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John Grisham is looking for truth in Chester

The best-selling thriller novelist will chronicle the legal perils of three Chester men in a nonfiction work due this fall, titled “Framed.”



Best-selling author John Grisham.

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by Jesse Bunch

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Across the trove of legal thrillers penned by John Grisham, the best-selling novelist and former lawyer turned Mississippi state politician keenly depicts the deceit and corruption that mar the underbelly of the U.S. legal system.

“This business works on you,” Grisham writes in *The Firm*, his 1991 chart-topping thriller that follows a Harvard law graduate — played by a hot-blooded Tom Cruise in the 1993 film of the same name — who becomes disillusioned with the Southern firm that butters up new hires to mask its sinister inner workings. “When you were in law school you had some noble idea what a lawyer should be. A champion of individual rights; a defender of the Constitution; a guardian of the oppressed; an advocate for your client’s principles. Then after you practice for six months you realize you were nothing but hired guns.”

The idea of a crooked system is something that Grisham, 69, has returned to across his 49 bestsellers. But as much as the novelist is inspired by the decade he spent in the courtroom, it’s rare for Grisham to step outside the realm of fiction.

Then Grisham found himself in Chester, the bankrupt, riverside city just south of Philadelphia.

Grisham, who lives in Virginia, visited in early April to speak with a lawyer who was involved in a 1997 murder case that has recently burst back into the headlines — and is being covered in the novelist’s next nonfiction book.

Dubbed the “Chester Trio,” three local men [were all under age 20 when they were accused of murdering 70-year-old Henrietta Nickens](#) in her apartment. They were later sentenced to essentially life in prison for a crime their legal teams have maintained they did not commit.

Years of appeals from nonprofit criminal justice groups such as the Innocence Project and Centurion Ministries delivered results this spring: [A Delaware County judge ruled in March](#) that newly presented DNA evidence, pointing to an unknown male perpetrator, could lead to a different outcome in their trials.

The fate of Derrick Chappel, Morton Johnson, and Samuel Grasty lies with county prosecutors, who will choose whether to retry the case before their May bail hearing. The men are now in their 40s.

It's a story of an alleged false accusation and unscrupulous police work that Grisham said happens too often in the legal system, and one he'll write about in *Framed*, the novelist's second work of nonfiction.

The book details some of the most egregious wrongful convictions that Grisham says he has encountered, and the Chester Trio story will be one of 10 included.

Framed was written with Jim McCloskey, founder of Centurion Ministries, a nonprofit that seeks to overturn wrongful convictions, and is due out Oct. 8.

Grisham spoke to The Inquirer over the phone and by email, discussing his findings in Chester, his time as a Mississippi lawyer, and his personal revelations on criminal justice reform.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What got you interested in the Chester Trio?

Most of the stories I've known about for a long time. But the Chester Trio is a new one, at least for me. I heard about it during a Centurion board meeting — I'm on the board — and couldn't believe it. Three teenagers pulled off the street and framed for a murder that has never been solved. And given life with no parole.

What do you envision the story looking like in its finished form? Any narrative focuses?

Almost all are linear, beginning with the crime, tracking the investigations as they go off the rails, describing the illegal maneuvering, like watching a car wreck in slow motion. The reader can't believe in mistakes made by the investigators. Trial, conviction, sentencing, prison, the exoneration efforts, and, hopefully freedom.

How does the Chester Trio case compare to other wrongful conviction cases you've seen throughout your career?

They're all terrible. Some involve honest mistakes made by people trying to do what's right. Most, however, involve investigators who don't play by the rules, prosecutors who use lying snitches and bad forensics, and judges who tolerate shoddy legal work.



What was it like visiting Chester? Whom did you speak with, and what new information did you learn about the case?

My first and only visit was last week and was there for only a few hours. I had a good time with Guy Smith, a 50-year veteran of the courts in Chester. He was the original attorney for Morton Johnson, one of the three. Typical lawyer, he can tell stories for hours. Great stories. I hope to visit again soon and meet the three.

You mentioned that your upcoming project will focus on a handful of wrongful conviction stories. Across those cases, what have you learned about how a false accusation or unreliable witness can lead to something as severe as a life sentence — or worse?

Try this unbelievable statistic: In half of all capital cases in which the defendant was convicted and sent to death row, a lying snitch was involved. In the Chester Trio case, the snitch was a 15-year-[old] kid with a criminal record and a drug problem who was facing more time in jail. The police coerced him into [giving] a statement pointing the finger at Sam, Derrick, and Morton. Because of that false testimony, these three have spent the last 25 years in prison.

You helped [petition the Mississippi government to remove the Confederate symbol](#) from its flag. How do you think the Chester Trio's case would have gone over in Mississippi, or another Southern jurisdiction?

Same result because racism is everywhere. From suspicion, investigation, arrest, bail, indictment, counsel, plea agreement, trial, jury selection, verdict, sentencing and parole, Black people are not treated the same as white. True in Pennsylvania, true in Mississippi.

The Chester Trio is a glaring case in point. The Trio are all Black. The police, prosecutors, and virtually all of the jurors were white. Would three white boys from Haverford or Villanova have been treated the same? Of course not! They would never have been suspected or questioned.



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I'm a reporter covering breaking news and all things Philadelphia.