

Book Review of John Grisham's *Skipping Christmas*

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ABSTRACT

This book review is arranged with the purpose to show the strengths and weaknesses of a novel entitled *Skipping Christmas*, authored by an American author, John Grisham. This novel tells a story of the Kranks couple who wanted to skip Christmas to go on a cruise instead. This novel is the only comedy novel that is written by John Grisham who is a well-known thriller author.

The strengths of the novels are the moral value of the novel, the cover design, and the greatness of the author's name. This novel tells what Christmas is about. The greatness of the author's name and the cover design are very powerful to attract people to buy and read the novel. The weaknesses of the novels are the dictions and the naratology of the novel that is too detailed. The author tends to use difficult words to tell the story. There are too many details in the novel to bore the readers. The main aim of this book review is to give a picture about the novel and a reference for the readers before reading the whole novel.

Keywords : Family, Comedy, Christmas, Moral Value, Detailed Naratology.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Christmas is one big day to celebrate for Christians. If we take a closer look through the media, Christmas in the USA always goes very festive, especially for the upper-middle class people. Houses are fully decorated, millions of Christmas cards are sent, the presents, and so many other fancy

things are the impression of how Christmas is celebrated in the USA. This ritual of spending so much money for the day where Jesus was born somehow becomes a way to impress and buy happiness. It shows how these people in the upper-middle class fail to grasp the true meaning of Christmas. Through John Grisham's *Skipping Christmas*, the readers from all over the world can learn what Christmas should actually be about.

The writer chose this novel to review because this book is unique for the writer. This novel is written by a famous writer who is very well-known for his ability to write best seller thriller novels. This novel is one of the three non thriller novels that Grisham has written, and the only comedy novel from him. This fact about the novel makes this novel stand out for the writer from the first time the writer saw the novel in a bookstore.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to summarize *Skipping Christmas* and to find the strength and the weakness of John Grisham's *Skipping Christmas*.

1.3. The Author of *Skipping Christmas*

The following description is taken from <http://www.jgrisham.com/bio/> and Mary Beth Pringle's *Revisiting John Grisham : A Critical Companion*.

Born on February 8, 1955 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, to a construction worker and a homemaker, John Grisham as a child dreamed of being a professional baseball player. Realizing he did not have the right stuff for a pro career, he shifted gears and majored in accounting at Mississippi State University. He earned a D in freshman composition, had a college major in accounting, and went to law school at the University of Mississippi with

plans to become a tax attorney. After graduation he practiced criminal law for a while and then civil law, enjoying neither. Grisham ran for the Mississippi legislature in 1983 and won, but quit before the end of his second term. He felt, he said, that it was impossible to change much as a lawmaker.

One day at the DeSoto County courthouse, Grisham overheard the harrowing testimony of a twelve-year-old rape victim and was inspired to start a novel exploring what would have happened if the girl's father had murdered her assailants. Getting up at 5 a.m. every day to get in several hours of writing time before heading off to work, Grisham spent three years on *A Time to Kill* and finished it in 1987. Initially rejected by many publishers, it was eventually bought by Wynwood Press, who gave it a modest 5,000 copy printing and published it in June 1988.

The day after Grisham completed *A Time to Kill*, he began to work on another novel, the story of a hotshot young attorney lured to an apparently perfect law firm that was not what it appeared. When he sold the film rights to *The Firm* to Paramount Pictures for \$600,000, Grisham suddenly became a hot property among publishers, and book rights were bought by Doubleday. Spending 47 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list, *The Firm* became the bestselling novel of 1991.

The successes of *The Pelican Brief*, which hit number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and *The Client*, which debuted at number

one, confirmed Grisham's reputation as the master of the legal thriller. Grisham's success even renewed interest in *A Time to Kill*, which was republished in hardcover by Doubleday and then in paperback by Dell. This time around, it was a bestseller.

Since first publishing *A Time to Kill* in 1988, Grisham has written one novel a year (some of his other books are *The Firm*, *A Painted House*, *Skipping Christmas*, *The Summons*, *Bleachers*, *The Last Juror*, *The Broker*, *Playing for Pizza*, *The Appeal*, *The Associate*, *The Confession* and *The Litigators*) and all of them have become international bestsellers. There are currently over 275 million of John Grisham's books in print worldwide, which have been translated into 40 languages. Nine of his novels have been turned into films (*The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief*, *The Client*, *A Time to Kill*, *The Rainmaker*, *The Chamber*, *A Painted House*, *The Runaway Jury*, and *Skipping Christmas*). *The Gingerbread Man*. *The Innocent Man* (October 2006) marked his first foray into non-fiction, and *Ford County* (November 2009) was his first short story collection.

