

Interesting, not fascinating

John Grisham: "The King of Torts." 470 pp, \$ 7.99 (paperback)

By Clemens Matuschek

Remember Stella Liebeck? In 1992, the 79 year-old lady spilled a cup of hot coffee she had previously bought at a McDonald's drive-through on her lap, causing severe burnings. She sued McDonald's, receiving a chunk of money and becoming America's poster child for frivolous lawsuits.

What nobody ever cared about was the name of her lawyer.

Nobody except John Grisham, presumably. In his latest novel, "The King of Torts," the bestselling author gives an illuminative but moral-laden insight into the world of mass tort litigation and class action suit lawyers. After having read it through, one tends to agree with Grisham's position that the Stella Liebeck Award should not be given to victims but rather to their lawyers, greedy vultures who chase ambulances to sign up clients.

To come to this verdict, Grisham depicts the quick rise and inevitable fall of a D.C. lawyer called Clay Carter II. In the beginning, this Faustian hero is working with the Office of the Public Defender, a man "burned out at the age of thirty-one, stuck in an office he was ashamed to show his friends, looking for an exit with no place to go." Even his girlfriend Rebecca leaves him, pressured to do so by her posh, dominant parents.

Change comes in the person of a Mephistophelian character called Max Pace, from whom Carter learns that one of the seemingly senseless murders he is dealing with at OPD resulted from a bad brain drug that his client took as a kind of unwitting guinea pig. Even worse, there are several more 'guinea pigs,' murders, and victims out there. Pace makes an offer that Carter cannot refuse (without otherwise instantly ending the novel): for unknown reasons, he is chosen to represent these victims' families, quietly cut a fake deal, and earn 15 million on the way.

This seduction by money and/or power is a typical Grishamesque setting, and one has to admire how he manages to always come up with a new version of it. In the case of this storyline, Carter soon advances to the position of the new "King of Torts" by acting

as a façade for Pace’s shady background activities. He immediately loses his head over the staggering amount of money that pours in, turning into a kind of lawyer who is happy if a plaintiff’s bladder tumor turns bad since this will increase his share.

Alas, subtle portrayal and development of characters are not Grisham’s strong points. People are either good (like Carter’s pals from OPD) or evil (like other mass tort lawyers or Rebecca’s parents); and although Carter swings from one side to the other, there is really no in-between. Even some of the novel’s other characters seem to notice this: “Look, Clay, I’m just your accountant. But I’m not sure if there’s anyone else who is telling you to slow down. Take it easy pal. You’ve made a fortune, enjoy it. You don’t need a big firm with so many lawyers. You don’t need jets. What’s next? A yacht?” “Yes.”

Instead of subtlety, the author focuses on satisfying a kind of voyeuristic excitement by devoting long paragraphs to blonde trophy bimbos, Caribbean hideaway mansions, and private jets. If he spent a little longer on exploring how Carter’s personality deals with the ethic implications of his new life than on describing the interior of a Gulfstream, he would not only have written a more interesting but a fascinating novel.

Sometimes the novel even drops from its average flight altitude down to the level of a dime novel: “Who I am and where I come from are irrelevant,” Max Pace introduces himself, offering the mystic aura needed but certainly not the most innovative phrase in the history of literature.

Anyway, Grisham paints a lively picture of what everyday life and the cases of the big boys of mass tort litigation look like (or what he wants us to think it looks like), permitting a view behind the scenes of this game of money and power.

All these elements make “The King of Torts” an enjoyable reading for, say, flights. It does not have to be your own Gulfstream.