

The Last Juror

John Grisham



About the author

John Grisham was born on February 8, 1955, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in the United States. His father worked in construction and as a cotton farmer, and his mother was a housewife. The family had financial problems and John and his four other siblings moved from town to town in the South. John graduated in law in 1981 and in the same year married Renee Jones. He set up a law practice, and in 1989 published his first book, *A Time to Kill*. Since then, he has been a prolific writer publishing a string of best-sellers, some of which have been made into successful movies. His novels include: *The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief*, *The Client*, *The Chamber*, and *The Last Juror*, which was published in 2004. He writes mainly about legal cases, but also includes social history and commentary in his books. He is widely recognized as one of the world's best-selling novelists. He now lives with his wife and two children in Oxford, Mississippi. He has maintained a life long passion for baseball and devotes much of his time to charitable causes.

Summary

The narrator of the story is a reporter called Willie Traynor. A girl is murdered in a small American town. The local bad boy, Danny Padgitt, is put on trial. He goes to jail, avoiding the death penalty because some of the jurors don't vote for it. After being turned down for parole on one occasion, he is eventually let out of jail. Two of the jurors are subsequently shot dead, and one is seriously injured by a bomb. Willie discovers that the dead and injured jurors hadn't wanted the death penalty at the trial. He can't understand why the prime suspect, Danny, would want to kill these people. When Danny is arrested

and put on trial for a second time, somebody shoots him dead in the courtroom. The killer is a mental patient called Hank Hooten. He had been in love with the dead girl. He took revenge for her death by killing the jurors who had opposed the death penalty, and then by killing Danny, before shooting himself dead.

Chapters 1–2: The story begins in the sleepy American town of Clanton, Mississippi. In March, 1970, a young woman called Rhoda Kassellaw is stabbed to death in her bedroom. Just before she dies, she tells her neighbor the name of her attacker, Danny Padgitt. He is later arrested following a car accident and taken into custody. Willie Traynor, the owner of the local newspaper, covers the story. He knows Danny comes from a bad family, who are rumored to kill people for money. His friend, a black woman called Callie Ruffin, warns him that the Padgitt family would not be very happy about his newspaper stories about them, and a lawyer called Harry Rex gives him a gun. The day arrives for the trial. In the crowded courtroom are Ernie Gaddis, the prosecuting lawyer, a man called Hank Hooten, who had been the dead girl's boyfriend for a while, and Lucien Wilbanks, an unpleasant man, who is defending Danny. Callie Ruffin is one of the jurors. Danny's defense is that was with his girlfriend on the night of the murder, but a lot of people don't believe him. Danny threatens to kill the jurors if they say he is guilty. He is found guilty and is sent to jail for life, avoiding the death penalty because some of the jurors didn't want it.

Chapters 3–4: Willie Traynor explains to Miss Callie's son that a life sentence in Mississippi really meant ten years. Just as things are returning to normal, Malcolm Vince, a witness at the trial, is murdered. Then, Hank Hooten goes crazy and starts shooting a gun from the top of the court house. He is enraged because Danny didn't get the death penalty. He is captured and put in a mental hospital. A few years later, a woman tells Willie that she has seen Danny in a café talking and joking with a jailer from the Broomfield jail. Willie is doubly surprised because Danny should be in Parchman jail. Willie drives to Broomfield to investigate. He takes photos of the two men and publishes the story in his newspaper. He then receives threatening phone calls and is given police protection. Later, when Willie is visiting a church, he sees Hank Hooten. He tries to find out why Hank isn't still in the mental hospital, but no one will talk to him.

The Last Juror

Chapter 5: Two years later, Willie attends Danny Padgitt's parole hearing in Parchman jail. Danny says he is a reformed character but Willie tells the parole panel about Danny's threatening behavior at his trial. The officials vote three to two not to give Danny parole. A year later, Willie and the Sheriff attend Danny's second parole hearing. This time Danny is given parole and is free. Willie visits Callie Ruffin's house and learns that Callie is very worried and has been seen by a doctor. He tries to reassure the family that Danny won't do the things he has threatened to do, but deep inside he doesn't feel as confident as he sounds.

Chapters 6–7: Lenny Fargarson, a juror at the trial, is shot dead in his wheelchair. The Sheriff wants the list of all the jurors at the Padgitt trial so he can warn them of the danger and offer police protection. Willie informs the Ruffin family personally. Then another juror is murdered. Mo Teale is shot dead while he is mending a piece of farm machinery. The Sheriff discovers that the bullet had come from the same gun that killed Lenny Fargarson, but admits he can't arrest Danny because there weren't any witnesses. Willie and the Sheriff drive around the town and observe police cars and people with guns outside the jurors' homes. Willie tells Harry Rex that he has received an offer for his newspaper and is thinking of selling it and taking a trip around Europe.

Chapters 8–9: Willie is called to the Ruffin house. Miss Callie explains that nine of the jurors wanted the death penalty and only three didn't. The three that didn't were Lenny Fargarson, Mo Teale and Maxine Root. It appears that the killer is murdering the wrong people. Willie wants to tell the police the names but Callie initially objects on the grounds that the jurors were sworn to secrecy. She relents and gives Willie the names. The Sheriff calls a tearful Maxine Root to warn her of the danger. A short time later, a box is delivered to Maxine's house. She believes it is a box of candy sent to her by her sister. Before opening it, she calls her sister to thank her and is told her sister hadn't sent anything to her. A policeman decides that the box could be dangerous and shoots at it. There is an explosion and Maxine and the other policemen are injured and admitted to hospital. The police put Danny in jail. The next day Danny is in the courtroom when somebody shoots him dead. Then the gunman shoots out all the windows in Danny's lawyer's office across the street.