Despite his success, Grisham is still the same quietly spiritual person he always was. A "lifelong Baptist," Grisham and his wife have taught Sunday school in their local church. Grisham devotes time to charitable causes, including most recently his *Rebuild The Coast Fund*, which raised 8.8 million dollars for Gulf Coast relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Grisham and

wife also traveled to the northern part of Brazil several times to build medical clinics and homes. Grisham frequently uses his wealth to help others. As soon as he and his family moved to Charlottesville, Grisham made baseball available to kids who had not been able to play before by creating Cove Creek Park. With its six baseball diamonds, clubhouse, and batting cages, the park is a testament to "Grisham's generosity and his determination".

II. SUMMARY OF SKIPPINGCHRISTMAS

The story started on the day Blair went with a Peace Corps to Peru. She departed during the Christmas holiday. This made Luther and Nora Krank, the parents, started thinking that Christmas would not be the same this year without their only child's presence. Nora grieved Blair's departure and could not stop worrying about her, while Luther's accounting instinct started counting how much money they spent last year and how much would be spent this year for Christmas. According to his counting, \$6,100 was spent last year. The fact of how expensive and stressful a Christmas could get and that Blair was not going to celebrate Christmas at home, made Luther thought of forgoing Christmas. He told his wife about the idea. Nora could not really agree at first, but then realized that the money to go to a Caribbean cruise for ten days would be less than the Christmas expenses, she then agreed.

Word quickly spread throughout the small town, that the Kranks were not celebrating Christmas and would not be participating in the neighborhood or town festivities. The tickets were booked, they spent their time to prepare themselves for the cruise. The diet was on, and they spent their time in tanning booths in preparation for the hot Caribbean sun.

The decision confused acquaintances and caused anguish in the neighborhood. It got hard on Nora, since she met more people and heard more negative envious comments about their plan. The neighborhood, which in the last years always won the best decorated street contest, lost the contest this year. All the blames were on the Kranks, because their house was the only house in the street without any decorations. The neighbors had already questioned their plan on skipping Christmas, since they lost the contest, the questions soon turned to be harassments. The Kranks couple, especially Nora, could not feel comfortable anymore in the neighborhood. Luther kept going steadfastly, knowing things would be back to normal once the Christmas holiday gone and they would get back from the cruise.

December 24th, one day before the cruise, Nora and Luther woke up happily and ready to pack. In the middle of the excitement that they were having, the phone rang. A phone from Blair. Knowing nothing about her parents' plan, Blair already planned to make a surprise for her parents. She was in Miami when she called, half way to home

from Peru, bringing her new fiancé with her. Her fiancé was an educated Peruvian doctor who wanted to witness how beautiful Christmas could be celebrated in the USA. Nora, who missed Blair so much, could not reject her daughter's wish to have a Christmas party. They then had to have Christmas and skip the cruise.

Things turned to a completely different direction too fast and the Kranks were panicking. The neighbors found out that The Kranks were back on the Christmas ritual in the very last second. Surprisingly, the neighbors helped them out and made things fine enough for Blair's coming.

Blair came with her handsome Peruvian fiancé. She noticed some small unusual things but was too overwhelmed with happiness to be home with her fiancé to complain. Christmas was saved for the Kranks even they had to forget the Caribbean cruise. The tickets could not be refunded, so with the Christmas spirit, Luther walked out of the house in the cold to hand his dream tickets to his neighbor. Christmas this year could be the last Christmas for his neighbor, since she had a terminal cancer. Luther wanted to make this Christmas to be wonderful for her and her husband with the cruise tickets.

III. REVIEW ON SKIPPING CHRISTMAS

Skipping Christmas is attractive because it tells about Christmas in the USA in a complete different way, where it is actually stressful

and expensive. It gives a new point of view against the mainstream idea of how Christmas is only about joys and festivities. Skipping Christmas has some weaknesses and strengths which can be found from some aspects, and they are: the moral values, the cover, the great name of the author's, the dictions, and the details

3.1 Strengths

Skipping Christmas has fundamental strengths, this can be seen from some aspects, the moral values and the cover.

