The story begins with Ron Williamson, who has returned to his hometown after failed attempts at playing for various minor league baseball teams, including the Oakland A's and the Ft. Lauderdale Yankees. This failure leads to a bout of depression, which results in a drinking problem.

Very early in the morning of December 8, 1982, the body of Debra Sue Carter, a 21-year-old cocktail waitress at the Coachlight Club (located in Ada), and a resident of Ada, was found in the bedroom of her garage apartment. She had been beaten, raped and suffocated. After five years of false starts and shoddy police work by the Ada police, Williamson—along with his "drinking buddy", Dennis Fritz—was charged, tried and convicted of the rape and murder charges in 1987-1988. Williamson was sentenced to death. Fritz, meanwhile, was given a life sentence. Fritz's own wife had been murdered seven years earlier in 1975 and he was raising his only daughter when arrested.
Grisham's book describes the aggressive and misguided mission of the Ada police to solve Carter's murder mystery. Forced dream confessions, unreliable witnesses and flimsy evidence were used to convict Williamson and Fritz. Since a death row conviction automatically sets in motion a series of appeals, a fresh look into the details of the trial, especially by the Innocence Project and Williamson's attorney, Mark Barrett, exposed several glaring lacunae in the prosecution's case and the credibility of the prosecution's witnesses. Brady v. Maryland, a case that had been ignored until after the sentencing, was acknowledged. A retrial was ordered by Frank H. Seay, a U.S. District Court judge. After suffering through a conviction and 11 years on death row, Williamson and Fritz were finally exonerated by DNA evidence, and released on April 15, 1999.

Ron Williamson suffered deep and irreversible psychological scars during his incarceration and eventual wait on death row. He was intermittently treated for manic depression, personality disorders, alcoholism and mild schizophrenia. It was later proven that he was indeed mentally ill (and hence unfit to be either tried or placed on death row
in the first place). The State of Oklahoma and Ada and Pontotoc County officials never admitted any errors, even threatening to re-arrest him, though they did settle a wrongful-conviction case brought as a result of Williamson's incarceration.

Another criminal from Ada, Glen Gore, was eventually convicted of the original crime on June 24, 2003, and was sentenced to death at first, but his death sentence was overturned in August 2005; he was eventually convicted at his second trial on June 21, 2006 and sentenced by Judge Landrith to life in prison without parole which was required by law due to a jury deadlock on sentencing.

Williamson and Fritz sued and won a large settlement ($500,000.00) in 2003 from the City of Ada, and an out of court settlement with the State of Oklahoma for an undisclosed amount. By 2004, Williamson was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver, and died soon thereafter on December 4, 2004 in a Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, nursing home. Dennis Fritz, meanwhile, returned to Kansas City, where he lives with his daughter, Elizabeth as of 2006. In 2006, Fritz went on to publish his own account of being wrongly
convicted in his book titled *Journey toward Justice*.

The story also includes accounts (as sub plots) of the false conviction, trial and sentencing of Tommy Ward and Karl Fontenot in the abduction, rape, and purported murder of Denice Haraway, as well as the false conviction of Greg Wilhoit in the rape and murder of his estranged wife, Kathy. All the men were, at one point of time, incarcerated in the same death row. About two decades before Grisham's book, Ward and Fontenot's wrongful convictions were detailed in a book published in 1987 called *The Dreams of Ada*, by Robert Mayer.

Los Angelas Times Book Review

As a novelist, John Grisham had an advantage in turning his hand to nonfiction for the first time in "The Innocent Man." He knows how to tell a story swiftly and cleanly; he knows that we want to read about people's lives, not just about the ills of the U.S. justice system. So he keeps his focus tightly on the two men, Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz, who were convicted of raping and killing a 21-year-old cocktail waitress, Debra Sue Carter, in Ada, Okla., in 1982.
In Grisham's telling, Williamson was hardly a model citizen. A former high school baseball star who never got over his failure to make the major leagues, he had been acquitted of two previous rape charges. He was a moocher and a noisy drunk who couldn't hold a job and displayed symptoms of manic depression and schizophrenia. He had become, in short, a likely suspect. In Ada, pop. 16,000, only members of Williamson's family saw much amiss when he was found guilty in 1988 and sentenced to death.

Nor did Oklahoma's appellate courts find anything wrong with his trial, though the prosecution's case, as Grisham describes it, was a flimsy assemblage of junk science (including microscopic comparisons of hairs that Williamson's attorney, a blind man, was unable to challenge), testimony by jailhouse snitches and a coerced confession in which a dream of the defendant's was presented as his actual memory of the crime.

Williamson spent a decade on Oklahoma's death row in McAlester, Okla., first in a crumbling old building with vile food and no heating or air conditioning, later in a "modern" underground facility with cramped
cells and no natural light or fresh air. Already mentally unstable, he became psychotic and suicidal yet received little treatment because authorities reckoned he would be dying soon anyway.

In 1994, Williamson came within five days of death by lethal injection before he was granted a stay of execution.

As for Fritz, the evidence against him was even slimmer. He received a life sentence, Grisham says, simply because he was an acquaintance of Williamson's and had a similar record of petty crime. Detectives theorized that Carter's injuries and the damage to her apartment pointed to two assailants, not one: "They needed another suspect. Fritz was their man."

