

The Client

John Grisham



About the author

John Grisham is one of the most popular American authors writing today. He has sold more than sixty million copies of his books worldwide, and each individual novel has been a bestseller. Grisham's books are often called 'courtroom thrillers', as they have a legal background. Since 1991, Grisham has written one book a year. Six of his books, including *The Client*, have been made into films. His most recent book, *The Appeal*, was published in early 2008.

Grisham was born in Arkansas in 1955, the son of a migrant construction worker. As a child, he wanted to become a professional baseball player. Later on, however, he changed his mind and studied accounting at Mississippi State University. In 1981, he qualified as a lawyer. He worked in a law firm for nearly ten years, specialising in criminal defence and personal injury claims. He sat as a Democrat in the state House of Representatives from 1983 to 1990.

Although he was working sixty to seventy hours a week, Grisham got up at 5 a.m. every day to write his first book, *A Time to Kill*, which was inspired by a case he was involved in. It took him three years to write the book, which was finished in 1987. His next novel, *The Firm*, published in 1991, was his first major success. After publishing the book, he took up writing full time, except for a brief period in 1996 when he represented the family of a railroad brakeman killed at work. Grisham won \$683,500 for his clients – the biggest award of his career.

Grisham lives with his wife and their two children in Mississippi. In his spare time, he enjoys helping children to develop their baseball skills.

Summary

The Client is a fast-moving thriller set in the southern United States. Mark Sway is a bright eleven-year-old who comes face to face with violence the likes of which he has previously seen only on television. Possessing dangerous information, he finds himself caught between the interests of the law and the Mafia, and the question quickly becomes one of who will get to him first?

Mark's mother is a single parent and she can't leave the bedside of his younger brother, who is ill. Mark desperately needs to find someone he can trust to advise him. By chance, he meets a lawyer named Reggie Love, who agrees to help him for a fee of one dollar. Working against time, Reggie helps Mark to work out how to protect himself and his family from the people trying to harm them. At the same time, they help the police to get the information they require.

Background and themes

A thriller with a message: Thrillers are books that often contain a lot of physical violence, suspense, crime, gunplay, escape and chase scenes – and *The Client* is no exception. It is an exciting story and students will want to keep on turning the pages to see what will happen. However, as well as being simply a good read, *The Client* also contains some serious issues that Grisham had clearly become familiar with through his job as a lawyer. In the book, he explores the ways in which the Mafia operate in the criminal world, and how this world can accidentally affect the lives of innocent people. The FBI, a powerful federal law enforcement agency, has an interest in the Mafia, and *The Client* explores a situation in which ordinary people find themselves caught between the FBI and the Mafia with apparently no way out.

Ordinary people caught in extraordinary situations:

The situation in *The Client* is typical of Grisham's stories: an ordinary person is suddenly faced with a life-or-death moral choice. In *The Client*, the person in this situation is a child, which gives the drama an added sense of poignancy. Should Mark tell a lie and save himself? Or should he give the FBI the information that they want and put himself and his family in danger from the Mafia?

Untrustworthy adults: Many of the adults in the book aren't shown in a good light. For example, the FBI agents try to frighten Mark into telling them what they want to know, thereby infringing upon his rights. They clearly don't have his best interests in mind. The prosecution

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lawyer, Foltrigg, is only interested in heightening publicity for himself and winning the court case. He doesn't care if Mark has to suffer as a result of his actions. In addition, the news reporter, Moeller, is focused only on pursuing what he thinks is a good story.

Having one person to rely on: Although many of the adults in the book are selfish and unreliable, there is one adult who is able to give Mark the help that he needs. Reggie isn't interested in working for financial gain – in fact, she only asks Mark for one dollar as payment for her services – she just wants to take an opportunity to help someone in real need. Her generous nature contrasts pointedly with the selfish nature of the other lawyer in the story, who refuses to see Mark because he is too busy making money from his personal injury cases.

Growing up too fast: Mark is an intelligent boy who has been forced to grow up much too quickly. His father was a violent man, and he abandoned the family, forcing them to live in poverty. As a result, his mother, Dianne, has to work full time, so the children often find themselves on their own. Mark has taken on the role of 'father' to his little brother, Ricky, teaching him what he knows about life. Mark is tough and self-reliant. He is used to finding his own way around, although much of what he knows about the world – especially the criminal world – comes from what he has seen on TV.

