The Firm
by John Grisham

SUMMARY

The Firm, written by the highest-selling thriller writer of the 1990s, tells the story of a brilliant young lawyer, Mitch McDeere. Before he has even left Law School, Mitch is offered $80,000 a year in the job of his dreams. So even though the firm of Bendini, Lambert & Locke seems peculiarly strict and conservative, Mitch moves with his young wife to Memphis, Tennessee, to take up the job. However, the firm is even stranger than Mitch thought: not only is it obsessively secretive, but its lawyers keep dying. Then Mitch is contacted by the FBI, and as he learns the real truth about the firm, he realises he is in very great danger ...

ABOUT JOHN GRISHAM

John Grisham’s novels have made him one of the richest men in the entertainment business. His publishers claim he is the world’s most popular author. The Firm, published in 1991, was his first big success and sold over 12 million copies in paperback in the United States alone. He is said to earn well over $25 million a year from his books and from film rights. Many of his books, including The Firm, have been made into successful films.

One of the secrets of Grisham’s success is his much-acclaimed ability as a story-teller. Another, however, is his detailed knowledge of the law and the criminal world, gained from his own years practising law in Southaven, Mississippi. Like his hero, Mitch McDeere, Grisham was born in the south of the United States – in Grisham’s case, in Arkansas – and worked his way up from poverty to become a lawyer.

There is a strong element of social criticism in Grisham’s thrillers. He served in local government in Mississippi as a Democrat from 1983 to 1991 and hoped to improve the state’s education system, but resigned his seat because he felt that it was impossible to make changes. He is a born-again Christian who attends a Baptist church every Sunday, teaches at Sunday school and works with overseas orphans. In almost all his stories, a lone, often young figure, fights for justice against the corruption of large state institutions, or criminal gangs like the Mafia and Ku-Klux-Klan.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Grisham’s stories have a consistent theme which appeals to many people nowadays: his heroes are ordinary people who fight the faceless, powerful institutions of society - and win. Three large institutions feature in The Firm: the Mafia, the FBI and lawyers.

Americans are both fascinated and appalled by their lawyers. They sue each other more frequently than any other nation, and are so interested in the procedures of law that there is a 24-hour Court TV channel. Yet lawyers are mistrusted for their high fees, and ‘lawyer jokes’ are so common that there is a phone line in California which specialises in them. Grisham’s criminal law firm of Bendini, Lambert & Locke, with its cynically high charges and money-driven culture, cleverly plays to his countrymen’s worst fears.

The Mafia secret crime society spread to the United States from Sicily in the late 19th century. There are several Mafia ‘families’, each with its own head or ‘don’. Non-relatives can also join if they are trusted. The Mafia is enormously rich and powerful, and its influence is said to reach into almost all areas of American business, and beyond. At times in its history it has even controlled government officials. It makes billions of dollars from gambling, prostitution and drug trafficking, and invests this money in legal businesses, through which it makes even more profit. Grisham’s central idea of a law firm that is secretly owned by the Mafia is not in the least far-fetched.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) exists to combat criminals or criminal organisations whose activities affect the whole United States. The investigation of crime syndicates like the Mafia is one of its most important tasks. It has more than 30 million fingerprints on record, and files on more than 100 million Americans. In the 1970s there was widespread public distrust of the FBI, following revelations that, under its long-standing director J. Edgar Hoover, it had overstepped its legal powers in many of its investigations into people’s lives, and performed secret political work in the service of various presidents. More recently, however, respect for the FBI has returned.
In Grisham’s books, the ‘enemy’ can be a government agency, a powerful company, the FBI or the CIA, just as often as a criminal group such as the Mafia or the Ku-Klux-Klan.

Communicative activities

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

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

1 Ask if any students have seen the film, ‘The Firm’. Ask them to tell the others in the class about it and whether they liked it and thought it was exciting, but tell them not to say how it ends.

2 Ask students to say what they know about the Mafia. Have they seen any other films involving the Mafia, for example ‘The Godfather’?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1–8

1 Ask students to give their opinions about lawyers and the amount of money they earn (especially in America). Do they think it is right that lawyers earn so much? Do they think the firm of Bendini, Lambert and Locke is typical in billing clients for more hours than they actually work? They should also think about the time it takes to qualify as a lawyer, the long hours they work, and the short holidays.

2 Ask students in pairs to role play a conversation between Mitch and Abby when Mitch gets home too late for a dinner that Abby has spent some time cooking. Students taking the part of Abby should include asking why he’s working so hard, working through the night, not talking to her about his work, and should tell him that her life is miserable. Students taking the part of Mitch should include wanting to be the best, wanting to become a partner more quickly than anyone before, wanting to earn a lot of money so that he and Abby can enjoy a life of luxury.

3 Ask students to discuss whether it is a good idea for Mitch to tell the partners about being contacted by Tarrance. Ask them to imagine he tells Abby instead – what do they think her reaction and advice will be?

