

Teacher's notes

A Time to Kill

by John Grisham



SUMMARY

With over 55 million of his books currently in print worldwide, John Grisham has been described as "the bestselling novelist of the 90s". *A Time to Kill* is his first novel. The story is set in the southern states of the USA, where the Ku Klux Klan 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. Can he possibly get Carl Lee off? Does Carl Lee deserve to go free? The Ku Klux Klan certainly don't think so. The attention of all of America is focused on the trial . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Grisham was born in 1955 in Arkansas, in the USA. His father was a construction worker and his mother a housewife. He became a lawyer. Three years after qualifying, he found himself watching a court trial that he could not forget. A young girl was testifying against a man who had brutally raped her. Horrified, Grisham found himself wondering what he would do if the child were his daughter. He writes that he "wanted personally to shoot the rapist." Out of this experience, *A Time to Kill* was born.

A Time to Kill was published in 1989, but did not do very well. However, by that time, Grisham's second novel, *The Firm*, was completed. Film rights to the book were bought by Paramount Pictures and it became the bestselling novel of 1991. Interest was aroused in *A Time to Kill* and it too became a best seller.

Since first publishing *A Time to Kill*, Grisham has written one novel a year, including *The Client*, *The Pelican Brief* and *The Rainmaker*. Six of them have been turned into films. 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."

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

John Grisham is America's top storyteller. His books are guaranteed to top the bestseller 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."

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 USA. Up until the middle of the 19th century, the economy of the southern states of the USA 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. 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.

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

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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.

Another constant element of Grisham's books is that of "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.

A film version of *A Time to Kill* was released in 1996.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. Further supplementary exercises, covering shorter sections of the book, can be found on the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers, but with the exception of pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access center.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Write the chapter titles on the blackboard but not in the right order. Put students into pairs, and ask them to try to put the chapter titles in the right order.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1-3

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?

Chapters 4-6

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 6-9

1 Put students into pairs and ask them to discuss the following question.

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!

2 Put students into small groups, and ask them to discuss the following questions.

- 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

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.

Chapters 13 - 14

Put students into pairs. Ask them to put Jake's closing arguments in order of importance according to how they helped Jake win the case.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

In groups, students discuss the following question:

John Grisham is one of the most popular writers in the world. Judging from this novel, why do you think this is so? Will you read another Grisham novel?

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practiced in the Before You Read sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-3

arrest (v) if the police arrest somebody, they take them away because they believe them to be guilty of a crime

case (n) something that must be decided in a court of law

client (n) someone who pays a person or organization for services or advice

county (n) an area with its own local government

defendant (n) the person in a court who has been accused of a crime

deputy (n) somebody who has the second most important position in an organization

insane (adj) seriously mentally ill

mask (n) something that covers all or part of your face in order to protect or hide it

nigger (n) a very offensive word for a black person

nod (v) to move your head up and down to say 'yes'

pickup (n) a vehicle with a large open part at the back, used for carrying goods

prosecute (v) to say officially that someone might be guilty of a crime and must be judged by a court of law

psychiatrist (n) a doctor who treats people who have a mental illness

publicize (v) to tell people about something in a newspaper or on television

rape (v) to force someone to have sex when they do not want to

robe (n) a long loose piece of clothing

whiskey (n) a strong alcoholic drink

Chapters 4-6

reasonable (adj) sensible and fair

Reverend (adj) used in the title of a Christian priest

Chapters 7-9

dynamite (n) a powerful explosive

porch (n) an open area with a floor and a roof, that is built on the side of a house

qualification (n) an examination that you have passed

research (v) to study a subject in detail so that you can discover new things about it

select (v) to choose

tick (v) if a clock or watch ticks, it makes a short sound every second

Chapters 10-12

charge (v) to state officially that someone might be guilty of a crime

evidence (n) information given or objects shown to help prove whether or not someone is guilty of a crime

sustain (v) to allow

victim (n) someone who has been hurt or killed by someone or something



Student's activities

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Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students.

Activities before reading the book

- Read the Introduction. Then answer these questions.
 - Where does this story happen?
 - How old is Tonya Hailey and what happens to her?
 - What is Carl Lee Hailey's revenge, do you think?
 - What could his punishment be?
 - What "legal defense" could there be for his actions?
- Work in pairs.

What do you know about the history of the southern states of America? Write three or four lines about it. What do you know about the Ku Klux Klan? Write down three facts.

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1 - 3

Chapter 1

- What are the names of these people?
 - This man arrests Billy Ray Cobb and Willard.
 - These men throw Tonya Hailey into "the long grass at the edge of the woods".
 - This man was in the past Jake Brigance's employer.
 - This man usually gets up at 5.30 am.
 - This man wants to throw Tonya off a bridge.
- How do you think the two rapists should be punished?

Chapter 2

Answer these questions.

- What does Carl Lee do or say that shows that he planned the murders?
- Who else gets hurt during the shooting?
- We are told that the Deputy Sheriff could hear Carl Lee's "crazy laughter" during the shooting. Do you think that Carl Lee was crazy when he committed the murder? Give reasons for your opinion.

