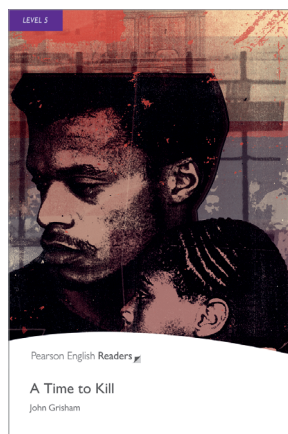


A Time to Kill

John Grisham



About the author

John Grisham was born on 8 February 1955, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in the United States. After graduating in law from Mississippi State University, he started a small law firm in Southaven, Mississippi, where he practiced both civil and criminal law. In 1983, he was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives (the lower house in the U.S. parliament).

One day in court he overheard the testimony of a twelve-year-old girl who had been raped. He started to wonder what would have happened if the girl's father had killed the rapists ... and he started to write his first novel, *A Time to Kill*, which deals with the theme of a black man in Mississippi who murders the rapists of his young daughter. Grisham was working a 60–70 hour week at that time and he could write only by getting up early and writing before going to the office, and using the time between court work to write. He finished the novel and sent it to publishers, but it was rejected many times before finally being published in 1989. Since then he has written about one book a year. While most are connected with law in some way, he has also written several non-legal fiction books. Many of his books have been made into films.

Grisham soon became one of the world's top-selling novelists – there are now more than 225 million copies of his books in print, in thirty languages. Despite this, he gave up writing for a few months in 1996 to return to court and honour a commitment he had made to the family of a railroad worker killed at work. He represented the family in court and won for them the biggest financial settlement of his career.

Grisham is married with two children. He devotes time to charitable causes and watches a lot of baseball. He writes,

"Ten years from now, I plan to be sitting here, looking out over my land. I hope I'll be writing books, but if not I'll be on my pond fishing with my kids. I feel like the luckiest guy I know."

Summary

A Time to Kill is set in the southern states of the United States, where the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) still meet and racial tension can still run high. It begins with the vicious rape of a ten-year-old black girl by two white men. They are quickly arrested and charged. However, things then get more complicated. The girl's father, Carl Lee Hailey, plans the murder of the two rapists and shoots and kills them in the town courthouse. He is sentenced to death. Jake Brigance, an ambitious young lawyer, agrees to defend Carl Lee. Helping Jake on the case are his former boss Lucien Wilbanks, fellow attorney Harry Rex Vonner, and law student Ellen Roark, who has prior experience with death penalty cases. The prosecuting attorney is a man named Rufus Buckley, and the judge who will preside over the trial is white Judge Omar Noose. Buckley hopes to win the case so as to gain the publicity that a win would generate, in hopes of being elected to a higher public office (governor). At the same time, Billy Ray Cobb's brother, Freddy Lee Cobb, is seeking revenge for Carl Lee's killing of his brother. To this end, Freddy enlists the help of the Mississippi branch of the KKK, which is led by Stump Sisson. Subsequently, a KKK member attempts to plant a bomb under Jake's porch, and Jake's secretary Ethel Twitty and her husband Bud are attacked by the KKK and Bud dies. On the day the trial begins, there is a riot outside the court building between the KKK and the area's black residents, and Stump Sisson is killed by a molotov cocktail. Believing that the black people were at fault, Freddy and the KKK increase their attacks. The National Guard is called to Clanton to keep the peace during the trial. The case proceeds, and in the end, after lengthy deliberations, the jury acquits Carl Lee by reason of insanity.

Chapter 1: Little 10-year-old black Tonya Hailey is attacked and raped by two local white men – Billy Ray Cobb and Pete Willard. The two of them are arrested by Sheriff Ozzie Walls, the only black Sheriff in Mississippi.

Chapter 2: Carl Lee, Tonya's father, has planned to murder his daughter's rapists. He shoots and kills them in the town courthouse. He also wounds Deputy Looney.

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Chapter 3: Jake Brigance, an ambitious young lawyer, agrees to defend Carl Lee. He believes the case will make him and his family famous and rich.

Chapter 4: The Grand Jury decides Carl Lee should stand trial. Rufus Buckley will be the prosecutor. In the meantime, Klan members meet to decide on the strategies they will follow.

Chapter 5: Harry Rex Vonner, a lawyer who specializes in divorce cases, is a friend of Jake's who will help him pick a good jury for Carl Lee's trial. Jake starts planning how to claim insanity and save Carl Lee.

