The Pelican Brief

John Grisham was born on 8 February 1955, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, the United States. After graduating in law from Mississippi State University, he started a small law firm in Southaven, Mississippi, where he practised both civil and criminal law. In 1983, he was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives (the lower house in the US parliament).

One day in court he overheard the testimony of a twelve-year-old girl who had been raped. He started to wonder what would have happened if the girl’s father had killed the rapists … and he started to write his first novel, A Time to Kill, which deals with the theme of a black man in Mississippi who murders the rapists of his young daughter. Grisham was working a 60–70 hour week at that time and he could write only by getting up early and writing before going to the office, and using the time between court work to write. He finished the novel and sent it to publishers, but it was rejected many times before finally being published in 1989. Since then he has written about one book a year. While most are connected with law in some way, he has also written several non-legal fiction books. Many of his books have been made into films.

Grisham soon became one of the world’s top-selling novelists — there are now more than 225 million copies of his books in print, in thirty languages. Despite this, he gave up writing for a few months in 1996 to return to court and honour a commitment he had made to the family of a railroad worker killed at work. He represented the family in court and won for them the biggest financial settlement of his career.

Summary

The Pelican Brief is a legal thriller — a thriller in which much of the plot and action is based on elements of the law and the roles of big business and government. It was written in 1992 by John Grisham. It was his third novel and the second of his books to be made into a film. The film was directed by Alan J. Pakula and stars Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington.

The Pelican Brief tells the story of Darby Shaw, a young law student in the United States, who puts together a theory of why two Supreme Court judges have been murdered. She shows her theory to her lover, a professor in law. He then shows it to an ex-colleague of his who now works for the FBI. Awful things start happening to Darby and she realizes that her theory has put her life in danger. She runs away and eventually turns to the only person she can trust — a newspaper reporter determined to find out the truth and save Darby’s life.

Chapters 1–3: A hired killer named Khamel kills two Supreme Court judges, Rosenberg and Jensen. At first glance, these important judges (two of nine appointed by the government for life) seem to have little in common so it is a mystery why they were murdered.

The President hears about their deaths from Fletcher Coal, his chief of staff. They recognize that the President will now have a chance to appoint two new judges who will support the views of the Republican party.

The President and Coal meet with Denton Voyles from the FBI and tell him to get a list of suspects to them by that evening. Voyles assigns Eric East to the case.

Darby Shaw, a law student specializing in the environment, talks with her boyfriend, Thomas Callahan, about the murders. Thomas is a law professor at the university in New Orleans. Darby plans to look for a connection between the two judges by looking at upcoming cases in the Supreme Court. She finds one case that could link the two judges. Meanwhile, Thomas arranges to meet with an old friend, Gavin Verheek, who is legal adviser for the FBI.

Chapters 4–6: Thomas meets with Darby who tells him she has put together a brief linking the two judges, but she is not convinced it amounts to anything.

Thomas meets with Gavin and gives him the brief Darby has written. They both find the theory unlikely but interesting. Gavin passes the report along to East.
Gray Grantham, a reporter with the Washington Post, gets phone calls from someone who calls himself Garcia. He says he is a lawyer with information about Rosenberg and Jensen. He is afraid to pass along the information he accidentally saw at his office.

East and K. O. Lewis (second in command with the FBI) meet with Coal to report that the killer Khamel had been seen at the airport. They also pass along Darby’s brief telling Coal that it could hurt the President. Coal tells the President that they should do something about the investigation. Coal says if the press hears about the case that the President might look bad.

Thomas and Darby have dinner together. They argue and Thomas leaves alone. When Thomas starts his car, it explodes and he is instantly killed. Darby recognizes that the bomb was likely meant for her and she goes into hiding.

The next morning, Darby calls Gavin and asks him if he knows about her report. Gavin says it is called the Pelican Brief and that it was read by the FBI and passed along to others. Darby tells him that Thomas is dead.

Chapters 7–10: The President meets with Voyles about the Pelican Brief and tells him to pull back from the investigation for a few weeks so he (the President) will not get damaged by questions from the press.

