

The Rain Painter Takes A Bow

Work Of Norfolk Artist Appears In Latest Grisham Novel

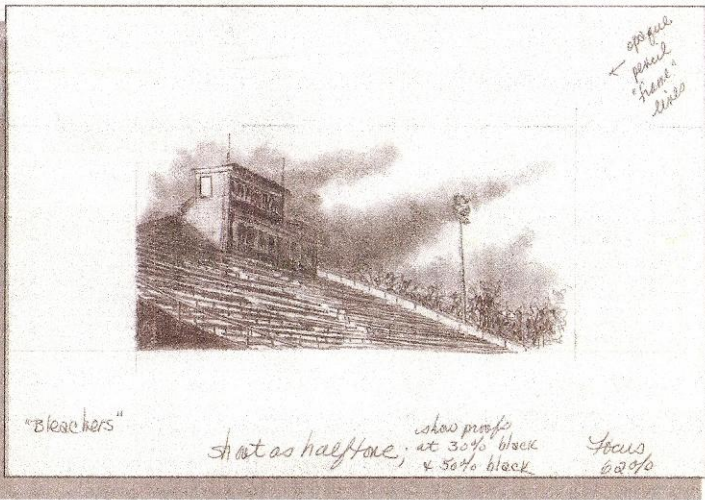
BY JILL COLEY

ON A RAINY afternoon in May, Louis Jones drove his van to Old Dominion University's Foreman Field. A fence barred him from entering or peering through, so he pulled himself up to look over. He made half a dozen trips between the fence and his van, where he sketched two drawings to submit for the title page of John Grisham's *The Bleachers*, released nationally Sept. 9.

The Bleachers, a departure from Grisham's legal thrillers, recounts the return of an aging, high school star quarterback, Neely Crenshaw, to the site of his former glory. Crenshaw and his fellow Messina Spartans converge to bury the coach who led them to athletic heights 15 years earlier.

Maria Carella, the interior art editor at Doubleday, publisher of *The Bleachers*, called Louis on Friday to say she needed the drawings Monday. Familiar with the outline of *The Bleachers*, Louis turned to his own high school days for inspiration. When he was a student at Granby High School in the late '60s, the football team had no field of its own and used ODU's Foreman Field for its home games. Built in 1935, the field is now used primarily for ODU women's field hockey and lacrosse.

With the rain patting his van roof, Louis drew the deserted stand and the press box, with the light tower, erect and hopeful, rising behind them.



"Foreman Field represents for me the first cold breath of fall," Louis says. He felt it was important that the field signify something true to him. "If it's true for me, it's probably true for other people," he says.

Carella didn't like the first drawing, nor did she care for the second one he submitted, Louis says. Within a month, he sent her four more. The editor presented all six to Grisham, and he chose the first one Louis drew.

Louis and his wife Susan own and operate the Louis and Susan Jones Art Gallery in the marbled lobby of downtown Norfolk's Dominion Tower. The gallery features the owners' artwork, and the art of their immediate family and one family friend. Throughout the workday, people stop by

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the gallery to enjoy the peace and the easy conversation of Louis and Susan.

In the Jones' company, it does not take long to enter the ether of aesthetics and philosophy.

"We talk to a lot of people," Susan says. "Art brings out a lot of emotions." Their artistic vision focuses on positive images, nothing dark or negative.

"There's enough of that in the world," Louis says.

Three years ago, Grisham stopped by the waterside gallery and enjoyed a similar conversation with Louis. Only Louis did not know he was talking to one of the best-selling authors in the world until the following week when Carella called him. Grisham wanted him to do the title page art for his book *The Painted House*.

"The funny thing was," Louis says, "I was reading *The Rainmaker*. It was sitting right there on my desk, and his picture was on the back."

"He's one of the good guys," Louis says of Grisham. "He goes with his instincts, and he really gives back."

Virginia Business conjectures Grisham's net worth to be \$120 million. It is reported that the author donated \$280,000 to Charlottesville's Legal Aid Justice Center. The profits from his novel *Skipping Christmas*, according to Louis, go to the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

For the title page of *The Painted House*, Louis received a complete manuscript prior to release. He mined the text for details, paying attention to the placement of the porches, the height of the cotton in the fields, and the pin oak trees that grew near the house.

Louis is not new to the publishing world. Eight years ago, Hampton Roads Publishing commissioned him to create the cover art for Neale Donald Walsch's meditations book, *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue*.

After *Conversations* sold 100,000 copies, the publishers Penguin Putnam bought

the rights and with it, Louis's contract. Normally, large publishing houses pay artists a one time fee, but Louis's contract with Hampton Roads Publishing entitled him to royalties, he says.

Almost a decade after its release, *Conversations* is still available in hardback and has been published in 24 languages. A Penguin Putnam employee once told Louis that he was their highest paid cover artist, Louis says.

Louis would not disclose specific numbers. Nor would he reveal how much he was paid for the art in Grisham's novels. But he did say that it was "a lot more than fair." Besides, he says, the exposure matters more. Anything that adds value to an artist's reputation is important, he says.

And Grisham moves books. *Publisher's Weekly* reported that Grisham sold over 60 million books in the '90s, the highest seller of the decade. Even in the Harry Potter era, Grisham is a force to be reckoned with.

"You better be good," Louis says, when asked how it feels to know millions of people see his art. "I work all day, every day," he says. "It's nice to take a bow." ■