Chapter 6: Jake meets Dr. Bass, a psychiatrist, who will prove Carl Lee was insane at the time of the shooting. But he is also a drunk and has not practiced for a long time.

Chapter 7: Jake is having financial problems. The Klan is also threatening him and his secretary, Ethel. The Klan puts a bomb on Jake's house but the criminals are caught by the Sheriff. Jake's wife Carla and their daughter leave to stay with Carla's parents.

Chapter 8: Ellen Roark, a law student, offers to be Jake's law clerk for free. She wants the experience of being in a courtroom during the criminal trial.

Chapter 9: Jake gets the list of possible members of the jury and, together with Ellen, starts making choices. In the meantime, Ethel and her husband are attacked by the Klan. Bud dies of a heart attack.

Chapter 10: While Rufus and Jake are in the courtroom selecting jury members, crowds of black people led by Reverend Agee protest outside demanding Carl Lee's freedom. The Klan is also present. Violence breaks out so the National Army arrives.

Chapter 11: The trial begins. The lawyers' opening speeches are heard. The rapists' mothers are the first witnesses. Then the lawyers question Sheriff Ozzie and witnesses who gave technical evidence. Finally Jake cross examines Deputy Looney who shows his empathy with Carl Lee.

Chapter 12: There is an attempt by the Klan to murder Jake who, due to the constant threats, is protected by soldiers. One of the soldiers is hit. Ellen is also attacked by Klan members. Dr. Bass is discredited during the trial. Jake's case is falling apart and so is his confidence.

Chapter 13: Dr. Rodeheaver, the psychiatrist chosen by the prosecution, explains that after examining Carl Lee he can confirm that he was not insane at the time of the shooting. He is discredited after Jake's cross examination.

Chapter 14: The jury now meets to decide on a verdict. They find the defendant not guilty, by reason of insanity. They reach this verdict thanks to the intervention of one of the jury members: Wanda Wornack. She made the jury imagine the girl who had suffered what Tonya went through was white.

Background and themes

Grisham's success: John Grisham is America's top storyteller. His books are guaranteed to top the best-seller list. Hollywood film producers compete for the film rights to his novels. It is interesting to ask, "What is the secret of Grisham's success?"

All Grisham's novels are similar in certain ways. For example, in all his stories an individual is fighting a big, big organization. In *A Time to Kill*, Jake Brigance and his client, Carl Lee Hailey, are fighting the strength of the law. The problem for them is, as in all Grisham novels, that so-called "justice" tends to be blind. The law demands that Carl Lee should receive the death penalty for the murders he committed. However, most parents can understand why Carl Lee did what he did and can forgive him for it.

In the words of Hollywood producer Steve Reuther: "The main appeal of a Grisham project is that he is a great storyteller. His characters are always victims of the judicial/legal system. There are always conflicts of conscience, conflicts of morals, blind justice and a system that is absolutely corrupt. The system is always unable to see or adjust to the human side of the individual's problem."

Racial discrimination: In *A Time to Kill*, Jake and Carl Lee are fighting more than the law. They face the racial prejudices of the southern states of the United States. Up until the middle of the 19th century, the economy of the southern states of the United States was largely based around cotton and a colonial style of life. White families owned vast plantations, which were worked by black slaves. This way of life was ended by the Civil War of 1861–65, which was won by the Northern states. Slavery was made illegal and all slaves were freed.

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After the war, the whites started a secret society, The Ku Klux Klan. The purpose of the Klan was to frighten black people and keep them in an inferior social position. Klan members carried out whippings, burnings and murders of black people. The Ku Klux Klan still exists today.

The law: Another important feature of Grisham's novels is that the reader is given real insight into the way lawyers work at a trial. Therefore not only does Grisham hold the reader's attention on an emotional level (the individual against the large organization), he holds the reader's attention on an intellectual level too. It is obvious to the reader that Grisham has a fine legal mind and this legal brilliance is seen throughout the book. The way in which Jake goes about winning his case is both convincing and intriguing.

Ethics: Another constant element of Grisham's books is "ethics". The issue of "right against wrong" lies at the heart of a Grisham story. The rape of the child is monstrous. The novel takes the view that in these circumstances, Carl Lee's actions are understandable (though some readers may think otherwise!). There is a fundamental decency in Grisham's work.

