

Despite the lack of any physical evidence, a young man is sentenced to death for the murder of a young woman; and the conviction and sentence are affirmed by the state court system. The setting is Sloan, a fictitious town in East Texas. Nearby real East Texas towns are Marshall, Longview, Denton, and Paris. The missing young woman, Nicole, is white, and the convicted young man, Dante, is black. In the same high school class, she is a popular cheerleader and he is a football star with a good future ahead of him. An anonymous telephone call pointed the police toward Dante, and the girl's gym membership card was found near a local river. The police detective bullied Dante, lied to him, and threatened him with the death penalty for nearly a day. Finally Dante gave a detailed confession, which he later recanted. At trial, the telephone tipster lied because he believed Dante had taken his place as Nicole's boyfriend. The confession and testimony of the jealous former boyfriend convicted Dante. The jury was composed of 12 white people.

Eight years later, still with no body found or direct evidence to tie the young man to the supposed murder, execution is a few days away. The book opens with the visit of a recently released parolee to Keith, a Lutheran minister in Topeka, Kansas. The man says he has a lethal brain tumor and will die soon, that he is struggling with the burden of his past actions, that the wrong man is about to be executed in Texas. The minister struggles with his own responsibilities and convictions, and ultimately decides to help the man tell his story in hopes of stopping the execution.

Dante's lawyer, Ronnie, is a man who embodies the best and worst characteristics – driven, passionate, belligerent, fearless in negotiations and at trial, and willing to offend and/or sue just about anyone. But he signed on to Dante's defense, and he won't give up. We have all seen lawyers on TV going to the mat for their clients. Grisham makes the breed almost admirable, flawed though this one is.

The families of Nicole and Dante deserve mention. Nicole's mother fills the slot of the grieving parent who, deprived of real answers, focuses her grief into sharpened hate. She works just as hard as Ronnie to keep media attention on her daughter and the convicted Dante, but for a different purpose. Dante's mother and extended family bear their grief with quiet dignity and then work to reconcile the black and white communities of Sloan.

In novel form, this story functions as a condemnation of the death penalty and calls into question legal systems in states where capital punishment is practiced. Keith, the Lutheran minister from Topeka, is the character who, apart from lawyer Ronnie, rehearses his thoughts about this aspect of society's desire to feel safe and secure. The role of churches and ministers also plays a part in this story. Some pastors will not take an official stance on social and political issues or preach on them from the pulpit. Others see their pulpit as the right place to preach about political issues, even political candidates, and seek to guide their church members in action.

Do we not all want good to triumph over evil? I do. I feel satisfaction (vindication?) when the bad guy loses at the end of the book or film. But that anyone rejoices at the death of another person – that is something different.

A novel or film isn't the best venue or format for the learning of history, of course, but a novel or film can inspire some greater learning about historical events. This novel can do the same for the social issue of capital punishment. A person who might never spend 12-15 hours reading up on capital punishment moratorium initiatives in state legal systems could very well spend those hours listening to this story – and thinking about the issues involved.

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