Chapters 9–16

1 Ask students in pairs to role play the conversation between Mitch and Tammy as they plan exactly how Mitch will deliver documents for her to photocopy in the Cotton Shipping Building.

2 Ask students in groups of three to role play the conversation between Mitch, Abby and Tammy as they discuss the details for giving sleeping-powder to Avery and photocopying the documents in the Cayman Islands.

Chapters 17–25

There are a number of important differences between the end of the book and the end of the film. For example, in the film, there is a long chase after Mitch runs out of the firm’s building and eventually Mitch kills DeVasher; Mitch does a deal with the Mafia, so he, Abby and Ray don’t have to escape from the USA and live in hiding for the rest of their lives. Ask students to imagine they are going to direct the film. They should discuss what changes from the book they would make, if any, and explain their reasons.

Alternatively, students can discuss whether they think Mitch, Abby and Ray will be safe from the Mafia for the rest of their lives. Is there a better way for Mitch to deal with the situation he finds himself in?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

1 Ask students to discuss whether Tom Cruise was a good choice of actor for the part of Mitch. (They can compare the photo of Mitch on the cover with Tom Cruise.) Would they prefer to see another star in the role? If so, who?

2 In groups, students discuss whether Mitch is a likeable character. They should think about the time he spends working instead of being with Abby, the fact that he is unfaithful to her and the way he saves them all in the end – but does he do it for the sake of justice, or just for money?

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know these new words. They are practised in the Before You Read Sections at the back of the book.

Definitions are based on the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.

Chapters 1–8

agent (n) someone who works for the government or police force to get secret information about another country or an organization

associate (n) someone who you work or do business with

badge (n) a small piece of metal, plastic, cloth etc with words or pictures on it, worn to show your rank

client (n) someone who pays for services or advice

cop (n) (slang) a policeman or policewoman

firm (n) a business or company

investigate (v) to try to find out the truth about something such as a crime

security (n) something that protects you from the bad thing that could happen to you

surveillance (n) the act of carefully watching a person or place because they may be connected with criminal activities

Chapters 9–16

arrest (v) if the police arrest you, they take you away because they think you have done something wrong

bikini (n) a piece of clothing in two separate parts that women wear for swimming

briefcase (n) a case used for carrying papers or documents

evidence (n) facts, objects or signs that make you believe that something exists or is true

legendary (adj) famous and admired

photocopy (iv) (to make) a photographic copy of a document, drawing, etc

storage (n) the act of putting something in a special place while it is not being used

wire (v) to send money electronically from one bank to another

Chapters 17–25

pier (n) a structure built out into a river or the sea, usually so that boats can stop at it
1. Look at the cover of the book. Can you guess what the story is about? Now read the introduction at the front of the book.

2. Look at a map of the US and the Caribbean Sea and find these places on it.
   - States: Kentucky, Arkansas.
   - Islands: Grand Cayman, the Bahamas.

CHAPTERS 1–4

1. Match the names with the descriptions.
   - (a) Abby (i) An associate who’s been with the firm for seven years
   - (b) Bendini (ii) An FBI agent involved in watching the firm
   - (c) Oliver Lambert and Nathan Locke (iii) Mitch’s wife
   - (d) Lamar Quin (iv) Mitch’s brother
   - (e) DeVasher (v) The man who started the firm
   - (f) Kozinski and Hodge (vi) The two bosses of the firm
   - (g) Tarrance (vii) Two members of the firm who the security chief is worried about
   - (h) Ray (viii) The head of the firm’s security

2. Who do you think Lazarov might be? Who are ‘they’ in Chicago, the people that DeVasher and Lambert talk about in Chapter 3?

3. Does anything seem strange to you about the law firm of Bendini, Lambert and Locke? Look for clues that show that the activities of the firm may be criminal.

CHAPTERS 5–8

1. Look at these sentences. Complete them with the correct name:
   - Mitch, Abby, Avery Tolleson, Wayne Tarrance, Nathan Locke, or Ray McDeere.
   - (a) ………………………. has a happy marriage and looks at other women.
   - (b) ………………………. has cold, knowing evil eyes.
   - (c) ………………………. starts work at six a.m. every day.
   - (d) ………………………. is the partner with whom Mitch is working at the firm.
   - (e) ………………………. is not happy about the number of hours Mitch spends at the firm.
   - (f) ………………………. finds Mitch while he is having his lunch.
   - (g) ………………………. has been in prison for four years.
   - (h) ………………………. does not have a happy marriage and looks at other women.
   - (i) ………………………. has cold, knowing evil eyes.

