

BOOKS

A Painted House
By John Graham
(Doubleday, \$27.95)

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tale about a family, and what happens to them during one meaningful harvest season in 1952. It's a work of fiction that's definitely off the beaten path for John Grisham, but it nevertheless reveals his outstanding ability as a storyteller, whatever the backdrop. It also reminds us that the best stories are those that are brought to life by characters we care about, existing in a place and time that captivate our imagination.

Opening words

Grisham does this at the outset with the book's opening words — "The hill people and the Mexicans arrived on the same day. . . in September 1952. The Cardinals were five games behind the Dodgers with three weeks to go, and the season looked hopeless. The cotton, however, was waist-high to my father. . . and he and my grandfather could be heard before supper whispering words that were seldom heard. It could be a 'good

A Painted House is narrated by Luke Chandler, looking back from his viewpoint as an inquisitive 7-year-old. (Luke spends so much time listening in on adult conversation and spying on other people that he seems just a bit absurd sometimes, although we're not sure he's supposed to impress us that way.) He lives with his grandmother and grandfather and his parents in a

small, unpainted farmhouse on rented land in the Arkansas delta. Perhaps it was a kinder, gentler era — though definitely not always kind and gentle — and without a doubt, times were changing. Along with this backdrop of change, Luke himself is changing, too.

One member of the farm family is missing, but his presence is strongly felt, anyway. Luke's 19-year-old Uncle Ricky — a kind of local hell-raiser — is away at war in Korea.

Baseball acts as an important subtext to the main drama. On most steamy nights during harvest time, after a day of back-breaking labor, the family gathers around the radio to cheer for their beloved St. Louis Cardinals and star players like Stan Musial, Red Schoendienst, or "Country" Slaughter. As it happens, this is more than just a family ritual.

Luke sees professional baseball as his ticket to a better life, away from the cotton patch. It's not an altogether foolish dream, either. He loves the game, and both his grandfather and his father almost made it to the big leagues before two world wars threw them off the track.

A Painted House first appeared in serial form in the literary magazine, *The Oxford American*, before being brought out early this year in hardcover. Maybe this is what gives it a kind of Dickensian coloration — especially when we meet and come to know its memorable characters.

Included among these are edgy, hard-working grandfather Eli Chandler who exists in a perpetual state of worry about his crops; the resourceful Gran-

whose countrified household duties extend even to medical "cures;" Luke's conscientious father whose dreams of leaving the farm have been dashed by a war injury; the boy's more hopeful mother ("raised. . . at the . . . edge of. . . town. . . in a painted house"), who not only can see the possibility of a better future for her only son, but intends to carry through with what she sees.

Cast of characters

Chandler's rural neighbors, various townsfolk, migrant workers from Mexico, and the hill people who immigrate from the Ozarks at harvest time to toil in the cotton fields.

Even peripheral players, such as the angry Baptist minister, make indelible marks. Those with larger roles, like the seductive "hillbilly," Tally, her explosive brother, Hank, or the

Grisham's depiction of the physical community add considerable spark to the story. The roaring cotton gin with its "noisy precision," the village shops, the rickety river bridge, the tin-

roofed sharecropper's homes, the weedy front yards, the snake-haunted chicken house, even the prickly feel of the cotton bolls in the heat of the noonday sun — all are brought superbly to life on the pages of *A Painted House*.

How does Michigan play a part? For an answer, you'll have to read the book.

Victoria Diaz is a Livonia resident who writes about books, theater and movies for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

Art Beat features various happenings in the suburban art world. Send Wayne County arts news leads to Art Beat, Observer Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia MI 48150, or fax them to (734) 591-7279.

FREE CONCERT
The Redford Civic Symphony Orchestra will present a Cabaret

Concert 3 p.m. Sunday, May 20 at Thurston High School, Redford. There is no admission charge. For more information, call (313) 638-1652.

The season concludes 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, June 19 in Capitol Park, Redford.

