

BOOK REVIEWS

THE CHAMBER / JOHN GRISHAM

LONDON: CENTURY, 1994.

\$29.95

As most of the world knows, a John Grisham novel generally involves a lawyer-hero - or law student-hero, in the case of *The Pelican Brief* - who is involved in some kind of struggle, or who faces some kind of dilemma. For Mitch McDeere in *The Firm*, it was a struggle against his law firm, a front for the Chicago mafia. For Darby Shaw in *The Pelican Brief*, it was a struggle to escape assassins sent to kill her by the man responsible for the killing of two US Supreme Court Justices. For Jake Brigance in *A Time to Kill*, it was a struggle to defend a black man charged with killing the white men responsible for the rape of his daughter in the deep South. And for Reggie Love in *The Client*, it was a struggle to keep her "client", a small boy, from being killed, again by the mafia.

Until *The Chamber*, these struggles have usually lacked a moral dimension. The protagonist has always been too busy trying to stay alive, too busy trying to escape the mafia or corrupt businessmen, to worry much about the morality or ethics of their actions or the actions of others. *The Chamber*, however, is quite different from John Grisham's four previous novels. Although the two main characters are involved in related struggles to stay alive (well, one of them, anyway), the novel also offers a debate on the morality of capital punishment. *The Chamber* is Grisham's most ambitious, "serious" book to date. While it is not the most entertaining of his books - I have yet to read a novel that is as entertaining and enjoyable as *A Time to Kill* and that keeps the pages turning as that novel does (high praise, I know) - it is the most thoughtful and thought-provoking.

Sam Cayhill killed two Jewish children in a 1967 Ku Klux Klan bombing. He now sits on Mississippi's Death Row, only weeks away from execution. Adam Hall, a young lawyer just out of law school (where, we are reminded at various times in the book, he graduated second in his class and edited the Law Review) persuades his employer, a large Chicago law firm and the firm previously employed by Cayhill before he dispensed with their services, to send him to Mississippi to defend Cayhill. As it turns out, Adam is Sam's grandson, a fact initially only known to Adam. And Adam has joined this Chicago law firm with the intention of defending his grandfather. Why a young, Northern liberal lawyer seeks to defend an old, Southern racist on Death Row, family connection notwithstanding, is a question dealt with early in the novel. Subsequently, the novel explores the relationship which develops between Sam and Adam and their last-ditch attempts to keep Sam from the gas chamber. Along the way, Adam (and the reader) faces the morality of capital punishment, the ugliness of racial prejudice and bigotry and all the questions associated with both.

Unusually for a Grisham novel - although not so unusual for other novels in this genre (for example, Richard North Patterson's *Degree of Guilt* and Scott Turow's *Burden of Proof*) - *The Chamber* almost demands an emotional reaction. The issues with which this novel deals are, by their nature, sensitive. And the main characters are often fragile and uncertain. The final chapters of this book are sometimes really difficult to read because of the issues involved. I didn't think John Grisham had it in him.

The Chamber is an excellent book.

David Hodgkinson

High Court of Australia