

*A Painted House*

John Grisham, 2001

Doubleday, 388 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

This is not your typical John Grisham book. It is not his fast-paced, cleverly plotted, lawyer-embroiled thriller. In fact, words are brought to each page of *A Painted House* at the deliberate pace of the time and place about which they are written. Grisham, as ever fluid in his writing style, is not in a hurry to tell this tale, narrated with humorous insight by seven-year old, Luke Chandler.

The time and place is 1952, in a fertile flood plain south of the Ozarks in Arkansas. Three generations of Chandlers scratch out an existence as cotton farmers on an eighty acre farm along the banks of the St. Francis River. Their house has indeed gone unpainted over its fifty or so years, with scarce money used for commodities more important than paint, like flour, sugar, coffee and parts for farm equipment. This condition is pointed out by even poorer hill people, who come to pick the cotton during harvest, yet have a painted house in which to return home.

The slight dramatic tension of the story comes from the mysterious behavior and unpredictable violence of the migrant hill people and Mexican laborers, as they camp and toil on the Chandler farm during the searing autumn heat of cotton picking season. The uncertainty of the harvest is balanced against the regularity of life's rituals such as predawn awakenings to fetch the eggs and milk from the barn, large family meals over discussions of the weather, Saturday visits to town, and Sunday church. Baseball, the most ritualistic of American games, is like a scenery backdrop within the story, as Luke worships the St. Louis Cardinals during the era of Stan Musial, no matter what their place in the standings might be.

The women of *A Painted House* offer us the most well-developed characters. Gran is the matriarch, whose quick-minded common sense solves more than one sticky problem. Her daughter-in-law, Luke's mother, is a decent woman who endures the family's poor circumstances as she silently motivates them to find a better life elsewhere. Each has a generous spirit and inner strength that resonates as one of the core truths of the book.

These women are a stark contrast to several of the men. Hank Spruill is the brutal son of the hill people, and Cowboy, a Mexican with an air of danger about him. Grisham creates a dance where it's inevitable that these two adversaries will violently clash at some point. Luke tells a steady story, and at times it's quite a burden for him, as he shares his affection towards pretty teenage girls and carries the weight of keeping many heavy secrets.

*A Painted House* is a well crafted nostalgic tale that a reader can quickly move through as a reminder of a time in our past when the quiet, slow life on the surface was actually pitching and churning more deeply within its seams. It's possible that Grisham wants us to think of John Steinbeck's classic *Grapes of Wrath*, as we read *A Painted House*, though it lacks the depth of that epic.

Luke narrates late in the book, "*Just after Pappy thanked the Lord for the food, saying nothing about the weather or the crops, my father grimly announced that the backwaters had begun trickling across the main field road into the back forty acres. This development was absorbed with little comment. We were numb to bad news.*" We're left unsure whether a coat of paint will really cover the plight of being poor, agrarian or rural.