The Rainmaker

John Grisham

About the author
John Grisham is one of the publishing phenomena of the late twentieth century. He is the highest-selling thriller writer of the 1990s: over fifty-five million copies of his novels have been sold, and they are available in thirty different languages.

Grisham was born in 1955 in Arkansas, in the southern United States. His family were poor and they moved several times when he was a child, staying wherever his father could find work. They eventually settled in Mississippi, where Grisham did well at school and went on to study law at university.

When Grisham qualified in law in 1981, he set up his own office. He often represented workers against big companies, or helped accident victims to get compensation for injuries. He also had a short career in politics, as a Democrat in local government.

One day at the Desoto County courthouse, Grisham overheard the harrowing testimony of a 12-year-old rape victim. He decided to write a novel exploring what would have happened if the girl’s father had murdered her attackers. He proceeded to get up every morning at 5 am to work on the novel, called A Time to Kill, which was published in 1988. Although the book was not a bestseller, Grisham was determined to succeed as a writer. He got advice from a How to Write course and spent three years on his second novel, The Firm. This time he had a best-seller. The Firm was one of the biggest hits of 1991, spending 47 weeks on The New York Times best-seller list. He earned enough money from The Firm to close down his law office and become a full-time writer. Since then he has written a string of best-sellers including The Pelican Brief (1992), The Client (1993), and The Rainmaker (1995). They have been translated into more than thirty languages. Publishers Weekly declared him to be “the bestselling novelist of the 90s”. The Rainmaker is different from most other novels and books in that it is written mostly in the present tense.

Many of Grisham’s books have been made into films. The Rainmaker was turned into a film in 1997 starring Matt Damon as Rudy Baylor, Mickey Rourke as Bruiser Stone, and Claire Danes as Kelly Riker.

It is said that he earns well over $25 million a year from his books and from movie rights. He is a born-again Christian, attends a Baptist church on Sundays, teaches at Sunday school, and works with overseas orphans. He is married with two children, and divides his time between his home in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Oxford, Mississippi.

When he’s not writing, Grisham devotes time to charitable causes, including mission trips with his church group. As a child he dreamt of becoming a professional baseball player, and now serves as the local Little League commissioner. He has built six ballfields on his property and hosts children from 26 Little League teams.

Despite his success, Grisham has kept his license to practice law, and at the beginning of 1996 he returned to the courtroom to continue a case he had worked on before he was rich and famous. A railway worker had been killed at work and his widow was asking the company for compensation. Grisham won a lot of money for her and refused to accept a fee for his work.

Summary
The idea of the “rainmaker” in the title of this story comes from American Indian culture. The job of the rainmaker was to carry out traditional rituals to make the rain fall. In the same way, the young lawyer follows the traditional ways of the American courtroom to make money fall into the hands of his client.

Chapter 1: Rudy Baylor has nearly finished law school but hasn’t yet passed the bar examination. He secures a position with a Memphis law firm, which he loses when the firm is bought out by another larger firm. A poor couple, Dot and Buddy Black, ask for his help. Their son, Donny Ray, has leukemia and needs a bone marrow transplant, but their health insurance company won’t pay for the operation. Rudy thinks they have a very strong case against the company, but he has no job and no money and isn’t licensed as a lawyer.
Chapters 2–3: Rudy gets a job in Jonathan Lake’s law firm and passes the Black case to the lawyer, Barry Lancaster, who hired him. But Barry just uses him to get the case and then tells him that Lake doesn’t want to hire him. Rudy is furious and goes to Lake’s office to see him but nobody is there. Later the office is burned down and a security guard killed. Rudy is suspected of murder and arson. Desperate for a job, Rudy reluctantly allows “Prince” Thomas, the crooked owner of a sleazy bar where he’s been working part-time, to introduce him to J. Lyman “Bruiser” Stone, a ruthless but successful ambulance-chasing lawyer, who makes him an associate. But to earn his fee, Rudy is required to hunt for potential clients at the local hospital where he must contact injury cases and get them to sign up for a court case with the firm. He is introduced to Deck Shifflet, a less-than-ethical former insurance assessor, now “paralawyer” (having failed to pass the Bar examination after six tries). Rudy works for Bruiser and files suit for the Black case.

Chapters 4–5: Rudy starts his career with ambulance chasing. Whilst preparing the case and also waiting about in the local hospital, he meets and later falls in love with Kelly Riker, a beautiful young woman but a battered wife whose husband has beaten her so badly that she is now in hospital. Rudy is cleared of the charges of murder and arson.