The Ku Klux Klan: Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is the name given to several secret organizations in the United States, mostly in the South, that are known for believing and fighting for white supremacy. Their typical costume consists of conic masks and white robes. The first KKK appeared after the Civil War. It used terrorism, violence, and lynching to intimidate and persecute African Americans, Jews and other racial and religious minorities. The first Klan was founded in 1866 by veterans of the Confederate Army. Its main objective was to restore white supremacy after the American Civil War. The organization lost support from 1868 to 1870 and was destroyed during President Ulysses S. Grant's government. Nevertheless, the second Klan was founded in 1915. It grew rapidly as a reaction to the new groups of immigrants and migrants that arrived in the United States during and after the war. The second Klan also advocated white supremacy and hatred against different minorities and social groups which were now taking the scarce job opportunities available. Their typical methods included lynchings, attacks on private houses and public property, and the use of cross burning to intimidate victims and demonstrate the Klan's power. The attacks were mainly produced in the South. They are classified

as hate groups by the American government, with operations in separate and well organized small local units that still exist today.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- 1 **Discuss:** Divide the class into groups. Ask groups what the front cover of the reader is trying to say about the book and how well it does this. Make sure they pay attention to the pictures and images presented. What does the cover tell them about the plot or the themes? Write the main points on the board.
- 2 **Pair work:** Ask: *What do you know about the history of the southern states of America?* Ask students to write three or four lines about it. *What do you know about the Ku Klux Klan?* Get them to write down three facts.
- 3 **Answer:** Ask the students to work in groups. They read the information about John Grisham in the Introduction. Then, they answer the following questions:
 - a What nationality is John Grisham?
 - b What was his first job?
 - c Which was his first novel?
 - d What opinion did readers have about his novels?
 - e What has helped him become internationally popular?
 - f What is so relevant about the year 1996 in his life?
 - g What kind of topics are his books about?

Chapters 1–3

While reading

- 4 **Pair work:** Ask students to work in pairs and find the names of the following people.
 - a This man arrests Billy Ray Cobb and Willard.
 - b These men throw Tonya Hailey into "the long grass at the edge of the woods".
 - c This man was in the past Jake Brigance's employer.
 - d This man usually gets up at 5:30 a.m.
 - e This man wants to throw Tonya off a bridge.
- 5 **Discuss:** Get students to discuss the following questions and present their views to the class: *How do you think the two rapists should be punished? What do you consider the main conflict in the story is? The rape? The murder? Why do you say so?*
- 6 **Discuss:** Get students to express their views on the following questions:
 - a Why isn't Jake confident about defending Carl Lee? Give four reasons.
 - b Why does Rufus Buckley, the prosecutor, want the case?
 - c Why is Deputy Looney a problem for Carl Lee?

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- d Why does Lucien say Jake must try to get the trial moved to another county?
- e Why does Lucien say that insanity is the only possible defense?
- f Why does Lucien say Jake is lucky to have the case?
- g Why is Ethel, Jake's secretary, worried?

After reading

- 7 Group work:** Put students into small groups, and ask them to discuss the following question. Then have a whole class discussion on the question: *Do you think Carl Lee should be punished for what he did or be allowed to go free? If you think he should be punished, what should the punishment be?*
- 8 Discuss:** Get students to answer the following questions: *How relevant is the Ku Klux Klan's intervention during the case? If you were Jake, how would you explain to your family why you are going to defend Carl Lee?*

Chapters 4–6

Before reading

- 9 Discuss:** Ask students to discuss the following questions: *What would you do now if you were Jake Brigance? How would you prosecute the case if you were Rufus Buckley?*

While reading

- 10 Research:** Get the students in groups. Ask them to look for evidence on the methods used by the KKK. Then they report their findings to the class.
- 11 Role play:** Get students to work in pairs. One of them is Carla. The other one is Jake. Ask them to continue the conversation between Carla and Jake at the end of Chapter 5.

After reading

- 12 Discuss:** Put students into pairs, and ask them to discuss the following questions. Then have a whole class discussion: *In what way does the situation look more hopeful for Carl Lee and Jake? In what way doesn't the situation look very hopeful?*

Chapters 7–9

Before reading

- 13 Discuss:** Get students to answer the following questions: *What will Carl Lee's trial be like? Why do you say so? Will it be affected by publicity? If so, how can it benefit or damage Jake's work?*

While reading

- 14 Role play:** Get students to work in pairs.
Student A: You are a reporter for a local newspaper. Ask Jake questions about the attempt to blow up his house.
Student B: You are Jake. Answer the reporter's questions.

- 15 Write:** Get students to work in pairs. One of them is Jake. The other one is Ellen. Jake writes a paragraph describing Ellen from his point of view. Ellen writes a paragraph describing Jake from her point of view. Then they read aloud what they have written.