Gray arranges for a photographer (Croft) to get a picture of Garcia at a phone book. Meanwhile, Gray hears from a White House informant (Sarge) that Khamel is likely the killer and Gray writes that up for the newspaper.

Gavin meets with Voyles and is shocked to hear that the investigation is called off. Darby, who has changed her appearance, sees a man following her. Darby’s friend (Alice) goes to Darby’s apartment and finds the files about the case are missing from her computer. Gavin goes to New Orleans for Thomas’s funeral and tries to find Darby by asking questions about her at the university.

Darby calls Gray. She tells him she wrote the Pelican Brief and says she’ll call again.

Darby watches the people attending Thomas’s funeral from a distance and see two suspicious men. Khamel is back in New Orleans with the assignment of killing Darby. He is told to watch Gavin at his hotel.

Darby calls Gavin at his hotel. She does not know what he looks like so arranges to meet a man in a black shirt who is carrying a newspaper. Khamel, who is waiting in Gavin’s hotel room, kills Gavin.

Chapters 11–12: Gray tells his boss at the newspaper (Smith Keen) about the information he has from Darby. Keen tells Gray they will need an independent witness to confirm the story.

Darby meets a man who matches Gavin’s description at the arranged location. As they walk together, that man is killed and Darby realizes he was not Gavin. She immediately leaves town.

Voyles and Lewis talk about investigating the Pelican Brief. Voyles wants to proceed quietly so the President and Coal will not know.

Darby meets Gray in New York and tells him about Victor Mattiece who found oil in the Louisiana marshes. Through the years, he bought all the surrounding land in that area but just as he prepared to drill, an environmental group opposed his plans and took him to court. The marshland was home to some rare pelicans. The judge forbade drilling to start and the case was sent to the Supreme Court. Mattiece had to be sure that judges who supported big business were there. The current President (a Republican) had received election money from Mattiece.

Darby tells Gray that advice about judges would likely have come from his lawyers. Gray decides they need to search for his contact, Garcia, at one of two Washington law firms that worked with Mattiece.

Chapters 13–14: Croft, the photographer, waits outside one of the law firms (Brim, Stearns and Kidlow) but does not see anyone that looks like Garcia.

Coal discusses the Pelican Brief with Matthew Barr who secretly works for the White House. Coal asks Barr to find Mattiece and ask him to disappear because the press will soon be on the story.

After discussing the case with Keen in Keen’s car, Gray discovers someone has been in his New York hotel room.

Meanwhile, Darby gets the names and addresses of the students who had worked at the other Washington law firm (White and Blazevich) and finds one student who identifies the photograph of Garcia as Curtis Morgan.
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Chapters 15–18: Barr is taken on a five-hour boat ride from Florida to meet Mattiece. Barr asks Mattiece if the Pelican Brief is true and Mattiece says that it is. Then Barr is killed.

Darby goes to the law firm (White and Blazevich) and asks to see Morgan. She is told that Morgan was killed in a mugging.

Gray gets in contact with Morgan’s wife. She gives Gray a key to a mysterious lock-box at the bank. Inside the box, there is a document from Morgan that explains his work with Mattiece. Morgan writes about finding a note from one law partner to another (Marty Velmano to F. Sims Wakefield) that notes the benefits of Rosenberg and Jensen retiring. Wakefield showed concern that Morgan had seen the note and took him off Mattiece’s case. Morgan hid a copy of the note with his written statement in the lock-box.

Darby and Gray go over the details of their story with Keen and the Washington Post’s lawyer at the Post building. Meanwhile, the men with guns are looking for Darby outside that building.

Gray writes the story and then calls the FBI. Voyles arranges to come to the office to meet with Keen. Then Gray calls Coal at the White House. Coal agrees that Mattiece had given money towards the President’s election but denied slowing down the investigation of the Pelican Brief. Then Gray calls White and Blazevich and speaks with Velmano. Gray tells him he has the Pelican Brief and the note that Velmano sent to Wakefield about the two judges.

Voyles tells them about the FBI’s investigation and says he has a recording of the President asking him to stop working on the case. Voyles tells Darby that he can arrange for her flight out of the country.

At White and Blazevich, Velmano talks about hiding out in Europe. Wakefield shoots himself.

