

View from the street

Ian Barron

THE STREET LAWYER

by John Grisham
Arrow Books, £5.99

NOVELIST John Grisham mined a rich vein of interest in the legal world with storylines containing all the ingredients that make for exciting plots. Every new book becomes a no.1 best seller in the US – kidnappings, murder, Mafia conspiracies, double crossers in the world of politics and the law – it all makes for spicy reading. But *The Street Lawyer* appears to be the pro bono offering of a rich writer with a conscience.

The book is more a documentary of the plight of the homeless on the streets of Washington DC.

The tragedy begins with a shady character buying a derelict property for \$11,000 and selling it six months later to the Federal government for \$200,000. The evictions that follow lead our hero, the lawyer from a top-notch firm dedicated to billing its clients maximum rates for its services, in to the soup kitchens. And that's the start of a tour around the streets of despair in the capital city of the richest nation in the

world. The fiction is peppered with facts which no doubt stopped Grisham in his tracks:

- Only 14% of disabled homeless people receive disability benefits
- About half of all poor people spend 70% of their income trying to keep the housing they have
- It costs 25% more per day to keep a person in jail than to provide shelter, food, transportation and counselling services

As the lawyer is sucked deeper into the hopelessness that smother the homeless he learns about the social attitudes that lock thousands of people out of the homes which we take for granted. He's told:

"The trend in urban America is to criminalize homelessness. The big cities have passed all sorts of laws designed to persecute those who live on the streets. Can't beg, can't sleep on a bench, can't camp under a bridge, can't store personal items in a public



park, can't sit on a sidewalk, can't eat in public".

"Damned cities are spending more on legal fees than on building shelters for the homeless. You gotta love this country. New York, richest city in the world, can't house its people so they sleep on the streets and panhandle on Fifth Avenue, and this upsets the sensitive New Yorkers, so they elect Rudy WhatsHisFace who promises to clean up the streets, and he gets his blue ribbon city council to outlaw homelessness, just like that – can't beg, can't sit on the sidewalk, can't be homeless – and they cut budgets like hell, close shelters and cut assistance, and at the same time they spend a bloody fortune paying New York lawyers to defend them for trying to eliminate poor people".

The lawyer is forced to recognise the reality of the political system. No good complaining about the failure of the city government to enforce its laws on standards for apartment blocks when "the answer was in the potholes too numerous to count or avoid; and the fleet of police cars, a third of which were too dangerous to drive; and the schools with roofs caving in; and the hospitals with patients stuffed in closets; and the five hundred homeless mothers and children unable to find a shelter. The city simply didn't work".

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