

The Summons
John Grisham, 2002
Doubleday, 341 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

The Summons is not John Grisham's best effort. Where most of his previous thrillers have kept readers breathless with dizzy anticipation, this book seems ordinary. It lacks the overlays of subplots within a compelling primary story-line. There is a minor twist at the end, which many readers will see coming far in advance.

Grisham has never been known for his character development. The few figures who make it on these pages will fail to register as memorable. Even our protagonist, Ray Atlee, the eldest son of Judge Reuben Atlee, doesn't have enough depth to hold much interest. Unfortunately, he is nearly all the reader has, with the few remaining characters being mere sketches. Some of these, like a graduating co-ed, enter the story and go no where. Others, like three criminal brothers, fail to enter the story at all. The reader isn't given much to work with, and Grisham is no Hemingway, so this minimalist approach essentially creates a void left unfilled.

Faithful readers will recognize the locale of the story, Ford County, Mississippi, where retired Judge Atlee presided for most of his adult life. His death being imminent, he summons his two sons to the family home for what is expected to be estate-related matters. The Judge is found dead upon the arrival of Ray from his home in Virginia, where he is a law professor. The other son Forrest hasn't stepped foot in the home for many years. *"Forrest was a different set of issues and problems, much more complicated than a dying, reclusive old father hell-bent on giving away his money. Forrest was a living, walking disaster, a boy of thirty-six whose mind has been deadened by every legal and illegal substance known to American culture."* Ray is recently divorced from a wife who left him for a flamboyant business tycoon. He takes up flying as therapy. *"Flying was a bargain, and much more effective, though it was a very fine shrink who'd suggested he pick up a new hobby, and quickly."* It too serves the story as a diversion.

The plot turns on Ray's discovery of \$3 million in cash, stored in stationary boxes behind a couch in his father's den. We follow Ray's pursuit of finding out the money's source, whether it was legitimately acquired, and his constant hiding of it. Where this leads is rather predictable, which in today's Gulf Coast, means casinos and fast-talking personal injury lawyers, and probable thriller circumstances, such as Ray being followed, and his apartment broken into by unseen assailants who presumably are after the money. This world is presented in pedestrian fashion.

During the story, Forrest is on and off the wagon, and stumbles upon a job opportunity that later seems to hold possibilities of connecting the plot in a layer of complexity. It's a missed opportunity that inexplicably goes nowhere. Nor is it a red herring thrown in to steer the reader in another direction. Like the light-weight characters and tame plot, it simply fizzles out. The same can be said for Forrest's suspected collusion, that is revealed in the closing pages.

Other Grisham novels have presented intricate criminal plots on a platform of a moral redemption. 'Money corrupts' seems to be the conclusion of the simple morality lesson in *The Summons*. The book's end is as unsatisfying as what came before it. However smooth the writing, Grisham has done better in previous novels. Don't expect much and your expectations will be met.