The story ends with Darby on a relaxing beach in the Virgin Islands. Gray has just arrived. They discuss what has happened to some of the people involved in the case and they talk about spending time together.

Background and themes

The main theme – or at least setting – running through most of John Grisham’s books is the law, and The Pelican Brief is no exception. However, while the action in many of Grisham’s books is mainly within a courtroom, it is not the case in this one. The Pelican Brief is a classic ‘chase’ story of one person running from a larger force. The connection with the law here is the fact that Darby Shaw is a law student and she exposes the way in which the law can be twisted by people who have the money and influence to do so.

The underlying theme in The Pelican Brief (as in most of Grisham’s books) is that of the small person taking on a big organization, whether it is the government, the legal establishment or big business. In this book, Darby Shaw, an unimportant law student, makes herself noticed and puts herself in danger by threatening the Presidential office and big business with her theory of why two judges were killed. She soon has to use all her resources to escape from several attempts to kill her. She doesn’t know throughout most of the book (and neither does the reader) who exactly she can trust, both in terms of individuals and people in authority.

Another theme present here and in many of Grisham’s other books is that of corruption in high office. Here the corruption is in the President’s office, although the President himself is weak and stupid rather than corrupt. We see that his attitude of ‘turning a blind eye’ (refusing to acknowledge something which makes you uncomfortable or which in some way will have a bad effect on you) allows the corruption to continue and in the end can threaten the lives and happiness of many people.

Finally, there is one theme in The Pelican Brief that is not a common theme in Grisham’s books – that of the environment. The ‘Pelican Brief’ refers to the document Darby Shaw writes when she tries to work out why the two judges were murdered. The only link she can find is that both of them would have been against an appeal by a large oil company to drain and use a marsh area in Louisiana which houses the few remaining brown pelicans in the United States. The marsh area represents income to the businessman who owns the oil company, and he is so interested in creating more wealth for himself that he does not care about the environmental impact the work would have. Through his lack of concern for others and his ruthlessness, he shows a disregard for human life. With this, perhaps Grisham is suggesting that we all need to respect our environment or it is a short step to losing respect for each other and for life itself.
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Discussion activities

Before reading
1 **Discuss:** Ask if students have read a John Grisham book or seen a film based on one. What kind of stories does he usually write? Where do they take place? What kind of person is usually the main character? Have students discuss their answers in groups.

2 **Guess:** Have students look at the title of the book and the picture on the cover. Have them guess what the book is about.

Introduction

After reading
3 **Careful reading:** Read the Introduction. In pairs, make notes about John Grisham.

<table>
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<th>Date and place of birth</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Family</td>
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<td>Father</td>
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<td>Other novels</td>
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<td>Marriage / children</td>
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<td>Home</td>
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<td>Writing income</td>
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Chapters 1–3

Before reading
4 **Guess:** In pairs, have students look at the picture on page 5. Guess who these three characters are. Who is the man with the gun? Why does he have a gun aimed at the older man? Have them share their ideas with the class.

After reading
5 **Pair work:** Have students find clues in Chapter 1 that show that Khamel is a professional killer and the murders are a professional ‘job’.

6 **Write:** Have students write a list of adjectives which describe Darby Shaw. In pairs, have them explain the reason for their choice of adjectives.

7 **Careful reading:** In pairs, students make notes about the role of the Supreme Court and its judges in the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supreme Court judges in the United States</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of judges</td>
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<td>Role of judges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appointing judges</td>
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<td>Length of career</td>
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8 **Group work:** Have students discuss these questions.
   a Why could the news of the murders be good news for the President?
   b Why might different people and groups not want to have judges like Rosenthal on the Supreme Court?
   c How do the President and his chief of staff (Coal) feel about the head of the FBI (Voyles)? How does Voyles feel about the President and Coal?

Chapters 4–6

Before reading
9 **Guess:** Have students look at the titles for the next three chapters. What do they think might happen?

After reading
10 **Group work:** Have students answer these questions in small groups and then share their ideas with the class.
   a Why was Thomas Callahan killed? Who is behind the killings?
   b What will happen to Darby?
   c What do we know about the Pelican Brief? How do we know that it is an important theory?
   d How does Darby probably feel at the end of Chapter 6?
   e What role will Gray Grantham of the Washington Post play in this story?
   f What will happen next?

