The Day of the Jackal

Frederick Forsyth

About the author
Frederick Forsyth’s The Day of the Jackal is one of the most famous thrillers ever written, and won its author the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1971. It has been translated into thirty languages and was made into a film in 1973.

Frederick Forsyth was born on August 25, 1938 in Ashford, Kent, England. He left full-time education as soon as he could, and joined the Royal Air Force, becoming its youngest fighter pilot at the age of nineteen. In further search of adventure, he entered journalism. This profession took him all over the world as a foreign correspondent.

When Forsyth returned to London in 1970, he began to write fiction. The story of his first novel, The Day of the Jackal, was one he had in fact begun to plan in 1962–63, when he had worked in Paris. He had read many thrillers and adventure novels himself, but had often been disappointed at their authors’ lack of knowledge of their subjects, which made the stories unrealistic. This accuracy in the details of the plot against a background of real events and characters is Forsyth’s greatest contribution to thriller writing. In The Day of the Jackal, readers feel they are being shown how a professional assassin really would work and how a detective might really track him down. His novels have now sold well over fifty million copies around the world. The Day of the Jackal, however, remains his most popular book.

Summary
Chapter 1: The Secret Army organisation (OAS) in France fails (again) in an attempt to assassinate General De Gaulle. Its leaders decide there are too many police spies in the organisation, and that only an outsider could succeed in killing De Gaulle. They choose an Englishman, who agrees to do the job for half a million dollars, and gives his name only as ‘The Jackal’. The Jackal prepares for the job by stealing and forging passports and other papers.

Chapter 2: The Jackal asks an expert in Belgium to make a special gun for him, and another expert to forge identity papers. The French secret police are worried because the OAS leaders are staying in their hotel in Rome and never come out. They make a plan to get the OAS bodyguard, Victor, who is with the leaders in Rome, back to France.

Chapter 3: By pretending to Victor that his daughter is ill, the French police manage to get him to France. The Jackal meanwhile kills the Belgian forger, who tried to get more money from him than promised.

Chapter 4: Victor the bodyguard is captured by the secret police who torture him. Before killing him, they question him. He says very little but they catch the words ‘foreigner’, ‘fair-haired’, ‘killer’ and ‘jackal’. The Minister, Mr Frey, calls a meeting. He understands that the OAS is paying a foreign killer to assassinate De Gaulle. He asks Claude Lebel, ‘the best detective in France’, to lead the investigation. The ministerial committee will meet regularly to monitor progress. Colonel Saint Clair, who is on the committee, tells his girlfriend the secret information, not knowing she is an OAS spy. The Jackal smuggles his gun to Italy.

Chapter 5: Lebel calls police chiefs in other countries to try to find out who The Jackal might be. He also asks the frontier police to check all fair-haired foreigners entering France. The British police believe a certain Charles Calthrop may be The Jackal.

Chapter 6: Lebel announces to the committee his suspicions about Charles Calthrop. The Jackal enters France. Searching for fraudulently obtained passports, the British police find that The Jackal is using the name Duggan. All this information is passed on to Lebel, and, via the committee and Saint Clair’s girlfriend, to The Jackal.

Chapter 7: The Jackal seduces a woman in the hotel. The police discover that ‘Duggan’ is in France. Then they find the hotel he is staying in and are catching up with him. The Jackal changes the colour of his car and flees. Lebel arrives at the hotel too late. The Jackal goes to the house of the woman, Colette, he had met at the hotel. Meanwhile Lebel suspects The Jackal is getting information through a member of his investigation committee.
Chapter 8: Colette discovers The Jackal's plan and he kills her. Hearing from the OAS spy that 'Duggan' is now known, The Jackal changes his identity, disguises himself as a Danish priest and takes a train to Paris. Lebel hears about Colette's murder and hurries to the train station in Paris, but is too late. At the committee meeting, Saint Clair is angry with Lebel. Lebel decides to listen in to the telephone conversations of committee members.

Chapter 9: Lebel listens in to a telephone conversation from Saint Clair's girlfriend and discovers she is a spy. He arrests the person she was phoning. The Jackal calls and Lebel answers. The Jackal is suspicious and leaves his hotel one hour before the police arrive. The Jackal puts on his new disguise as an American college boy. Lebel plays a recording of a phone call to the committee meeting, and Saint Clair resigns. De Gaulle refuses to change his schedule because of The Jackal. Lebel finds the name of the last passport The Jackal is using, and the photograph. The committee is confident.

Chapter 10: The Jackal finds a gay man in a bar who allows The Jackal to stay at his flat. When a photograph of The Jackal's new disguise comes on the television, The Jackal kills the man he is staying with. He waits in the man's flat, and so the police cannot find him in a hotel.

On August 25, De Gaulle is to give out medals to old soldiers. Lebel is sure that The Jackal will shoot him at this ceremony. Many security measures are put into place, and Lebel will walk around checking. On the day, The Jackal, disguised as an old soldier with many medals and only one leg, succeeds in crossing the security lines. His gun is hidden in his metal crutch, and he has very well forged papers.

Chapter 11: At the very last moment, Lebel realises the old man is The Jackal, stops him from killing the president, and kills him. But the police are never sure about the real identity of The Jackal – in the end, it turns out that he was not Charles Calthrop.