Chapters 6–9: Having passed the bar examination, Rudy prepares to fight the team of lawyers employed by Great Benefit Insurance. It is a daunting task. He has never argued a case before a judge and jury—but he now finds himself up against a group of experienced and ruthless lawyers from a large firm, headed by Leo F. Drummond. But the judge, Harvey Hale, is the old friend of Great Benefit’s lead lawyer. Things do not go smoothly. Meanwhile, Bruiser gets into trouble and Judge Hale dies. Rudy and Deck Shifflet then set up their own firm of lawyers. The newly-appointed judge, Kipler, gives Rudy a ray of hope as he shows more understanding toward victims. Before the trial commences, however, the Blacks’ son dies.

Chapters 10–13: The case goes to trial and Rudy uncovers a scheme that Great Benefit ran throughout 1991 which was to deny every insurance claim submitted, regardless of the validity of the claim. Rudy collects evidence and builds up a picture of how Great Benefit makes huge profits by cheating the people who have their insurance policies with them. Great Benefit was playing on the odds that the insured would not consult an attorney (which Dot Black didn’t do until it was too late for Donny Ray). A former employee of Great Benefit testifies that the scheme generated an extra $40 million in revenue for the company. Finally, Rudy wins the case.

Chapters 14–15: During the Black trial, Rudy continues to pursue Kelly. Kelly is beaten by her husband again. Rudy wants to save her, and this eventually ends up in a violent fight with her husband while helping Kelly retrieve items from her home. At the end of the fight, with Rudy about to beat the husband to death, Kelly intervenes and tells him to leave. Later, Rudy manages to save her from the charge of murder. Meanwhile, Great Benefit quickly declares itself bankrupt, thus allowing them to avoid paying the damages. There is no payout for the grieving parents and no fee for Rudy, although Dot Black was never concerned with the money from the trial. In fact, she testified that if awarded any money from Great Benefit, she would donate all of it to the American Leukemia Society.

Background and themes

The Rainmaker has a large cast of characters and not all of them are honest or decent. Grisham seems to be saying that the world we live in is often corrupt, selfish, and greedy. To this extent he is part of the school of tough detective writers in the US such as Raymond Chandler, James Ellroy, and Patricia Cornwell.

Legal thriller: Most of John Grisham’s novels are legal thrillers—exciting stories set in the world of the law. His novels are “page turners”, that is, books which people find very hard to put down once they have started reading them. They have a consistent theme: his heroes are ordinary people who fight the powerful institutions of society—and win. Grisham finds ideas for his stories in the cases he worked on as a lawyer. He often represented workers against big companies. One day he sat in a courtroom listening to a very young girl testify against a rapist. “I never felt such emotion and human drama in my life,” he told People magazine. “I became obsessed wondering what it would be like if the girl’s father killed that rapist and was put on trial. I had to write it down.” And this became his first novel.
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Grisham uses the tension of the courtroom atmosphere to add suspense and strong emotion to his stories. In The Rainmaker, his young lawyer, Rudy Baylor, brings laughter, tears, anger, and surprise witnesses to the courtroom. All Grisham's novels are gripping and tense. One surprising event quickly follows another. They provide perfect material for the film thriller and have attracted some of Hollywood's most expensive stars.

David and Goliath: John Grisham's novels are very popular in America. They give the reading public a chance to support the “little guys” against the “big guys”. The big guys in Grisham novels include big business, US government agencies (the CIA and the FBI), the Mafia, and the Ku Klux Klan. Lawyers and the law play a more important part in American society than in other countries. However, it is usually rich and/or well-educated Americans who take out court cases. The poor in America are just as shy of the law as the poor are in other countries. The basic idea of the story in The Rainmaker is that poor and/or uneducated people are afraid to get involved with the law. Great Benefit, the insurance company at the heart of the story, relies on the fact that only one in twenty-five of the people who make a claim for money from them will use a lawyer to try to get their claim paid.

Ambulance chasing: Under the US legal system, a lawyer can take on a client for a percentage of the amount that the client wins from the court. It may be millions of dollars, it may be nothing. This is called “no win, no fee” and it allows people with little or no money to take out court cases. Many lawyers in the US find a lot of their clients by “ambulance chasing”—as Deck Shifflet does in The Rainmaker. This means that the lawyer visits victims of accidents in the hospital and offers to represent them.

Domestic violence: Domestic violence is rife in our society but it isn't often talked about in the media. Grisham takes the opportunity of denouncing this often hidden crime.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Group work: Read the Introduction to The Rainmaker. Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss the following:
   The Rainmaker is a thriller. What is a thriller? (Use a dictionary) Why the story is entitled The Rainmaker? Who is the rainmaker in the story? Can you give some examples of thrillers that you know?

