



## The Testament

John Grisham



### About the author

John Grisham was born on February 2, 1955, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in the southern United States. He was the second oldest of five children. His father was a construction worker and cotton farmer, and his mother was a homemaker. His father moved the family all around the southern United States, stopping wherever he could find work. Eventually the family settled in Southaven, Mississippi, where Grisham graduated from Southaven High School. In 1981, Grisham earned a law degree from the University of Mississippi's School of Law, which qualified him as a lawyer. During his time in law school, he switched his focus from tax law to criminal and civil litigation. After graduating from Law School, Grisham worked at a small-town law practice in Southaven for nearly a decade, representing all kinds of clients. He specialized in criminal defense and personal injury claims. Serving as a young attorney, Grisham spent much of his time in court proceedings.

In 1984, at the De Soto County courthouse in Hernando, Grisham heard the disturbing testimony of a twelve-year-old rape victim. He decided to write a novel exploring what would have happened if the girl's father had decided to take the law into his own hands and murder his daughter's attackers. The book, entitled *A Time to Kill*, took him three years to complete, and although it was initially rejected by a number of publishers, it was eventually bought by Wynwood Press, which published 5,000 copies in June of 1988. Grisham's next novel, *The Firm*, was one of the biggest hits of 1991, spending forty-seven weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The book's success enabled him to shift his focus from law to full-time writing. In the years to follow, Grisham

produce at least a novel a year, most of which became bestsellers, including *The Testament*, which was published by Doubleday in 1999. *Publishers Weekly* named Grisham "the bestselling novelist of the 90s" for selling a total of more than sixty million copies of his novels during the decade.

### Summary

**Chapters 1–3:** The story starts in the final hours of Troy Phelan's life. Phelan is the tenth richest man in the United States, with a net worth of about eleven billion dollars. His three ex-wives and six children can't wait for him to die so that they can finally get their hands on his money. However, having other plans for the legacy that he will leave behind, he cleverly masterminds a hoax, causing his ex-wives and children to believe that they will inherit all of his estate. When they leave after the signing of the testament, he produces another will and jumps out the window, committing suicide in front of his astonished lawyers. In his final will, he leaves his fortune to an illegitimate daughter, Rachel Lane, whom he has been unable to trace. The job of finding Rachel Lane falls on the shoulders of a troubled lawyer named Nate O'Riley, who is at present in a private hospital trying to overcome his addiction to drugs and alcohol. After checking out of the clinic, Nate flies to Brazil, where Rachel lives in the Pantanal among the primitive tribes working as a missionary and giving medical assistance.

**Chapters 4–6:** Nate meets his contact in Brazil, a man named Valdir Ruiz, who hires a guide for him. Nate and his guide, Jevy, start to fly to Corumbá, but the pilot doesn't want to fly into a storm, so he tries to land in a farmer's field and ends up hitting a cow. Following the crash, Nate, Jevy and the pilot wait for a military helicopter to pick them up and take them to Corumbá where they stay at a hotel for the night. Nate ends up drinking several beers, but he convinces himself that he isn't relapsing into alcoholism. The next day, Nate buys two bottles of vodka. He drinks the alcohol by himself in his hotel later that night, no longer trying to convince himself that he isn't on a slide. The next day, he and Jevy board a boat and head down the river in search of Rachel's tribe. Meanwhile, back in the United States, Phelan's will is read to his children and their lawyers, who are in total shock. The lawyers convince their clients that they need to fight their father's will by proving that he was crazy when he signed it.



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**Chapters 7–9:** Nate risks his life to find Rachel, traveling along narrow rivers in a broken down boat, and when he finally manages to locate her, she doesn't want to accept any of Phelan's money and refuses to sign the papers. However, Nate doesn't give up because he is determined not to let Phelan's money-hungry family get the estate. He talks to Rachel about his own problems, and she tries to get him to accept God into his life. Meanwhile, back in the United States, the lawyers are trying to figure out how they can prove that Phelan was crazy when he signed his last will and testament. They need to make sure that Rachel doesn't get Phelan's money so that they can get paid themselves.

**Chapters 10–12:** Nate agrees to tell his partners that he didn't find Rachel, and then he leaves the village and starts back to Corumbá. However, he soon becomes feverish with dengue fever. After recovering, he goes into a church and prays. He stays in the city and tries to find Rachel, because he thinks that she visited him in the hospital, but in the end he decides that it was just a dream. He returns to the United States, where he agrees to work on one last case—protecting Rachel's interests in the hearing involving Phelan's will. He moves to the country and starts to attend a local church, where he helps the minister to build an addition to the basement for classrooms. He is starting to find peace in his life, and happiness. He sends a letter to Rachel's boss in Brazil, who tells him that she will forward the letter to Rachel in a month's time.