Chapter 10: Finally the gunman shoots himself. It is Hank Hooten. Willie visits the mental hospital and talks to

Hank's doctor, Dr Vero. The doctor explains that Hank was a very mentally sick person. He had been in love with the dead girl, even though she wasn't in love with him, and was incensed about her murder. He also believed she spoke to him. He killed the two jurors because they hadn't wanted the death penalty. The doctor adds that he wasn't Hank's doctor when he was released from the hospital. While in a café, Willie learns that Miss Callie is very ill in hospital. The following day, with her family and Willie at her bedside, Miss Callie dies. The next day Willie packs his things in preparation for his trip abroad and very sadly begins his last article for the paper, an obituary of his close friend, Miss Callie.

Background and themes

The Deep South: The book is set in a small town in the south of the United States. Life there is monotonous, and in the character of Willie Traynor, we see one man's desire to escape from the never changing environment and widen his horizons by traveling around the world. The book also gives us an insight into the social hierarchy of the town. The fact that Miss Callie is the only black juror reveals some racial prejudice on the part of the authorities. The fact that the black people live in a segregated part of town, Lowtown, in small, crowded houses reveals the lack of social integration between white and black people. The only white person to have any real involvement with the black community is the book's narrator, Willie.

Revenge: Danny Padgitt swears to take revenge on the jurors if they find him guilty. This, and the fact that although he is in prison, he is free to go where he wants, forms the basis of the suspicion everyone has that he is responsible for the murders. However, the twist at the end of the story is that the mentally deranged Hank Hooten is responsible for killing the jurors because they didn't put Danny to death.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

While reading (p. 6, after "We sold a lot of newspapers that week.")

- I **Write:** Put the students in groups of three and tell them to write a newspaper article about the killing and the arrest of Danny. Tell them to include the facts mentioned in the chapters and to invent some extra material. Each group then reads out their story to the class.

The Last Juror

After reading

- 2 **Discuss:** Put the students in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: *Do you think the death penalty is a good thing or a bad thing and why? Does your country have the death penalty? What countries do have it? Does the death penalty stop other people doing bad things?*

Chapters 3–4

After reading

- 3 **Write and ask:** Write *Who did Willie have lunch with on Thursday?* on the board and elicit the answer (Miss Callie). Ask students to write another question about something in Chapters 3–4. Now have students stand up and walk around the class, asking and answering each other's questions.

Chapter 5

While reading (p. 22, after "Padgitt went to jail in 1971—that's only eight years.")

- 4 **Pair work:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to jail for one month. Ask them to make a list of all the things they would like to take with them to the jail. Put their suggestions on the board and add some of your own. Tell them they can't take a computer. Then, they have to choose two things from their list. The students tell the class the two things they have chosen and why.

After reading

- 5 **Write and guess:** Write *Most black people in jail have no food.* on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (money not food). Now students choose a sentence from Chapter 5 and rewrite it changing one word. Students walk around the classroom, reading out their sentences, and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

Chapters 6–7

While reading (p. 32, after "He knew the policeman.")

- 6 **Game:** Put the students in groups of four and tell them they are going to play the twenty questions game. Student A thinks of a profession he or she knows in English. The rest of the group has to guess the profession. They can ask up to twenty questions. If they guess the profession, they win. Student A can only reply "yes," "no," or "sometimes" to the questions. See Discussion activities key for suggested questions.

After reading

- 7 **Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *stores, trees, book, chair, machine, jacket, newspaper, trip.* Have the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapters 6–7.

- 8 **Discuss:** Remind the students that Willie has an exciting plan to travel to Europe and India. Tell the students they have to spend a year in a foreign country. Put them in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: *Which country would you like to go to and why? What problems could you have? Do you think you would like the food/weather/people? Would you like to go with a friend?*

Chapters 8–9

While reading (p. 36, after "You can't tell him the names.")

- 9 **Role play:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Willie and Miss Callie. Tell them that Willie must try very hard to make Miss Callie give him the names and Miss Callie must refuse. See Discussion activities key for an example start to the conversation.

After reading

- 10 **Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 8–9. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

Chapter 10

After reading

- 11 **Write:** Ask the students to write Willie's letter about Miss Callie. Tell them to include all the information given in the book and to invent some more. Students then read out their letter to the rest of the class.
- 12 **Research:** Danny Padgitt and Hank Hooten were both killers. Ask the students to look on the Internet for information about one famous male murderer and one female murderer. Students then give an oral presentation of what they have found out.
- 13 **Discuss:** Put the students in small groups and ask them to make a list of all the main characters in the book. Then ask them to talk about each character, their personalities and what they did, and to grade them 1 to 10 on whether they were an interesting person or not. Then ask them to discuss the following questions: *Did you like the book? Do you like these kinds of books or movies? What kinds of books and movies do you like?*
- 14 **Game:** Divide the class into teams and get them to write five questions about what happened in the book. Team A finds questions from Chapters 1–5 and Team B questions from Chapters 6–10. The teams then take turns to ask their questions to the other teams, who have to write down the answer. The team with the most correct answers in the end wins.