

COVER STORY

"And you had trouble with the fastballs last week."

"Yes sir. They're awfully fast."

"Well, if you can't hit a fastball and you can't hit a curve, what can you hit?"

"A change-up, if I know it's coming."

"I see. Look, I was once a pitcher, and pitchers can be cruel when they spot weaknesses."

"I've never liked pitchers."

"Well, they show up at every game."

"I despise them."

"Your grades are not too impressive."

"Yes sir, I'm sort of drifting right now."

"I suggest you forget about baseball and hit the books."

"I think you're right."

ANOTHER UNIVERSITY, ANOTHER MAJOR

A semester later, the trio made their way Mississippi State University. "The rumors about the women didn't pan out," Grisham said. "Most importantly, Bubba grew a beard and decided he wanted to study forestry."

Grisham found a home at State, "but then there were more rumors about loose women at Ole Miss, so off they went," he joked. "They eventually got degrees from Ole Miss."

When Grisham showed up unannounced at the admissions office at State, he had no transcript and no paperwork. The office kindly took his check, only to see it bounce.

His future seemed less clear. He had changed his major three times in three semesters and decided he would take a shot at finance.

It only took him a few classes to figure out finance held no future for him, either.

Inspired by a talk with a Vietnam veteran who was majoring in accounting and planning to be a lawyer, he decided to follow suit and dedicated

himself to his studies.

He traded his dream of baseball for a dream of becoming a tax lawyer making millions representing the rich, maybe even baseball players.

Each morning, he read *The Wall Street Journal* in hopes of preparing himself for that world.

In a business correspondence class, a professor sent Grisham a note saying how easy his writing was to read. It was the first time anyone had complimented his writing.

Although some former classmates said Grisham caught "novel fever" before graduating from Mississippi State in 1977, he joked, "I don't remember contracting novel fever in college. I contracted a few other things which should not be repeated."

A LIFE IN LAW

In 1981, Grisham graduated from the University of Mississippi School of Law. He returned to Southaven, married and practiced law with Larry Vaughn.

They opened their office on Stateline Road. "We liked it because it was all glass in front," Vaughn said. "We thought it was the neatest thing at the time."

Grisham recommended one change. Rather than having clients sit across desks, "we're going to have a round conference table, where we can all sit equal," he said.

Whatever client came in the door, that was the law they practiced. Much of that was family law.

While Grisham saw the big picture, Vaughn repeated to

Grisham they needed to get serious about their bread-and-butter cases that were paying the bills.

At one point, Grisham balked at handling any more divorce cases. "I'd rather starve," he said.

The declaration surprised Vaughn, who knew the cases were bringing in good money.

"John Grisham was in an environment that didn't promote his vision," Vaughn said. "He had to swim upstream. I have to give him credit."

He said Grisham believed handling such cases kept them from seeing the possibility of big ones.

Finally, a few cases they'd dreamed of began to come their way. They represented clients in train collisions, auto crashes, and product liability cases.

"We became tort gurus and the things he's written [about] in books," Vaughn said.

They also saw criminal cases.

In the DeSoto County Courthouse, Grisham handled his first murder case. He became so nervous he had to go to bathroom before delivering his closing statement.

When he did speak, he apologized to the jury for being such a novice. He won anyway.

THE LEGISLATURE

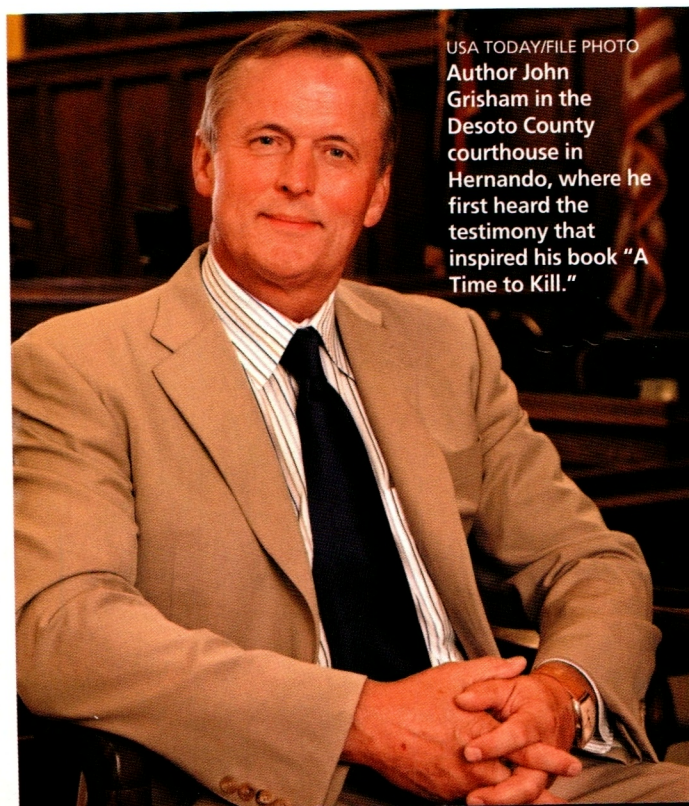
In 1983, Grisham ran for the state Legislature and won. He began serving in January 1984 and earned an \$8,000 salary, which was more than he had brought in during his whole first year as a lawyer.

By March, "I was sick of it," he recalled. "I would have had to serve 20 years before I got any kind of real responsibility chairing a committee. I just felt like it was an enormous waste of time."

He joined fellow freshman lawmaker Bobby Moak for lunch at places such as Denner's, and at night they might hit George Street Grocery, Hal &

GRISHAM COMING TO JACKSON:

On August 22, John Grisham will speak at the first Mississippi Book Festival, to be held at the state Capitol. His novel "Sycamore Row," the sequel to "A Time to Kill," was chosen as the festival's Mississippi Reads book, which people of all ages are encouraged to read. The Mississippi Library Commission is hosting online discussions for book clubs, library groups and classrooms. For more information, visit <http://msbookfestival.com/> or call 601-906-8698.



USA TODAY/FILE PHOTO
Author John Grisham in the Desoto County courthouse in Hernando, where he first heard the testimony that inspired his book "A Time to Kill."