**Chapters 13–15:** Nate starts to question the Phelan heirs in court, as well as Phelan's personal assistant, Snead, who lies in an attempt to get as much money as possible. Nate's questions start to reveal the heirs' greed and the lies that are being told to overturn Phelan's final will. Nate travels to Salem to visit two of his children, and he promises his ex-wife that he has changed, and he tells her that he wants to make things right and be a good father again. He then visits his other two children and attempts to repair his relationship with them as well, but they are older, so the meetings don't go as well. Back in the courtroom, the heirs agree to settle on fifty million dollars each, and Nate decides to fly back to Brazil to tell Rachel the news and get her to sign a document. However, when he arrives in Brazil, he finds that Rachel has died of malaria. He soon discovers that before dying of the disease, she wrote her own last will and testament, instructing Nate to put the money into a trust to be used for the World Tribe Missions around the world. She has seen Nate's goodness

and realized that his addictions are finished. Nate's journey along with that of Phelan's fortune has finally come to its rightful conclusion.

### Background and themes

**The dangers of greed:** The passion for money and wealth and the destructive consequences that come along with this passion represent the main theme of *The Testament*. Greedy ex-wives and greedy children employ greedy lawyers in pursuit of wealth. They are selfish and dishonest people, and in spite of their wealth, they spend more money than they have, so they are never happy and always need more. The ideal of a family life is destroyed in the process. Conversely, Phelan's illegitimate daughter has shed the need for money and wealth.

**The riches of giving:** Rachel Lane's life in the jungles of Brazil is difficult but also highly rewarding. Her faith and dedication to helping the poor, the hungry and the sick make her life richer than money ever could. She doesn't want to live in the United States ever again, and she isn't tempted in the slightest to accept the billions of dollars that her father has willed to her. She understands that the true riches in life come from giving rather than taking. Only when she realizes that she is dying does she take Nate's advice and accept the money in order to put it into a trust for the missionaries to buy medicine, food and clothing for the people in Brazil and South America. The common Grisham theme—that good always overcomes evil in the end—satisfies readers as they read this fascinating story about the wealth of giving.

**Families divided:** Grisham explores the nature and frailty of families in *The Testament*. Due to their incessant greed, Phelan's immediate family, which includes six children, are divided in their pursuit for their father's fortune. They don't care about his health, and they aren't concerned with showing their love for him—if they even have any love left. Instead, they can only think about their father's final will and testament—a document that could make them richer beyond their wildest dreams. However, it is their greed that makes Phelan turn his back on them in the end. Longing for a real family joined in love, he decides to leave his estate to his illegitimate daughter. For Phelan, leaving his money to a daughter he hardly knows is better than leaving it to his legitimate children whom he knows will waste it. It is a dark truth, but it is also one that many wealthy families are faced with. Grisham understands the power of money, and he wants to remind readers that it can overcome love and sever familial connections. It is



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in human beings' nature to live as families—to love, care for, nourish and protect one another—but it is also in their nature to be greedy, and sometimes, the latter is so powerful that it supersedes the former.

**Forgiveness:** *The Testament* is concerned with the act of forgiveness. Realizing that his children don't truly love him and that they want him to die so that they can get his money, Phelan is unable to forgive them for their greed, and he ends up giving his fortune to Rachel, a daughter whom he hardly knew. However, it isn't just his inability to forgive his children that makes him give his estate to almost a stranger—it is also the guilt that he feels for not being a father to Rachel in the first place. He is asking Rachel for forgiveness. He is telling her that he is sorry for not being in her life while she was growing up. He can't forgive his children, but he hopes that Rachel can forgive him. It is just one of several ironies in the book. Nate is also seeking forgiveness in the story—both for and from himself. He has allowed himself to become addicted to alcohol and drugs, and he can't stop thinking of himself as being weak. He needs to be able to forgive himself—just as he needs to be able to receive forgiveness.