CHORAL CONCERT
The Finnish American Singers present "Let There Be Music" 3 p.m. Sunday, May 20 at the Finnish Cultural Center, 35200 West Eight Mile Road, between Newburgh and Gill roads, Farmington Hills.

Tickets are \$7 and include a sandwich and desserts. (248) 478-6939 or (248) 589-8829.

The program includes Finnish classics, music by Sibelius. Soprano soloist Vickie Kimler will sing "Michigan Morn" by J. Jennings/H. Owen Reed. Choir director Henry Naasko will join Kimler for a 1925 duet "Moon-

OPENING RECEPTION
Ivan Kende, an arts instructor

at the Plymouth Community Arts Council, shows acrylic paintings, pastels, and select work from his Conte drawing series May 24 to June 18 at the Pierre Paul Art Gallery, 3601-C Washtenaw Avenue, Ann Arbor.

An opening reception with the artist takes place 6-8 p.m. Thursday, May 24 at the gallery. Hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday-Friday, until 6 p.m. Satur-

day, and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. For information, call (734) 975-1053.

his native Hungary in 1956 at age 10. He picked up a pencil and hasn't put it down since. He currently teaches figure drawing at the Plymouth Community Arts Council.

The Langsford Men's Chorus and PRIME vocal jazz team up for the first time for a spring

concert 3 p.m. Sunday, May 20 at St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, 2747's Five Mile Road, west of Inkster Road, Livonia. There is no admission charge, donations accepted. For information, call (248) 682-6562. The two groups share more

than a love of music - both are directed by Steve SeGraves of Plymouth. SeGraves recently created the Langsford Men's Chorus as a tribute to the late Harry Langsford, director of the Wayne State University Men's Glee Club. The chorus will perform several of Langsford's

term several of Langelord's favorite arrangements.

PRime will entertain with jazz standards, swing, ballads, pop/rock, and original tunes and arrangements. For information about PRime, visit the Web site at www.PRime-vocal-jazz.com.

PAINTIN' IN THE STREETS

A creative celebration of the

city, "Paintin' in the Streets," will allow spectators to view the artistic process up close. More

than 30 local artists will take to the streets to document their vision of Detroit's architecture and street scenes each Saturday in May. These works will then be curated and presented in an exhibition and sale at the Scarab Club in 2004.

Club June 29 to July 29. An opening reception is scheduled for 6-9 p.m. Friday, June 29 at the club on Farnsworth behind the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The final "Painting" in the Streets" takes place 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday, May 19 in Greentown and Eastern Market.

For more information, call project director Jillian Omand at (248) 399-0633.

VAA EXHIBIT/CLASSESThe Visual Arts Association of Livonia continues its spring show through May 31 in the lobby of Livonia City Hall, 33000 Civic Center Drive, east of Farmington Road.

In addition to exhibiting its members work, VAAL is holding art classes in Room 16 of the Jefferson Center, 9501 Henry Ruff, Livonia.

Learn to create watercolors with Farmington Hills artist Marjorie Chellstorp beginning June 20, or oil paintings with Lin Baum (June 19).

Workshops to paint sunflowers in watercolor with Farmington artist Gwen Tomkow take place 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday-Sunday, Aug. 3-5. The cost is \$75 members, \$80 non-members.

GLUCK'S "ORFEO ED EURIDICE"
The University Musical Soci-

ety along with Peter Sparling Dance Company present Christopher Gluck's classic opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* 8 p.m. Saturday, May 19 at the Michigan Theater.

Admission is free. For information, call (734) 764-2538.

This production of Gluck's famous opera represents a multifaceted collaboration with former Martha Graham dancer Peter Sparling choreographing the work, and students from University of Michigan School of Music.

performing the score under the direction of Stephen Jarvi. Student soloists are Pei Yi Wang, Katherine Alexander and Loren Allardyce. This is a preview performance and open to the public. The final production will occur in November featuring renowned singers Ewa Podles, Lisa Saffer and Isabel Benschneider.

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