I knew who insisted I call them by their "first" names, but only in the store when no one else was listening. If a customer walked in, then it was suddenly Mr. and Mrs. Watson. I told no one but my mother this, and she told me she was certain no other child held such privilege. "In the back, putting up stock," Pearl said. "Where's your grandfather?" It was Pearl's calling in life to monitor the movements of the town's population, so any question was usually answered with another. "The Tea Shoppe, checking on the Mexicans. Can I go back there?" I was determined to outquestion her. "Better not. Y'all using hill people, too?" "If we can find them. Eli says they don't come down like they used to. He also thinks they're all half crazy. Where's Champ?" Champ was the store's ancient beagle, which never left Pop's side. Pearl grinned whenever I called my grandfather by his first name. She was about to ask me a question when the small bell clanged as the door opened and closed. A genuine Mexican walked in, alone and timid, as they all seemed to be at first. Pearl nodded politely at the new customer. I shouted, "Buenos das, seor!" The Mexican grinned and said sheepishly, "Buenos das," before disappearing into the back of the store. "They're good people," Pearl said under her breath, as if the Mexican spoke English and might be offended by something nice she said. I bit into my Tootsie Roll and chewed it slowly while rewrapping and pocketing the other half. "Eli's worried about payin' them too much," I said. With a customer in the store, Pearl was suddenly busy again, dusting and straightening around the only cash register. "Eli worries about everything," she said. "He's a farmer." "Are you going to be a farmer?" "No ma'am. A baseball player." "For the Cardinals?" "Of course." Pearl hummed for a bit while I waited for the Mexican. I had some more Spanish I was anxious to try. The old wooden shelves were bursting with fresh groceries. I loved the store during picking season because Pop filled it from floor to ceiling. The crops were coming in, and money was changing hands. Pappy opened the door just wide enough to stick his head in. "Let's go," he said; then, "Howdy, Pearl." "Howdy, Eli," she said as she patted my head and sent me away. "Where are the Mexicans?"

I asked Pappy when we were outside. "Should be in later this afternoon." We got back in the truck and left town in the direction of Jonesboro, where my grandfather always found the hill people.... We parked on the shoulder of the highway, near the intersection of a gravel road. In Pappy's opinion, it was the best spot in the county to catch the hill people. I wasn't so sure. He'd been trying to hire some for a week with no results. We sat on the tailgate in the scorching sun in complete silence for half an hour before the first truck stopped. It was clean and had good tires. If we were lucky enough to find hill people, they would live with us for the next two months. We wanted folks who were neat, and the fact that this truck was much nicer than Pappy's was a good sign. "Afternoon," Pappy said when the engine was turned off. "Howdy," said the driver. "Where y'all from?" asked Pappy. "Up north of Hardy." "With no traffic around, my grandfather stood on the pavement, a pleasant express..."