3.1.1 Moral values in the novel

Skipping Christmas is a comedy novel, told in a funny way which makes it so light to read. Despite how light this book can be, there are some big moral values the readers can dig from the book. Christmas has become the biggest holiday in America, a big frosty, a beautiful Christmas tree, many expensive gifts, parties, a lightful decorated house, and so many other fancy things are expected from every upper-middle family in America. However, those expensive things are actually not the real spirit of Christmas. The Kranks couple who realize that they had spent so much in Christmas last year now want to skip Christmas, and allocate the money for going to a Caribbean island with a cruise. They skip everything they are expected to do in Christmas, everything even the smallest details. People around them are angry and envious about this and it seems like almost everybody turns to be their enemy. Yet, in the end of the novel, things turn around. Their

daughter comes in the last hours before they depart for the dreamy plan. Having a little time to prepare everything for Christmas makes it very hard for them to manage Christmas alone, surrounded by their enemies. But their enemies, with the Christmas spirit, help them out and give them their best to make a perfect Christmas for the Kranks.

This part of the story shares what the real Christmas is about, and also shows the moral values of the story. It is about sharing, trusting, accepting, and tolerating. Christmas is not about where you are, or how big the party you can make, or what you have to show off.

3.1.2 The Cover

The cover of a novel is the first impression of it. It should depict what the novel is about very well, without leaving the aesthetic aspect to attract readers. The cover from this novel is a strength of the novel because it clearly depicts Christmas and it also gives the reader the pictures of the main story which is the summer holiday that the main characters were aiming from skipping Christmas.

The main color of the cover is red, with a picture of a summery beach in green and gold. The title of the novel is written in white. Red, green, gold, and white, are the colors of Christmas.

An early use of red at Christmas were the apples on the paradise tree. They represented the fall of Adam in the plays. Red is also the color of Holly berries, which is said to represent the blood of Jesus when he died on the cross. Red is also the

color of Bishops robes. These would have been worn by St. Nicholas and then also became Santa's uniform. In many parts of Europe during middle ages, Paradise plays were performed, often on Christmas Eve. They told Bible stories to people who could not read. The 'Paradise Tree' in the garden of eden in the play was normally a pine tree. Green also reminded people that spring would come and that winter would not last forever. Gold is the color of the Sun and light – both very important in the dark winter. And both red red and gold are the colors of fire that you need to keep you warm. White is often associated with purity and peace in western cultures. The snow is also very white. White is used by most churches as the color of Christmas, when the altar is covered with a white cloth.

(www.whychristmas.com/customs/colors-of-christmas.shtml)

All the colors that are used for the cover are no doubt represents Christmas very well. Yet the main story line of the novel which tells about how the main characters planning to skip Christmas and go on a cruise instead, is very important to give the first impression to the readers. The cover gives a very well picture of the story by having a small picture in the middle of the cover about a beach view with the palm tree and the sun, which are the opposite of the image of Christmas.

3.1.3 The greatness of the author's name

The author's name is one of the first things that people see from a novel. Usually, the author's name is enough to tell the quality of the essence of the book. John Grisham is a great thriller author. He is a very active author who keeps on producing new books every year and a lot of his books are best sellers. Grisham has written three non thriller books so far, and *Skipping Christmas* is one of them, along with *A Painted House* and *The Bleachers*. Yet, *Skipping Christmas* is the only comedy novel he has written.

The greatness of the author's name for *Skipping Christmas* is definitely one of the important strong points for the novel. The praises that the novel gets are all about the author, who is very famous as a good author.

"Grisham may well be the best American storyteller writing today." – The Washington Post

"Grisham is an absolute master." – The Washington Post

"Never let it be said this man doesn't know how to spin a good yarn." – Entertainment Weekly

3.2 Weaknesses

The weaknesses of this novel can be seen in some aspects, the dictions and the aspect of naratology.

3.2.1 Dictions in the novel

Even *Skipping Christmas* is written very lightly, many words can be difficult to understand by the non natives. Some readers may need to open dictionaries to finally find out the meaning of some words then

grasp the emotions. On the other hand, it is good for English learners to add more vocabularies. It seems to target English natives, since the dictions used by the author are very specific in certain things to give the best details.

3.2.2 The naratology of the novel

The details of emotions and situations in the novel are one powerful tool to drag the readers into the story, which is good, but since there are too many details, it becomes boring in some points to read all the tiny details. The story line is simple, yet it seems the details are all it takes to make the novel stretched to be 177 pages.