2. Why does Lazarov want the homes of all the associates bugged?

3. Which of these things are true, and which are false, about Mitch’s conversation with Tarrance in the cafe?
   - True False
   - (a) Tarrance knows Mitch’s name.
   - (b) He tells Mitch the FBI are watching the firm.
   - (c) He tells Mitch he can trust people in the firm.
   - (d) He says Mitch’s home and office are bugged.
   - (e) He says that Hodge’s and Kozinski’s deaths were definitely accidental.

4. What do you think Tarrance means when he says ‘money doesn’t grow on trees’?

5. Who is Eddie Lomax? Why does Mitch want to get in touch with him? What does Mitch ask him to do?

CHAPTERS 9–12

Answer the following questions.

(a) How do you think DeVasher is going to use the photographs of Mitch and the girl to make sure Mitch will do ‘anything’ for the firm?

(b) Why does Lomax feel that Mitch is ‘swimming in dangerous waters’?

(c) Why don’t Abby and Mitch get Lomax to check their house for bugs?

(d) How does the firm keep its lawyers even after it tells them the truth?

(e) List two reasons why Mitch doesn’t want to accept Voyle’s offer.

CHAPTERS 13–16

1. Complete the sentences by matching the halves (a)–(f) with (i)–(vi).
   - (a) Tarrance suddenly stops talking to Mitch in the shoe shop because
   - (b) Mitch tells Lambert and Locke about meeting Tarrance because
(c) DeVasher thinks Mitch is lying because
(d) Lambert thinks DeVasher might be wrong because
(e) Lazarov is going to get someone in the FBI to talk so that
(f) DeVasher shows Mitch the pictures of him and the girl so that
(i) he thinks they might know about the meeting anyway, and he doesn’t want them to think that he wants to meet Tarrance.
(ii) Mitch won’t talk to the FBI.
(iii) they don’t know of any other meeting between Mitch and Tarrance apart from the first one which he told them about.
(iv) he can find out if Mitch is helping the FBI.
(v) he sees that they’re being watched.
(vi) his man saw Mitch and Tarrance’s meeting differently.

2 Put these events in order.
(a) Abby flies to the Caymans.
(b) DeVasher hears that Abby is leaving Mitch.
(c) Mitch meets Tarrance again, asks for $2 million and talks about Ray.
(d) Tammy and Abby photocopy the files from the firm’s beach house.
(e) Tammy rents a small photocopier and a large office.
(f) Abby sees Mitch in his office and tells Mitch she’s going to go away for a while.
(g) Mitch starts to take documents out of the firm for photocopying.
(h) DeVasher tells Lambert and Locke that Mitch talked to Abanks.
(i) Tammy gets Avery drunk in the Caymans, then drugs him.
(j) Mitch has lunch with the partners and is warned to stay away from Abanks.

CHAPTERS 17–20
Write in the gaps the name of the person who is speaking. Then, for each sentence, write who is meant by the word in italic type.

(a) ............................. says: ‘By the time we finish we’ll have ten thousand dirty files for you.’
(b) ............................. says: ‘Did you ever hear of the Bendini firm in Memphis?’
(c) ............................. says: ‘About ten days ago, someone made a lot of unusual copies on the fourth floor.’
(d) ............................. says: ‘Avery’s got some unfinished business in the Caymans. I want you to go down there tomorrow…’
(e) ............................. says: ‘Your face will be all over the papers tomorrow, but tonight you can do what you want.’
(f) ............................. says: ‘He’s delivered one lot of Bendini documents and says he has ten thousand more.’
(g) ............................. says: ‘You disgust me. I can’t believe it’s you.’
(h) ............................. says: ‘For some funny reason I don’t trust you at the moment.’

CHAPTERS 21–25
1 Match the names with the descriptions.
(a) Karen Adair (i) The leader of the Mafia family from Chicago
(b) Mr Laycook (ii) A clerk at the Blue Tide Hotel
(c) Joey Morolto (iii) A woman who follows Abby to the Perdido Hilton Hotel
(d) Andy Patrick (iv) A banker in the Southeastern Bank Building

2 Answer the following questions.
(a) What does the Doctor do?
(b) How is Mitch able to transfer $10 million from the bank in Grand Cayman?
(c) Why is the van that Mitch rented empty when the police find it?
(d) Why does Andy Patrick want to help Mitch?
(e) Why does DeVasher order Rimmer and his men to say that they had seen Mitch, Abby and Ray heading south?
(f) Who brings the boat to help Mitch, Abby and Ray escape?

Activities after reading the book

1 The Firm is a thriller. Do you think the story is very exciting? Did you want to keep reading to find out what was going to happen next? Is the story too complicated, with too many characters, especially at the end? Tell another student what your feelings about the story are.

2 Imagine that you are Abby and that, one year after the end of the story, you are able to contact your parents for the first time. There is no danger that the Mafia or anyone else will find out. Write a letter to your parents, explaining why you had to leave America, what you miss, what is good and what is bad about your new life, whether you think you are safe, and what your plans for the future are.