### Discussion activities

#### Chapters 1–3

##### Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *Where is the man in the picture? Why do you think he is in this place? What is the man doing in the picture? How do you think he is feeling? Why do you think this? Do you like the picture? Why/why not? How does the picture make you feel? Does the picture remind you of anything? Does the picture make you want to read the book? Why/why not?*
- Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to discuss what is important to have a "rich" life. Ask them to put the following things in order of most important to least important: career, clothing, family, freedom, friends, health, house, modern conveniences, money and religion. When they have finished, the groups should stand at the front of the class and read the list of things to their classmates.
- Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to discuss the following questions:  
*What would you do if you inherited a million dollars? Why would you do these things?  
Do you think a million dollars would make your life better or worse? Why do you think this?  
What would you do if you inherited eleven billion dollars? Why would you do these things?  
Do you think eleven billion dollars would make your life better or worse? Why do you think this?*

*Do you think money is important? Why/why not?  
Do you think people can be happy with money? Why do you think this?*

*Do you think people can be happy without money? Why do you think this?*

*What are the positive and negative effects of money?*

- Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to discuss the following questions:

*What kind of novel is *The Testament*?*

*Do you like reading this type of novel? Why/why not?*

*Have you ever read any other novels by Grisham? If so, did you like them? Why/why not?*

*Do you remember what happened in the other Grisham novels that you have read? If so, describe the stories to your partner.*

*What else do you know about Grisham?*

- Research:** Ask students to bring information about last wills and testaments 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

- Discuss:** Ask students if they have ever seen a film version of a Grisham novel (*A Time to Kill*, *The Client*, *The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief*, *The Rainmaker*, *The Runaway Jury*, *The Chamber*). *Did you like the film? Why/why not? Do you remember the story in the film? If so, what happens in the film?* Get students to recount as many of the stories as possible, and write notes on the board to record what each of the stories is about.
- Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw Phelan's family tree. Students should put Phelan's name in a box at the top of the family tree with three branches leading to three boxes below containing the names of the three ex-wives. Below the boxes containing the names of the ex-wives, they should write the names of Phelan's seven children.
- Pair work:** Write the following dollar amounts on the board: ninety thousand dollars, five million dollars, seven million dollars and eleven billion dollars. Then put students into pairs and get them to find the dollar amounts in Chapters 1 to 3. Finally, get them to write sentences using them. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read the sentences to their classmates.

#### Chapters 4–6

##### Before reading

- Research:** Put students into small groups and get them to look for information about Brazil and the Pantanal in the library, on the Internet, etc. Then get them to make a travel brochure to promote the country and region. When they have finished, the groups should stand at the front of the classroom and present their travel brochure to the rest of the class.





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- 10 Research:** Put students into pairs and get them to look up the word *missionary* in a dictionary or on the Internet. Make the exercise into a competition—the first pair of students to find the definition wins. They should stand up and read the definition out loud to the rest of the class. Finally, they should use the word in a sentence as an example.
- 11 Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture of a jungle. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class. The class should draw the picture as it is being described and then compare the pictures.

### After reading

- 12 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to write the names of the characters that have appeared in the book so far on small cards. The groups should write brief descriptions of the characters on other small cards and then exchange their collection of descriptions with another group. Finally, they should try to match the other group's descriptions with their collection of character names. When they have finished, the groups should stand at the front of the class and read each name and matching description to their classmates. For each character and description, take a vote to see if their classmates agree with their choice.
- 13 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:  
*How does Grisham develop Nate's character in Chapters 4 and 5? Give examples from the chapters.*  
*How would you describe Nate's personality?*  
*Do you think Nate is a strong or weak person? Why do you think this?*  
*Do you think Nate is the right person for the job? Why/why not?*
- 14 Role play:** Put students into pairs. Student A is Nate and Student B is Nate's friend. It is the day after Christmas and Nate and his friend are talking on the telephone. Nate should tell his friend about where he is and what he has been doing lately. His friend should listen to Nate and ask him questions to get more details. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and perform their role plays in front of the class.
- 15 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:  
*How do Phelan's children react when their father's last will and testament is read in the courtroom?*  
*Why do you think they react this way?*  
*Do you think the children are right or wrong to react this way? Why do you think this?*  
*How do you think Grisham feels about Phelan's children? Why do you think this?*  
*How do you think you would react if you were in the children's position? Why do you think this?*

### Chapters 7–9

#### Before reading

- 16 Research:** Put students into pairs and get them to look up the word *primitive* in a dictionary or on the Internet. Make the exercise into a competition—the first pair of students to find the definition wins. They should stand up and read the definition out loud to the rest of the class. Finally, they should use the word in a sentence as an example.
- 17 Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Nate, Rachel and the other characters in Chapters 7 to 9.
- 18 Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture of an alligator. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class. The class should draw the picture as it is being described and then compare the pictures.