2 Pair work: Students work in pairs. Explain that you are going to describe a situation that students find themselves in:
   You have just finished law school. You can't find a job.
   You have no money. You have debts you can't pay.
   What do you do now? (This is the situation Rudy Baylor finds himself in at the beginning of the story.)
   Then the pairs compare ideas as a whole class.

Chapters 1–3

Before reading

3 Research: Ask students to find information from books or the Internet about the following:
   a What is leukemia? What kind of illness is it?
   b What is a bone marrow transplant? Is it the only way to save leukemia patients?
   c What is an insurance policy? What policies can you buy from insurance companies?
   d Do you know any insurance companies in your country? Give some examples.
   e Apart from insurance companies, where can you buy policies?

4 Discuss: Chapter 1 is entitled The Black Case. Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss the following:
   a What does “Black” mean? Do you think it has a double meaning? And if so, what is it?
   b Who are “the blacks” in American society?
   c Do you think there is any social ladder in American society?
   d Why does the story start from the “Black” case?
   e Can you think of other story books or movies that show race problems in American society?

5 Guess: Ask students to guess the following:
   What can the Great Benefit company do to delay compensation? Will any law firm help the Blacks to sue Great Benefit?

While reading

6 Role play: On page 13 Rudy talks to Prince about “losing the job, the fire, the police, the dead body”. Put students into pairs and ask them to imagine and act out this conversation.
   Student A: You are Rudy. You explain all the things that have happened to you.
   Student B: You are Prince. You ask questions. Your eyes are red, you look terrible and you’re in a bad mood.

7 Check: Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 5 were correct.
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After reading

8 Read carefully and discuss: The whole novel is written in the first person and in the present tense. Read out or write on the board a few sentences to illustrate this. As an example read this sentence from page 9: *I leave Barry's office … Mrs. Skinner some flowers.* Get students to read the sentences back to you using the third person and the past tense. Then ask students to discuss these questions in small groups: Which style do you prefer? Why? Why do you think the author only uses the present tense?

9 Read carefully and discuss: On page 2, there is the letter from Great Benefit:

Dear Mrs. Black:

On seven previous occasions, this company has denied your claim in writing. We now deny it for the eighth and final time. You must be stupid, stupid, stupid!

Ask students to think about the following questions:
What is the purpose of this letter? From the letter, can you tell the attitude of Great Benefit? Do you think it is a rude letter? Great Benefit refuses the claims. Do you think it is wise/unwise for the insurance company to do so? Why? What do you think are the possible reasons for Great Benefit to refuse the claims in the letter?

Chapters 4–6

Before reading

10 Guess: Ask students to guess the following:

In accident cases, who are Rudy's target customers?

(Hint: Find the answers in Chapter 4)

The title of Chapter 5 is *Meeting Kelly. Who is Kelly?* Is she one of the central characters in *The Rainmaker?* Can Rudy pass the bar examination?

While reading

11 Check: Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 10 were correct.

12 Read carefully: In Chapter 5, Rudy meets Kelly Riker. Have the students read the chapter and answer these questions:

What does Kelly look like? What are her injuries? Is she single or married? How does Rudy know without asking her? What happened to her? Why is she on the wheelchair?

13 Pair work: Put students into pairs and ask them to discuss the following:

What advice would you give Kelly Riker, who is married to a violent husband?

14 Role play: Put students into pairs and ask them to act out this conversation.

Student A: You are Rudy. You feel sorry for Kelly. You think a divorce is the best thing to do. Say why.

Student B: You are Kelly. You want a divorce, too, but you are really frightened. Tell your partner why.

After reading

15 Group work: Rudy says to Deck (page 18) that at law school "they didn't teach us to chase ambulances." Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss the following:

What do you understand by "ambulance chasing"? Do you think it's a bad thing to do, or do you think it provides a genuine service to people who have had an accident?

16 Discuss: In Chapter 6, Drummond objects to Rudy's arguing the motion because he has no license. But Rudy insists on handling the case as he has passed the bar examination. Ask the students to discuss the following:

If you were a beginner lawyer like Rudy, would you have the courage and confidence to argue the motion? Write at least five reasons in less than 200 words.

If you were Drummond, what would be your reasons to reject such a lawyer who doesn't have any court experience? Write five reasons.

17 Discuss: In Chapter 6, Great Benefit has instructed its lawyer to offer Rudy and his clients seventy-five thousand dollars to settle the case. If so, Rudy will get twenty-five thousand dollars for commission. Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss the following:

Do you think the offer is a fair deal?

If you were Rudy, would you ask the Blacks to accept the offer? Give your reasons.

If you were the Blacks, would you accept the offer or ask for more? Give your reasons. If you refuse the offer, what would make you continue the trial?