The pros and cons of TV: *The Client* raises some interesting questions about TV. For example, do children see too much violence on TV? Or does TV perform a useful function in teaching children about real life? In the book, real violence, such as the scene in which Clifford shoots himself in front of the two boys, is shown as being too shocking for a child to cope with, and Ricky is hospitalised as a result. On the other hand, Mark uses what he has learned from TV to deal with the difficult situation. Is TV good or bad for children? It is a valid question – and one that the reader is left to answer.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–4, pages 1–15

Before reading

- 1 **Discuss:** Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *What can you see? Where is the boy in the picture? How do you think he is feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think the story will be about? What do you think will happen in the story? Do you think the story will be exciting or dull? Why do you think this?*

- 2 **Research:** Ask students to bring information about the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.
- 3 **Research:** Ask students to bring information about the Mafia to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.

After reading

- 4 **Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:
What is your opinion about Mark, who is only eleven years old, smoking cigarettes? Why do you feel this way? Do you think Mark has a healthy family life? Why or why not? Why do you think Mark doesn't want to tell the adults what he knows? Do you think Mark is a clever boy? Why or why not?

Chapters 5–8, pages 15–29

Before reading

- 5 **Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page 16. *What is happening in the picture? Where are Mark, Ricky and Dianne in the picture? How do you think Mark and Dianne are feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think they are thinking about? What do you think is wrong with Ricky?*
- 6 **Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Mark, Ricky and Dianne in Chapters 5 to 8. *Will the Mafia find Mark? Will Mark help the police to catch the Mafia? Will Ricky wake up and be normal again? Will Dianne start working less to spend more time with Mark and Ricky?*

After reading

- 7 **Check:** Review students' predictions about what would happen to Mark, Ricky and Dianne in Chapters 5 to 8. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
- 8 **Write:** Write the following combinations of letters and blanks on the board – they are outlines of words that can be found in Chapters 5 to 8. Get students to fill in the missing letters to spell the words. When they have finished, some of the students should stand at the front of the class and read the words to their classmates.

- a n _ r _ _
- b _ _ c _ _ r
- c _ _ w _ _ r
- d s _ n _ _ o _
- e _ r _ _ b _ _
- f _ l _ _ _ t
- g _ _ g h _ _
- h _ n t _ _ v _ _ _

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- 9 Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to discuss whether or not Dianne, Barry the Blade, the FBI men and Slick Moeller know that Mark:
- saw Clifford kill himself;
 - knows why Clifford killed himself;
 - knows where the senator's body is hidden.
- 10 Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe Chapter 5, 6, 7 or 8. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which chapter the picture illustrates.
- 11 Read carefully:** On page 25, Reggie says to Mark, 'Just remember what I told you.' Put students into pairs and get them to read pages 26 to 28 again carefully and then discuss what they think Reggie told Mark to say to the FBI men. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the class and explain their theory and reasons to their classmates.

Chapters 9–12, pages 30–43

Before reading

- 12 Guess:** Ask students to predict what Mark will do in Chapters 9 to 12.
- 13 Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 12 is called *Things Get Worse*. *Who do you think things get worse for? Why do you think this? How do you think things get worse? Do you think things will eventually get better again? Why or why not?*
- 14 Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page 34. *What is happening in the picture? What is the man doing to Mark? Why do you think he is doing it? What is he holding in his hand? How do you think Mark is feeling? Why do you think this? What do you think he is thinking about? What do you think will happen to Mark?*

After reading

- 15 Check:** Review students' predictions about what Mark would do in Chapters 9 to 12. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

Chapters 13–17, pages 43–56

Before reading

- 16 Pair work:** Write the word *escape* on the board and teach students what it means. Then put students into pairs and ask them to think about why Chapter 15 is called *Escape!*. *Who do you think escapes in Chapter 15? Why do you think this? Where do you think the person escapes from? Do you think the person will be captured again?*

After reading

- 17 Role play:** Write the word *tableau* on the board and teach students what it means (a group of people arranged on stage as if they are in a picture). Then put students into groups of three and get them to choose a scene from Chapters 13 to 17. They should stand up and make a tableau to express the scene. Remind them that they must keep still and refrain from talking. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and make their tableau in front of the class, and the class should guess which scene the tableau expresses.
- 18 Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to make a list of all the characters that appear in the book. When they have finished making the list, they should discuss which character(s) they:
- admire most;
 - dislike most;
 - fear most;
 - feel most sorry for.