“A year earlier, the Luther Krank family had spent \$6,100 on Christmas -- \$6,100! --\$6,100 on decorations, lights, flowers, a new Frosty, and a Canadian spruce, \$6,100 on hams, turkeys, pecans, cheese balls, and cookies no one ate; \$6,100 on wines and liquors and cigars around the office; \$6,100 on fruitcakes from the firemen and the rescue squad, and calendars from the police association; \$6100 on Luther for a cashmere sweater he secretly loathed and a sport jacket he'd worn twice and an ostrich skin wallet that was quite expensive and quite ugly and frankly he didn't like the feel of. On Nora for a dress she wore to the company's Christmas dinner and her own cashmere sweater, which had not been seen since she unwrapped it, and a designer scarf she loved, \$6,100. On Blair \$6,100 for an overcoat, gloves, and boots, and a Walkman for her jogging, and of course, the latest, slimmest cell phone on the market --

\$6,100 on lesser gifts for a select handful of distant relatives, most on Nora's side--\$6,100 on Christmas cards from a stationer three doors down from Chip's, in the district, where all prices were double; \$6,100 for the party, an annual Christmas Eve bash at the Krank home.” (Grisham, 2001: 13-14)

The text above shows the readers how much a Christmas cost for Luther last year. There are too many details on what he spent \$6,100 for Christmas. Following is another example of over-detailed text from the novel.

“He eased from the house an hour later. On the sidewalk that bordered Hemlock, he shuffled along, going nowhere. The air was cool and light. After a few steps he stopped by the Becker's mailbox and looked into the front window of the living room, not far away. They were decorating their tree, and he could almost hear the bickering. Ned Becker was balancing himself on the rung of a small ledder and stringing lights, while Jude Becker stood back a step and carped directions. Jude's mother, an ageless wonder even more terrifying than Jude herself, was also in on the fray. She was pointing directions to poor Ned, and her directions were in sharp conflicts to those of Jude. String them here, string them there. That branch, no that other branch. Can't you see the gap there? What on earth are you looking at? Meanwhile, Rocky Becker, their twenty-year-old dropout, was sitting on the sofa with a can of something, laughing at them and offering advice

that was apparently being ignored. He was the only one laughing, though.” (Grisham, 2001: 29-30)

The text above is showing how hectic it was in the Beckers’ place when they were decorating the Christmas tree. This made Luther proud of the decision of skipping Christmas. Yet, there are some details in the text which do not really fit to explain the hectic situation, they are “an ageless wonder even more terrifying than Jude herself,” “their twenty-year-old drop out,” and “He was the only one laughing, though.”

The conversations also get so long sometimes, without enough detail of who says what, that makes it hard to understand what is going on in the conversations and forces the readers to read them twice or more.

“She was back, with a small brown sack which she tossed beside him just carefully enough not to crack the chocolate while letting him know that she’d found it and he hadn’t. “Everybody knows you have to ask,” she said sharply as she yanked at her shoulder harness.

“Odd way of marketing,” Luther mused, in reverse now. “Hide it in the butcher, make it scarce, folks’ll clamor for it. I’m sure they charge more if it’s hidden.”

“Oh hush, Luther.”

“Are your feet wet?”

“No. Yours?”

“No.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“Just worried.”

“Do you think she’ll be all right?”

“She’s on an airplane. You just talked to her.”

“I mean down there, in the jungle.”

Stop worrying, okay? The Peace Corps wouldn’t send her into a dangerous place.”

“It won’t be the same.”

“What?”

“Christmas.” (Grisham, 2001: 10-11)

The text above shows a conversation between Nora and Luther in the car after getting some chocolate for Thanksgiving. The topic they are talking in the text changes several times without enough details on which ones are Nora’s dialogue and which ones are Luther’s. That makes the readers might need to read the conversation twice to understand the conversation and grasp the emotion.

IV. CONCLUSION

After reading *Skipping Christmas*, it can be concluded that this novel is recommended. This novel sees Christmas in a different way and plays with the readers’ imaginations on skipping Christmas and all the hassle in Christmas. The strengths of the book, which are the moral values, the cover, and the great name of the author’s are very fundamental. Written by a great and well-known author, this book shares a really good moral value about what Christmas is actually about in

very thorough details. The attractive cover that gives the readers the right impression about the book is also important. In some other points the naratology of the novel is too detailed and makes the novel weak. Too many details bore the readers. Some words are also strange for English learners. Despite all its weaknesses, this novel is really recommended for those who have time to read light novels and enjoy leasure time.

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