#### After reading

- 19 Check:** Review students' predictions about what would happen to Nate, Rachel and the other characters in Chapters 7 to 9. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
- 20 Write:** Write the following combinations of letters on the board—they are anagrams of words that can be found in Chapters 7 to 9. Put students into groups and get them to work together to find the words in the story and spell them correctly. Note that one person in the group should write the words on a piece of paper. When they have finished, some of the groups should stand at the front of the class and read the list of words to their classmates.
- |          |           |         |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| a rvire  | b sortm   | c shif  |
| d reeb   | e dinw    | f taob  |
| g oinpso | h rofnute | i airn  |
| j rutth  | k caneo   | l reet  |
| m dadley | n warro   | o onmye |
| p lilw   | q fiech   | r aksne |
- 21 Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe a scene from Chapters 7 to 9. 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 scene the picture illustrates.
- 22 Discuss:** Write the following words and phrases on the board: *alligators, beer, drowning, engine trouble, getting lost, Indians, mosquitoes* and *the weather*. Point out to students that the words represent threats to Nate's life while he is in Brazil. Put students into small groups and get them to work together to put the threats to Nate's life in order from the most dangerous to the least dangerous threat. When they have finished, some of the groups should stand at the front of the class and read the list of threats to their classmates.



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**23 Role play:** Put students into pairs. Student A is Hark Gettys and Student B is Malcolm Snead. The students should re-enact the conversation that Getty and Snead have in Chapter 8 (pages 45 and 46). When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and perform their role plays in front of the class.

### Chapters 10–12 Before reading

**24 Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 10 is called *Fever*. *What is a fever? What effects does a fever have on a person? Who do you think gets a fever in the chapter? Why do you think this? What do you think will happen to the person as a result of the fever? Why do you think this? Do you like the title of the chapter? Why/why not? Does the title make you want to read the chapter? Why/why not? Can you think of a better title for the chapter?*

**25 Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 11 is called *A New Beginning*. *Who do you think has a new beginning in the chapter? Why do you think this? What do you think will happen to the person as a result of the new beginning? Do you like the title of the chapter? Why/why not? Does the title make you want to read the chapter? Can you think of a better title for the chapter?*

**26 Research:** Put students into pairs and get them to look up the words *pray* and *salvation* in a dictionary or on the Internet. Make the exercise into a competition—the first pair of students to find the definitions wins. They should stand up and read the definitions out loud to the rest of the class. Finally, they should use the words in sentences as examples.

### After reading

**27 Artwork:** Get students to draw a picture of one of the characters in Chapters 10 to 12. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which character the picture illustrates.

**28 Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to write three questions that they have regarding Chapters 10 to 12. When they have finished, ask them to exchange their list with another group and write answers to the other group's questions. Finally, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and read their questions and the answers they have been provided with to the rest of the class.

**29 Write:** Put students into pairs and get them to work together to write the first page of Nate's three-page letter to Rachel (page 77). When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read the letter to their classmates. Finally, take a vote to find out which pair wrote the best letter.

**30 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:

*How has meeting Rachel affected Nate?*

*Why do you think Rachel has affected Nate in this way?*

*Do you think the transformation that Nate has gone through is realistic? Why/why not?*

*Do you think Rachel's character is believable? Why/why not?*

*Why do you think Rachel decides to visit Nate?*

*Why do you think she decides to disappear afterward?*

### Chapters 13–15 Before reading

**31 Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Nate, Rachel and the other characters in Chapters 13 to 15.

**32 Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 15 is called *Return to the Pantanal*. *Who do you think returns to the Pantanal in the chapter? Why do you think this? Why do you think he or she decides to return to the Pantanal in the chapter? Why do you think this? What do you think will happen to the person as a result of his or her decision to return to the Pantanal? Why do you think this? Do you like the title of the chapter? Why/whynot? Does the title make you want to read the chapter? Why/why not? Can you think of a better title for the chapter?*

### After reading

**33 Check:** Check if the predictions that students made in Activity 31 were right or wrong.

**34 Write:** Put students into small groups and get them to write a sentence to describe what happens in each of Chapters 13, 14, and 15. Point out that the sentences need to be concise while expressing the main event(s) in the chapter that they describe. When they have finished, some of the groups should read their sentences to the rest of the class. Finally, take a vote to find out which group wrote the best sentences.

**35 Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe a scene from Chapters 13 to 15. 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 scene the picture illustrates.

**36 Read carefully:** Get students to read Rachel's will (pages 96 and 97) as a class. Each student should stand up and carefully read one sentence out loud until the entire will has been read.

### Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to [www.penguinreaders.com](http://www.penguinreaders.com).