

# **An Open Book: A Candid Conversation with John Grisham**

By Emily Daniels

There have been many outstanding alumni to grace the halls of MSU's College of Business, but certainly one of the most well known is 1977 accounting graduate and best-selling author John Grisham.

He was born in 1955 in Jonesboro, AR, before his family finally settled in the town of Southaven, MS, just south of Memphis. Young Grisham, like many children, dreamt of one day becoming a professional baseball player, achieving fame and fortune while doing something he loved. Little did he know that he would achieve fame and fortune, but by way of another favorite pastime – writing.

Grisham, the author of best-selling novels such as *The Firm* and *A Time to Kill*, has sold more than 275 million books in his 30-year career. But before his name became synonymous with legal thrillers, Grisham was an accounting student in the College of Business. Though he originally intended to practice tax law, he ultimately turned his attention to criminal law. Grisham went on to practice criminal defense and personal litigation law for nearly 10 years. The courtroom was where Grisham's imagination came to life, inspiring most of his critically acclaimed novels.

We recently interviewed John Grisham to learn more about the man behind the international fame and success, with topics ranging from his time at Mississippi State to his once hobby-turned-writing career, sprinkled with some just-for-fun questions along the way.

**What made you choose to attend Mississippi State University for your undergraduate degree?**

*JG: I sort of stumbled into the place. It was my third college in two years. I was drifting, pretty indifferent, not too worried about grades but very excited about the next party. All that changed at State. I grew up overnight and got serious about not only my education but life itself.*

**Before majoring in accounting, were there any other majors that you were also interested in?**

*JG: No, I was always in business. An upperclassman, a guy I really admired, explained that accounting was the toughest major. I was planning to become a tax lawyer, as was he, and I needed that foundation.*

**Was there anything in particular that you enjoyed most about it? A favorite class, subject, professor, etc.?**

**JG:** *Smokin' Joe Curry taught tax, and he was a ball of fire. He made the course practical and a lot of fun. Truthfully, though, it was hard to enjoy Intermediate Cost and Auditing.*

**Do you ever wish you had chosen a different major? Perhaps English or political science?**

**JG:** *Not really. I wish I'd taken the time to read more, especially the classics, and I suppose an English Lit curriculum would have required that. But, no regrets.*

**Do you remember any advice that a professor gave you?**

**JG:** *Scotty Wofford advised us to never bet on the Bulldog football team. I think this was after another bad loss. I have followed his advice.*

**Is there someone who made a positive impact on your life? If so, why and how did this person make an impact?**

**JG:** *There was one professor I'll never forget. During my first semester at State, I, typically, arrived on campus late and without the benefit of proper registration. They stuck me in a German class on the top floor of Lee Hall. I was already thinking about transferring. The professor was a refugee from Eastern Europe and a man with a colorful past. He spoke ten languages. Being from small town Mississippi, I had never met anyone like him. When he wasn't showing off his languages, he would regale us with stories of his childhood in Hungary, his early years in Paris and Berlin and his escape to London to avoid the Nazis. I'm sure there was a lot of fiction involved, but we didn't care. He was a wonderful teacher who treasured every day, and we soaked up the German. I made an A and vowed to see the world.*

**Do you have any favorite memories that you can share from your time here at MSU?**

**JG:** *Oh yes, but I'd rather not go into all the details. In the spring, after the break [when] the girls had tans, we would sit for hours on the steps of McCool Hall and watch them walk by. Later, a party would materialize.*

**In 1983, you ran and were elected to the 7<sup>th</sup> District of the Mississippi House of Representatives, serving until 1990. What made you decide to get into politics, and what made you decide to get out?**

**JG:** *I got in because I was embarrassed that I lived in the only state without a kindergarten system at the time. I got out because I couldn't adjust to the loss of privacy.*

**You have become a leader in the literary field – is there any one thing that you would attribute to your success?**

**JG:** *God gave me the ability to write clearly and tell compelling stories. I didn't learn this. I didn't study it. It sounds so simple, yet it is quite difficult.*