Why does Great Benefit want to settle the case with that sum of money?

Chapters 7–9

Before reading

18 Guess: Ask students to guess the following story development.

In Chapter 7, Donny Ray is supposed to give statement. Who will ask him questions? What questions will be asked?

In Chapter 8, which is entitled *Surprises for Drummond,* what makes Drummond feel surprised?

In Chapter 9, which is entitled *The Funeral,* whose funeral is it?

While reading

19 Check: Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 18 were correct.

20 Discuss: In Chapter 7, there are some turning points in the story that make things different for Rudy. What are the turning points?

21 Discuss: In Chapter 8, Judge Kipler points out that it is quite common for the insurance companies to hide nasty things from their own lawyers. Great Benefit does hide something. What does this insurance company try to hide from its team of lawyers?
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22 Discuss: In Chapter 9, Deck finds out someone has put the microphones on the phones in Deck and Rudy’s office. *Who do you think has done it? Why did they do it?*

After reading

23 Write: Two important events are reported in the newspaper the day after Rudy and Deck set up their own office. Imagine you are a reporter and write the headlines.

24 Group work and discuss: In Chapter 8, three witnesses from Great Benefit are absent from court because they have left the company. They are a claims handler, an assistant claims examiner, and a claims examiner. Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss the following: *Why do you think these employees from the claims department of Great Benefit left the company before the hearing? Will their absence help Great Benefit win the case?*

25 Read carefully and pair work: An American lawyer once said, “Don’t tell me what the law says—tell me who the judge is.” Put students into pairs. Have them read Rudy’s first conversation with Judge Kipler on pages 37 and 38 and talk about the judge’s views which can be guessed at from the conversation.

Chapters 10–12

Before reading

26 Guess: Chapter 10 is entitled, An Important Discovery. Ask students to guess what that discovery is.

While reading

27 Check: Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 26 were correct.

28 Discuss: In Chapter 10, Great Benefit has further instructed Drummond to raise the offer to two hundred thousand dollars to settle the case. Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss the following: *Why do you think Great Benefit raises the offer at this stage? Do you think it is wise to accept the offer? Does Drummond have any hope of winning the case?*

29 Write: At the end of Chapter 10, they start to pick the jury for the trial. Write descriptions of the perfect Great Benefit witness and the perfect Black witness. (Include age, race, sex, background, education, job/profession, political opinions.)

30 Read carefully: Ask students to answer the following questions: In Chapter 11, Deck and Rudy have made a plan to hit back at those who put microphones on their phones. *What is their plan? Are they successful?*

31 Discuss: In Chapter 12, Mrs. Black tells the jury how she will use the compensation money if she wins the case. *How will she spend the money? Do you think her answer will help her win the case? Give your reasons. How do you think Great Benefit handle claims?*

32 Role play: Read the conversation between Drummond and Billy Porter on page 61 in Chapter 11. Work in pairs. Act out the conversation.

33 Discuss: In Chapter 12, the ex-claims handler Jackie Lemancyzk gives evidence. During her employment, she was unwilling to provide her boss with sex in order to get promotion. Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss the following: *Do you think we have to protect women in the workplace? If you were Jackie Lemancyzk, what would you do? Do you know if there is any law that protects women and single parents in the workplace in your country?*

After reading

34 Write: The trial begins in this chapter. Students look at the first paragraph on page 62 in Chapter 12. Rudy tells us what is in his opening statement. Ask students to write his statement.

35 Pair work and read carefully: Put students in pairs. Ask them to read through Chapter 12 again and find the important moments in the trial that will persuade the jurors one way or the other. Find the first one or two with the whole class. For example: 1) Drummond calls the Blacks “greedy”.

Chapters 13–15

Before reading

36 Guess: Chapter 13 is entitled The Verdict. Who will win the case?

37 Guess: Chapter 14 is entitled The Last Beating. Who is beaten? Why is it the last time?

38 Guess: The final chapter is called Winners and Losers. *Who are the winners? Who are the losers?*

While reading

39 Check: Ask students to check whether their predictions in Activity 36 to 38 were correct.

40 Read carefully: In Chapter 13, Drummond explains to the jurors that the amount of compensation demanded by the Blacks is too high. *What is/are his reason(s)?* After reading Chapter 14, ask students to describe the character of Cliff Riker.

After reading

41 Write: Ask students to imagine they are a reporter for a local Memphis paper. They arrive at the Riker house minutes after the police. They interview the neighbors and write a report for the paper based on what the neighbors say.

42 Discuss and write: Ask students to work in groups to discuss the following: *What makes The Rainmaker exciting and gives it tension?* Then have a whole-class feedback session and write ideas on the board.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.