- 16 Discuss:** Get students to read the following quotations and discuss who might have said them and in what context.

- a "I already said don't ask. I know twenty-six names. That's the best I can do."
- b "... I've found a secret weapon."
- c "Do you have something against females, sir?"
- d "I might make you wife number five."
- e "You said there was no danger!"

After reading

- 17 Discuss:** Have a class discussion based on the following questions: *How could Ellen Roark be of any assistance to Jake? What does Ellen mean when she says: "I'm a woman. I'm in the South. I know my place." (Chapter 8, page 40)?*
- 18 Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Get them to discuss the following questions: *Why do you think Jake continues with the case when the Klan have tried to kill him and his family? What would you do if you were Jake? Try to be honest! What does the Ku Klux Klan do in these chapters to hurt and frighten people? Why do you think organizations like the Ku Klux Klan exist? What makes people act like this, in your opinion?*

Chapters 10–12

Before reading

- 19 Discuss:** Get students to present their opinions on the following questions: *Now that the trial is about to start, what kind of reaction can be expected from the citizens of Clayton? Why do you say so? How effectively will Lucien, Jake, Ellen and Harry Rex work together? Why do you say so?*

While reading

- 20 Discuss:** Get students to express their views on the following:
- a How do you feel about what happened to Stump? Give reasons for your opinion.
 - b What mistakes does Buckley make during the trial?
 - c What are the important questions that Jake asks these people? Nora Cobb, Earnestine Willard, Ozzie Walls, Deputy Looney.
 - d Was there any part of these chapters which made you angry? Explain why.
- 21 Group work:** Ask students to work in groups and discuss the following question: *How well do you think the following people reacted during the events that took place before the trial began? Justify your opinions.*
 a) Reverend Agee and his followers, b) Stamp Sisson, c) Sheriff Ozzie.

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22 Pair work: Ask students to get into pairs and choose one of these characters: Jake Brigance and Rufus Buckley. Then write the following words on the board.

cunning	sad	ambitious
confident	deceitful	desperate
happy	patient	anxious
	kind	

Ask each pair to choose three words that best describe their character. They must justify their choices.

After reading

23 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Tell them that one of them is a witness in the trial. They can choose who they want to be. The other is either Jake or Buckley. Tell them to act the scene. When students have practiced together, each pair can perform in front of the class.

24 Discuss: Ask students to find evidence in the story to justify why Lucien states: "... It's not your fault. It's a crazy world Jake. Full of crazy people. Right now I think half of them are in Ford County." (Chapter 12, page 68)

Chapters 13–14

Before reading

25 Predict: Ask students how they think these people feel and write it down in their notebooks.
a) Ellen Roark, b) Jake, c) Rufus Buckley, d) Carl Lee.

While reading

26 Discuss: Ask students to look at the following words and discuss how they think those words relate to the different characters:

- a) confidence – Jake / Rufus
- b) insanity – Dr. Rodeheaver / Carl Lee
- c) freedom – Tonya / Carl Lee

After reading

27 Check and discuss: Have students look at their predictions from activity 25 and share what they thought versus what it says in the book with a partner.

28 Discuss: Get students to give their opinion on the following question: *What qualities do you think someone needs to be a good lawyer? List them in order of importance.* Then ask them to try to find evidence in the last three chapters of the qualities they have mentioned.

29 Write: Ask the students to imagine they are a member of the jury. Get them to write about their feelings and thoughts about Carl Lee and how they changed when Wanda Wornack talked to them.

Extra activities

30 Discuss: Do you think that *A Time to Kill* is a realistic novel? Give reasons for your opinion.

31 Group work: Get students to write in groups a list of the events they consider to be turning points in the story. Ask them to exchange lists with other groups. Do they agree? Are there events they have all included? Which? Have a class discussion.

32 Research: In this story, Jake and Carl Lee are fighting more than the law. They face the racial prejudices of the southern states of the United States. Have students work in pairs and do research using the library and/or the Internet about the history of the racial prejudice in the southern states and the history of the Ku Klux Klan.

33 Artwork: Choose an interesting scene from the book. Draw a cartoon that explains what happens through speech bubbles, captions and/or illustrations. Share your cartoon with others in the class.

34 Write: Have students choose a character from the book that interests them (in a good or bad way). Have them imagine that they are a relative or friend of that character. Write a story about that character that might help explain the role he or she plays in this novel.

Example: (from the perspective of Jake's aunt)
I remember Jake as a little boy. He was always very helpful and wanted to do the right thing. I remember the day he ...