In 1999, DNA evidence finally cleared Williamson and Fritz and pointed to the real killer, whom police had inexplicably ignored, although he was the last person seen with the victim. Before that, a hard-nosed but fair-minded federal judge, Frank H. Seay, had spotted the problems the state courts missed and ordered a new trial. A shattered man, Williamson was released without apology or
compensation and died five years later at 51.

Researching this book, Grisham says, "exposed me to the world of wrongful convictions, something that I, even as a former lawyer, had never spent much time thinking about. This is not a problem peculiar to Oklahoma, far from it. Wrongful convictions occur every month in every state in the country, and the reasons are all varied and all the same — bad police work, junk science, faulty eyewitness identifications, bad defense lawyers, lazy prosecutors, arrogant prosecutors."

But isn't there more to it than that? From a nonfiction book, we expect a diagnosis as well as a story. If wrongful convictions in the United States are common — and the new tool of DNA testing indicates they haven't been rare — then why is this so, and what should we do about it? Grisham is critical of individuals like the trial judge, the prosecutor and the Ada police, about whom all that can be said is that they railroaded Williamson and Fritz but didn't frame them: They sincerely believed the two were guilty. But Grisham skimps on historical context.
Grisham does observe how eager Oklahoma was to implement the death penalty after the U.S. Supreme Court re-legalized it in 1976, but he doesn't point to the tough-on-crime rhetoric triggered by the race riots of the 1960s, the drug scourges of the 1970s and 1980s, punitive trends in penology and the popularity of rule-bending cop heroes like Dirty Harry or "24's" Jack Bauer. Congress recently approved a bill denying habeas corpus rights to terror suspects — and it was a habeas corpus petition by Williamson's lawyers, read by members of Judge Seay's staff, that gave him his first real chance at justice. If due process is under siege in America, it isn't just in small towns.

No, Grisham is still a novelist at heart, and what we take from "The Innocent Man" is the story and the people — the functionaries here and there in the legal system who spoke up just in time; the other innocent convicts whose cases appear on the periphery; Williamson's sisters, Annette Hudson and Renee Simmons, who never stopped supporting him even after he had gone crazy; and Williamson himself, emerging from his ordeal gray and toothless, unable to avoid bars and strip clubs, stay on his medication or
live by himself, but clinging to a stubborn, twilit dignity.

Discussion Questions

1. What were your initial impressions of Ron Williamson? How did your attitudes toward him shift throughout *The Innocent Man*?

2. Discuss the setting of Ada, Oklahoma, as if it were one of the characters in the book. What were your opinions as Grisham described Ada’s landscape—a vibrant small town dotted with relics of a long-gone oil boom—and the region’s history of Wild West justice?

3. In your opinion, why was Glen Gore overlooked as a suspect? Were mistakes made as a result of media pressure to find justice for Debbie Carter and her family? How did Dennis Fritz’s knowledge of the drug scandal affect the manhunt? Was injustice in Ada simply due to arrogance?

4. How was Dennis different from Ron? Why didn’t Dennis confess, while Tommy Ward and Karl Fotenot did? Did refusing to confess help Dennis in the long run?

5. As you read about the court proceedings, what reactions did you have to the trial-by-
jury process? Have you served on a jury, or been a defendant before a jury? If so, how did your experience compare to the one described in *The Innocent Man*?

6. What are the most significant factors in getting a fair trial, or an intelligent investigation? Does personality matter more than logic in our judicial system? How would you have voted if you had heard the cases against Ron and Dennis?

7. How does new crime-lab technology make you feel about the history of convictions in America? What might future generations use to replace lie-detector tests or fingerprint databases? What are the limitations of technology in solving crimes?

8. How did the early 1980s time period affect the way Debbie’s last day unfolded, and the way her killer was hunted? Would a small-town woman be less likely to trust a Glen Gore today than twenty-five years ago? Were Ron’s high-rolling days in Tulsa spurred by a culture of experimentation and excess?

9. How did the descriptions of Oklahoma’s death row compare to what you had previously believed? What distinctions in treatment should be made between death-
row inmates and the rest of the prison population?

10. What is the status of the death penalty in the state where you live? What have you discovered about the death penalty as a result of reading *The Innocent Man*?

11. In his author’s note, Grisham says that he discovered the Ada saga while reading Ron’s obituary. What research did he draw on in creating a portrait of this man he never knew? In what ways does *The Innocent Man* read like a novel? What elements keep the storytelling realistic?

12. Discuss the aftermath of Ron’s and Dennis’s exoneration. How did you balance your reaction to the triumph of Ron’s large cash settlement (a rare victory in such civil suits) and the fact that it would have to be paid for by local taxpayers?

13. *The Dreams of Ada* (back in print from Broadway Books) figures prominently in Ron’s experience, though the men convicted in that murder are still behind bars. What is the role of journalists in ensuring public safety? Why are they sometimes able to uncover truths that law enforcement officials don’t see?
14. Grisham is an avid baseball fan. How did his descriptions of Ron playing baseball serve as a metaphor for Ron’s rise and fall, and his release?

15. To what extent do you believe mental health should be a factor in determining someone’s competence to stand trial, or in determining guilt or innocence?

16. In his author’s note, Grisham writes, “Ada is a nice town, and the obvious question is: When will the good guys clean house?” What are the implications of this question for communities far beyond Ada? What can you do to help “clean house” in America’s judicial system?