Background and themes

General Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) was one of France’s presidents, and a leader of the Free French army during the Second World War. De Gaulle was recognised at the end of the war as temporary president of the French Republic, but retired from politics when his views about how France should be governed were not accepted. However, he returned to power in 1958, and remained president this time until 1969.

The Algerian War: Algeria, in north Africa, had been part of the French empire since the mid-nineteenth century and remained a colony after the Second World War. In 1954 Algerian nationalists began to fight for independence from France. French troops were sent to Algeria to fight the nationalists. By 1958, more than half a million French troops had been sent to the country. But in France itself, opinion was strongly divided: some people thought Algeria should be free, others wanted it to remain a French colony.

Some French believed that Algeria was going to get its freedom, and hoped for a new government led by General de Gaulle, thinking he shared their views. De Gaulle, however, began the process of giving Algeria independence, making some Europeans and right wing French in Algeria unhappy. A group of senior army officers formed the Organisation Armée Secrete (OAS), eventually turning to terrorism when their attempts to kill de Gaulle failed.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Research and present: Divide students into three groups. Ask each group to research one of the following subjects at home and present it to the class: Charles de Gaulle, The Algerian war, The Secret Army Organisation (OAS).

Chapter 1

While reading

2 Write: Before the beginning of the attack described in the first pages of the novel, the OAS had carefully prepared its plans. Ask students to write the plans for the attack, after reading the chapter.

3 Describe and predict: Ask students to look at the drawing on page 15, and to guess the answers to the following questions: What is hanging up on the lines with pegs? What might be in the bottles? What else can you see in the room? Who are the two people? What kind of business are they doing?

4 Role play: Put students into groups of two. Ask them to imagine and role play a dialogue between the two characters in the drawing on page 15. When they read the chapter, they will see how close they were to the real story.

Chapter 2

After reading

5 Write: The Belgian forger plans to get more money from The Jackal. Before meeting The Jackal for a second time, he writes to his brother in New York, explaining his plan and why he thinks it will work. Ask students to write this letter.
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Chapter 3
Before reading
6 Describe and predict: Ask students to look at the drawing on page 22 and guess the answers to the following questions. What is the job of the man behind the desk? How do you know? What is the man in the foreground holding? Why is it special?

7 Write: Victor the bodyguard in Rome receives a letter from Kovacs, written under the pressure of the secret police. Ask students to write this letter, based on the information in Chapter 3. They should remember to sound tactful.

Chapter 4
After reading
8 Write: After questioning Victor, Colonel Rolland wrote a short report for the president. Ask students to write this report, based on the information in Chapter 4.

9 Role play: Put your students into groups of two. One of them will play the role of Saint Clair, the other the role of his girlfriend. Ask them to prepare and role play a conversation between the two after one of the committee meetings. The girlfriend tries to get information without seeming to take it seriously. The military man is not at all suspicious, and has other things on his mind.

Chapter 5
After reading
10 Describe and draw: Divide students into groups of two. One person in each group needs a pencil and paper. The other person looks at the drawing on page 45 and describes it in English in as much detail as possible, without showing the drawing to his or her partner. The partner must draw what is being described, without showing the drawing to the person describing. When they have finished they should compare the two drawings and explain the differences to the class.

11 Role play: Ask students to act out the discussion scene between The Jackal and the forger, which ends in the forger being killed.

Chapter 6
After reading
12 Write: All customs officers in France have received instructions about identifying The Jackal, but they have not been told who he is or what he is planning to do. Ask students to write these instructions.

Chapter 7
Before reading
13 Describe and predict: Put students into groups of two. One of them should look at the drawing on page 60, and the other should not. Tell the first student in each group to describe in some detail the content of the drawing. Then they should try to decide together the answers to the following questions: Where are the two people? What is the man saying? What is the woman thinking? What will happen next? Will they be friends for a long time?

After reading
14 Write: Ask students to imagine they work in the bar at the hotel where Colette and The Jackal were staying. Shortly after The Jackal leaves, the police come and ask for detailed information about what the staff have seen. The students should write a precise statement for the police.

Chapter 8
After reading
15 Write: Ask students to imagine that they are Ernestine, the maid in Colette's house. Ernestine writes a letter to her sister who lives in Italy. In the letter she tells of the terrible events which have happened in the house. Ask students to write this letter.

Chapter 9
After reading
16 Write: After the murder of Colette, the hunt for The Jackal is no longer secret, though his plan to kill the president still is. Tell students they are journalists. They should write an article telling of The Jackal's escape disguised as a Danish priest, and the police suspicion that he is now pretending to be an American student. If possible, show them other similar newspaper articles about crime first.

Chapter 10
Before reading
17 Describe and predict: Ask your students to look at the drawing on page 87 and answer the following questions: Who are the two people we can see? What is there on the table, and why? How do they know each other? What is the man who is standing up saying? What is he pointing at and why? What is going to happen next?

Chapter 11
After reading
18 Role play: Now that the story is over, students should imagine that the president has decided it is no longer necessary to keep the story a secret. They should work in groups of three. Two of them are TV journalists, the third is Claude Lebel, the detective. They should prepare and role play a television interview. The journalists want as many sensational details as possible. Mr Lebel is modest and does not want them to call him a hero.

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