11 **Discuss:** Have students discuss what Darby could have done after the explosion. Students have to list her options and consider what might be the result of each. Ask them to think about what they would have done if they were Darby.

12 **Role play:** Have students imagine that Darby contacts the police after the explosion. Imagine the discussion she might have with a police officer.
   **Student A:** You are Darby. What would you tell the police officer about Thomas and the possible reasons for his death?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For each judge ...</th>
<th>Judge Rosenberg</th>
<th>Judge Jensen</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Important causes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings of others towards them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Response to security ... and why</td>
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</table>

Then write down the facts about the two judges who were killed in this story. Why might they have been killed? Do they have anything in common?
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Student B: You are a police officer. What kind of questions would you ask Darby? Would you believe what she is telling you? What would you suggest she do?

Chapters 7–10
After reading
13 Write: Have students imagine that Gavin writes a letter to Voyles. He encourages Voyles (and the FBI) to continue the investigation of the Pelican Brief. Think how Gavin might feel about the case, knowing that the information he passed along led to the death of his friend.

14 Careful reading: In pairs, have students look at pages 28–30. What does Darby do to try to hide from the killers? Students list the strategies Darby uses to avoid being found.

15 Role play: Have students imagine the conversation Darby might have with her friend, Alice Stark, about what has happened in the last few days. 
Student A: You are Darby. What might you tell Alice about the Pelican Brief and Thomas’s death?
Student B: You are Alice. How would you respond to Darby’s news? What advice would you give her?

Chapters 11–12
Before reading
16 Discuss: Darby is planning to tell the story about the Pelican Brief to Gray Grantham, a reporter with the Washington Post. Have students discuss whether or not this is a wise decision. What would they do if they were Darby?

After reading
17 Group work: In groups, have students answer these questions.
   a. Why does Darby think Khamel is Gavin?
   b. Who do you think killed Khamel and saves Darby?
   c. How can Voyles destroy the President?
   d. Why were Rosenberg and Jensen killed?

18 Discuss: Divide the class into two groups. One group should make notes about Mattiece and why he wanted the marsh area. The other group should make notes about why Green Rescue objected. Then have each group put forward their arguments about the use of the land. Have them vote on what should happen to the land. Should Mattiece be allowed to develop his land or should it be protected?

Chapters 13–14
Before reading
19 Guess: Have students discuss the kind of information Gray might hope to get from Garcia. What do they think Garcia will tell Gray?

After reading
20 Pair work: Darby demonstrates to Gray that she knows how to hide from the killers. Have students list the ways she is able to avoid being found in Chapters 13 and 14. What mistake does Gray make?

21 Write: Have students imagine they are Matthew Barr and they are going to meet Mattiece the next day. What thoughts might you have as you wait in your hotel room in Fort Lauderdale? Have students write down their thoughts. Example: Tomorrow I will … I wonder … I hope …

22 Role play: Have students imagine the phone call Barr might make to Coal from his hotel room in Fort Lauderdale.
   Student A: You are Matthew Barr. Review the facts of the case with Coal. What might you wonder about?
   Student B: You are Coal. Answer Barr’s questions about the case. Is there anything Barr needs to remember or be careful about?

Chapters 15–18
Before reading
23 Discuss: In groups, have students discuss what they think will happen to the following characters: Darby, Gray, Morgan (Garcia), Mattiece, Voyles, Coal, the President and Barr.

After reading
24 Discuss: Have students list adjectives that describe Mattiece. What do they think will happen to Mattiece?

25 Pair work: Have students answer the following questions in pairs.
   a. Who is Edwin Sneller and who does he work for?
   b. What did Morgan (Garcia) find out? Why was he killed?
   c. Why does Voyles want Coal’s name to appear in the newspaper story?
   d. Who shot Khamel? Why?

26 Group work: In groups, have students discuss what has happened to all these people at the end of the story. Have them imagine what is going to happen next.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>What happened?</th>
<th>What will happen next?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darby Shaw</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gray Grantham</td>
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<tr>
<td>The President</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fletcher Coal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mattiece</td>
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