About the author

John Grisham was born on February 2, 1955, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in the southern United States. He grew up with five siblings, among whom he was the second oldest. 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 Southhaven, Mississippi, where Grisham graduated from Southhaven High School. Encouraged by his mother, he was an avid reader. He was especially fond of the work of John Steinbeck, whose clarity he admired greatly.

In 1981, Grisham earned a law degree (Juris Doctor) 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, focusing on criminal and civil law and representing every kind of client imaginable. 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 harrowing 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. *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 initiated a modest 5,000-copy printing and published it 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 focus on writing.

Summary

*The Chamber* tells the story of a seventy-year-old man’s last bid to save himself from execution. Sam Cayhall has been on death row for more than twenty years when a young lawyer named Adam Hall appears on the scene and declares his mission to save him. As Adam digs into Sam’s past, he unearths scenes of horror and confessions of wrongdoing that repulse him. However, as the pair of unlikely companions works together, they eventually become close. They begin to realize that they are bound together by more than a mission. Sam’s hopes for salvation rise as Adam submits appeal after appeal, but the law seems to be against them. In the end, there is just one piece of information—the name of Sam’s accomplice—that could save Sam’s life or cost Adam his.

Chapters 1–4: The story starts with a recounting of Sam’s involvement in the bombing in Greenville, Mississippi. It then shifts its focus to Kramer and his two sons as they enter his office moments before the bomb explodes. Kramer’s sons are killed instantly, and Kramer loses both his legs. Sam is also injured by the blast—he is walking towards the office when the dynamite goes off. The police find him in his car later, and after they ask him some questions, they arrest him on suspicion that he had been involved in the bombing. Sam is found guilty of murder and sent to prison, where he will eventually be put to death in the gas chamber. Adam takes on Sam’s case—even though Sam wants to represent himself—and at their first meeting, Sam figures out that Adam is his grandson. He finally agrees to let Adam represent him.

Chapters 5–8: Adam starts by trying to attack the death penalty itself, pointing out that two men had suffered horrible deaths in gas chambers. Meanwhile, Roland Forchin is becoming more and more interested in Sam’s case and the new lawyer who is representing him. He decides that it is time to travel to Memphis to make sure that Sam stays quiet about the true events that took place on the night of the bombing so long ago. Adam isn’t aware of Roland, though, as he is busy talking to the FBI agent, Wyn Lettner, who was in charge of the bombing case. He tells Adam things that he would rather not know, such as the fact that Sam was involved in killing black people before the bombing. By the time he learns the truth about Sam’s dark past, his appeal that gas chambers are cruel has been quashed by the courts.
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**Chapters 9–12:** Ralph Griffin, a chaplain, starts to visit Sam in prison in the days leading up to his execution. Sam admits that he doesn’t want to die, and that he feels sorry for what he has done in the past. He ends up giving Adam some letters to deliver to the family members of the people he has killed or helped to kill. He admits his crimes to the chaplain, who helps Sam to ask God for forgiveness. Meanwhile, Adam meets with the Governor, who tells him that he needs Sam to give him the name of his accomplice before he can grant him clemency. However, Adam knows that Sam won’t accept the deal.

**Chapters 13–14:** Sam gets dressed in his new clothes and prepares himself for execution. It is the last day of his life. The Supreme Court has denied his last appeal, and the Governor has denied his plea for clemency. Sam decides to admit his crimes to Adam, but he tells him that he didn’t kill the Kramer boys. He says that he was wrong to be involved, but he insists that he didn’t mean for the boys to get hurt. Adam says goodbye to Sam, who is taken into the gas chamber. Adam is leaving the prison as Sam is struggling to breathe his last breaths inside the chamber. He cries for Sam and his terrible fate.

**Background and themes**

**Writing for the reader:** Grisham owes much of his success to the fact that he writes in an easy, gripping style which combines a solid knowledge of the American legal system with an ability to portray realistically a wide range of characters, not only heroes but also villains. He often portrays people with unsavory personalities and dark backgrounds in a sympathetic light, which creates a sense of ambivalence in the reader, whose natural inclinations would otherwise be to side against the character. Grisham portrays his stories and characters in a simple and yet highly creative, appealing way, which makes his books very enjoyable to read. His books are always “page-turners.” He doesn’t write for himself, as many writers do—he writes for the reader.

**Focusing on the law:** Grisham draws on his experiences as a lawyer when he writes his legal thrillers. He frequently depicts a young lawyer fighting alone against the corruption of large companies, institutions or criminal gangs. First published in 1994, *The Chamber* represents Grisham’s fifth novel. It shows a young lawyer battling alone against the odds to save an old man from the death penalty. *The Chamber* is a very subtle legal thriller. It doesn’t contain any car chases, threats of injury or killings (except for those in the distant past). Grisham builds the tension by increasing Sam’s hope for redemption and then flattening it with despair by unraveling his past horrors with stark clarity. Meanwhile, looming over everything is the dark shadow of the gas chamber itself—the ultimate conclusion to a legal case.

**Exploring the death penalty:** One of the most powerful themes in *The Chamber* is the death penalty, which still exists in some states in the United States. In the book, the courts of Mississippi are hungry to carry out an execution because they view themselves as slipping behind other states. Sam has committed horrific crimes, but should he be punished for his mistakes by being killed himself? Can people feel genuinely sorry for their crimes? Can they truly seek salvation? In the story, some characters suspect that Sam wasn’t really responsible for the deaths for which his own death will serve as punishment. Is it right therefore that he should be killed and denied all hope for future justice? Grisham explores these questions in *The Chamber*—questions that exist in the real-world society of the United States.