**Have you always enjoyed writing?**

**JG:** *No, I never wrote fiction until I was 30 years old. Never dreamed of it. I wasn't sure I was any good at writing until The Firm sold a zillion copies.*

**Did you ever get frustrated when you were first starting out as a writer? How did you cope with rejection?**

**JG:** *Since it was only a hobby, I prepared myself for both the frustration and the rejection. I didn't take it serious and was prepared to drop the hobby after two books. I was busy as a lawyer and a legislator and had a good life without the writing.*

**Do you ever read any of your critics' reviews? Why or why not?**

**JG:** *When you write popular fiction, the critics despise you. I despise them right back.*

**Since writing is now a career for you, are there any other hobbies you've pursued, or would like to pursue?**

**JG:** *Six years ago I made the mistake of taking up golf, a sport I had zealously avoided until then. I was 53 at the time, far too old to indulge in such a foolish game. But, I'm hooked.*

**I've heard you mention in previous interviews that you didn't particularly enjoy practicing law or being in the courtroom. What inspires you to write so many legal thrillers?**

**JG:** *The fear of returning to the law office and the courtroom. It's very motivational.*

**Which of your works are you most proud of?**

**JG:** *A Time to Kill will always be my favorite. It was the first; it's the most autobiographical; and it's now the most popular of all.*

**Did your time at MSU inspire any story lines, characters, or scenery in any of your novels?**

**JG:** *Not yet, but I'm not finished.*

**How much time do you spend researching prior to writing a story?**

**JG:** *The range is a week to a decade, depending on the issue and the story.*

**Are there any writers that you would consider to be your mentors or role models?**

**JG:** *Not really. When you create, in whatever medium, it's difficult to follow others. We all strive for originality, and we fight the temptation to be like someone we admire.*

**What do you like to read when you're not writing?**

**JG:** *A mix of fiction and non-fiction. The non-fiction usually deals with various issues I'm thinking about exploring with fiction.*

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**We have a large number of students in the College of Business who are engaged in starting their own businesses – at least 30 different start-ups at any given time. Like you, they have an entrepreneurial spirit. Do you think there is something about growing up in rural areas like Mississippi that cultivates this kind of entrepreneurial spirit?**

**JG:** *No more so than anywhere else in this country. The American dream is still very much alive. Most of us still believe that with a good idea, a lot of sweat and a bit of luck, we can start and build a company. Maybe take it public. Maybe strike gold. I've been lucky enough to travel a lot in the past two decades. This dream doesn't exist anywhere else.*

**Speaking of dreams, if there were one person you could meet, real or imaginary, living or deceased, who would it be and why?**

**JG:** *Mark Twain, the younger version. He was a bitter, nasty old man.*

**Describe a perfect day in the life of John Grisham.**

**JG:** *An early walk on the beach with a cigar, lunch with friends, nine holes of golf, a book on the porch, wine with Renee, dinner, in bed by 10. No work whatsoever. You have nearly 1.5 million “likes” on your Facebook page, and I have noticed that you often surprise your fans with a live Q & A session, allowing you to interact with your fans from across the globe all at once. Do you think that social networking has changed society for better or worse?*

**JG:** *The bad outweighs the good. That Facebook page is maintained by someone at Doubleday/Random House. I don't tweet because I don't want anyone to know what I'm doing or thinking; likewise, I don't really care what anyone else is doing or thinking.*

**How has fame and success changed your everyday life? Was it everything you hoped it would be?**

**JG:** *It would be difficult to count the ways. I don't have a real job, with a boss, deadlines, meetings, pressures, etc. I enjoy a lot of freedom but don't take it for granted. Renee and I are thankful every day for what's been given to us.*

**If you had your career to do all over again, would you choose the same path?**

**JG:** *Yes. Though I struggled as a lawyer and was frustrated as a legislator, I'm happy to have those experiences. It's part of life, of living. And I would never have written the first word had I not been a small town lawyer scrambling to make a buck. I will always think of myself as a lawyer, and with some pride. As for the writing, I would be foolish to say I would change anything.*

**Just for fun... How many cowbells do you currently own?**

**JG:** *Three that I can think of.*