Chapter 3

- Answer these questions.
 - Why isn't Jake confident about defending Carl Lee? Give four reasons.
 - Why does Rufus Buckley, the prosecutor, want the case?
 - Why is Deputy Looney a problem for Carl Lee?
 - Why does Lucien say Jake must try to get the trial moved to another county?
 - Why does Lucien say that insanity is the only possible defense?

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- Why does Lucien say Jake is lucky to have the case?
 - Why is Ethel, Jake's secretary, worried?
- Answer these questions.
 - What have you learnt about Jake Brigance so far?
 - Do you like him? Give reasons for your opinion.

CHAPTERS 4 - 6

Chapter 4

Are these sentences true or false? If they are false, correct them.

- The grand jury decides that Carl Lee must stand trial for murder.
- Buckley is rude, unpleasant and self-important in front of the cameras.
- Stump Sisson is a friend of Bill Ray Cobb.
- The members of the Klan like the idea of using the Hailey case to bring together all Southern whites who hate black people.
- Billy Ray Cobb's grandfather is a member of the Klan.

Chapter 5

- These are the answers. What are the questions?
 - A lawyer who specializes in nasty divorce cases.
 - 60 days.
 - July 22.
 - Less than a hundred dollars.
 - A new Cadillac.
 - A burning wooden cross.

2 Work in pairs.

Continue the conversation between Carla and Jake at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 6

Answer these questions.

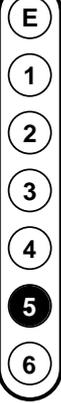
- Do you think Dr Bass will be able to help Carl Lee? Give reasons for your opinion.
- Who will be the psychiatrist for the prosecution?
- How is this man very different from Bass?

CHAPTERS 7 - 9

Chapter 7

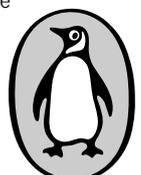
1 Complete the sentences.

On the night of July 11, the sheriff hears that the Klan are going to (a) Jake's house. Jake moves his family to safety very quickly and the police (b) the Klan man who is going to do the job. There is (c) in his suitcase. Ozzie beats the



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Student's activities

man with his stick and puts the (d) between his legs. The man takes the bomb apart. Then Ozzie beats the man again and the man tells him where his (e) are. The police find another Klan man sleeping in a red (f)..... near the house. Both Klan members have to go to (g).....

2 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.

Chapter 8

Write a paragraph describing Ellen from the point of view of Jake. Then write a second paragraph describing Jake from the point of view of Ellen. Use your imagination!

Chapter 9

Who says these things? Briefly explain the situation.

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

CHAPTERS 10 – 12

Chapter 10

1 Answer these questions.

- Why do bus loads of black people come into Clanton?
- What happens to Stump Sisson?
- Why does the sheriff call in the National Guard?
- How do Jake and his friends prepare for the trial?
- Why are twenty people on the list of possible jurors told that they need not become jurors?
- What question does Jake ask the possible jurors and why is this question so clever?

2 Work in pairs and discuss this question.

How do you feel about what happened to Stump? Give reasons for your opinion.

Chapter 11

Answer these questions.

- What mistakes does Buckley make during the trial?
- What are the important questions that Jake asks these people?
Nora Cobb, Earnestine Willard, Ozzie Walls, Deputy Looney

Chapter 12

1 Put these sentences in the order of the story.

- The Klan attacks Ellen.
- Lucien explains Bass's "rape" of the seventeen-year-old.
- Buckley tells the court that Bass was charged with the rape of a 17-year-old girl.
- Jake is told what happened to Ellen.
- The Klan burns down Jake's house.
- A Klan member tries to shoot Jake. But he hits a soldier instead.
- Dr WT Bass gives evidence.

2 Work in pairs. Discuss this question:

How do you feel about events in this chapter? What do you feel most angry about? Explain why.

CHAPTERS 13 – 14

Chapter 13

1 Answer these questions.

- What are Jake's closing arguments to the jury?
- Do you think he will win the case? Why/why not?

2 Work in pairs. Answer this question.

What qualities does someone need to be a good lawyer, do you think? List them in order of importance.

Chapter 14

1 Choose the right answers.

- When the people on the jury come into the court room to give their answers,
 - they are crying.
 - the people outside are crying.
- The judge says Carl Lee is free to leave because
 - he is not now insane.
 - because he is insane.
- Jake visits the home of
 - Lucien Wilbanks.
 - Wanda Wornack.
- Wanda Wornack was crying because
 - she was unhappy that Carl Lee was free.
 - she was tired but happy about the "not guilty" decision.
- Jake leaves town because
 - he wants to get away from the reporters.
 - he needs to talk to his wife.

2 Imagine you are a member of the jury. Write about your feelings and thoughts about Carl Lee and how they changed when Wanda Wornack talked to you.

Activities after reading the book

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