**Racism:** As in many of Grisham’s books, racism is a strong theme in *The Chamber*. When the story starts in 1967, the southern United States is steeped in racism and segregation. The Ku Klux Klan is a dominant force in the region. Sam’s father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan and therefore Sam was brought up to be a racist, never having an opportunity to experience any other way of life. Through his main character, attorney Adam Hall, Grisham questions whether Sam is entirely to blame for his actions, or if his environment was responsible for molding him into the man he eventually became. It is a difficult and important question—and one that can be asked about many racially motivated crimes that have been committed in the southern United States over the years.

**The importance of family:** The importance of family is a theme that recurs throughout *The Chamber*. As Adam was growing up, he didn’t have a chance to know his family, and as a result, he always felt at odds for having no family roots. His discovery of his grandfather and his past is horrifying because of the revelation of the truth, but at the same time, it is a measure of security. For the first time in his life, Adam feels like a normal person with a family and links to the past. Despite his grandfather’s many faults, he grows close to him because he is, after all, part of his family.
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Forgiveness: Forgiveness—not only the act of forgiving someone for his or her wrongdoings but also the act of allowing oneself to be forgiven—plays a central role in *The Chamber*. Sam is a criminal, and he is responsible for some atrocious crimes in his past. He hasn’t been forgiven for his crimes, and he hasn’t forgiven himself for committing them. However, Grisham portrays him as a sympathetic character—someone who is deserving of forgiveness—so the reader begins to forgive him for the mistakes he has made in the past. In turn, Adam begins to forgive him for his crimes and fights hard to save him from capital punishment. The question is—will society be able to forgive him for his crimes and fights hard to save him from capital punishment. The question is—will society be able to forgive him for his previous misdeeds? And perhaps more importantly, will he be able to forgive himself?

Discussion activities

**Chapters 1–2, pages 1–15**

**Before reading**

1. **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?*

2. **Discuss**: Put students into small groups and get them to read the description on the back cover of the book. Then get them to look at the front cover of the book and think about the title. Finally, get them to discuss the following questions:
   - What does the word chamber mean? Does it have more than one meaning? If so, what are they?
   - What meaning of the word “chamber” do you think is used in the title? Why do you think this?
   - Have you ever seen a chamber portrayed in a movie? If so, describe it to your classmates.
   - What role does a chamber play in the story? Why do you think this?

3. **Pair work**: Put students into pairs and get them to discuss the following questions:
   - What kind of novel is *The Chamber*?
   - 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?

4. **Research**: Ask students to bring information about capital punishment 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**

5. **Artwork**: Put students into small groups and get them to draw a timeline representing Sam’s life before he was arrested for the bombing. Point out to students that the timeline should start with the bombing and end with Sam’s arrest.

6. **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*, etc.). 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.

**Chapters 3–4, pages 16–30**

**Before reading**

7. **Research**: Put students into pairs and get them to look up the phrase *death row* 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 phrase in a sentence as an example.

8. **Write**: Write the following combinations of letters and blanks on the board—these are outlines of words that can be found in Chapters 3 and 4. Put students into small groups and get them to work together to find the words in the story and fill in the missing letters. 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.

   - Look up the phrase *death row* 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 phrase in a sentence as an example.

9. **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 short 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.
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Chapters 5–6, pages 30–45
Before reading
10 Research: Put students into pairs and get them to look up the words guilt and regret 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.

11 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Adam, Sam and the other characters in Chapters 5 and 6.

After reading
12 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Adam, Sam and the other characters in Chapters 5 and 6. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

13 Discuss: Put students into small groups and get them to discuss why Rollie Wedge breaks into Lee’s apartment. Then get them to discuss why David McAllister suddenly seems sympathetic toward Sam. One member of the group should make notes to record the reasons that the group comes up with. When they have finished, the groups should stand at the front of the class and read the notes to their classmates.

14 Artwork: Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe a scene from Chapters 5 or 6. 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.

15 Write: Write the following combinations of letters on the board—they are anagrams of words that can be found in Chapters 5 and 6. 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 rehub b eetngae c irch
d carsti e orrbro f aceg
g snaitch h lecl i inmeta
j awl k dica l asg
m atedh n eatbll o genta
p mbob q doyb r athe
s ruth t lambe

16 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture to describe how Adam feels about Sam at the end of Chapter 6. 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.

Chapters 7–8, pages 45–60
Before reading
17 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 8 is called A Cruel Way to Die. Which way of dying do you think the title refers to? Why do you think this? Why do you think this way of dying is a cruel way to die? What do you think the author is trying to say with this title? 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?

18 Research: Put students into small groups and get them to look for information about New Orleans, Louisiana in the library, on the Internet, etc. Then get them to make a travel brochure to promote the city. 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.

After reading
19 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of one of the characters in Chapters 7 and 8. 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.

20 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to write three questions that they have regarding Chapters 7 and 8. 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.

21 Write: Put students into small groups and get them to write a sentence to describe what happens in Chapter 7 and a sentence to describe what happens in Chapter 8. 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.

Chapters 9–10, pages 60–75
Before reading
22 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Adam, Sam and the other characters in Chapters 9 and 10.

After reading
23 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Adam, Sam and the other characters in Chapters 9 and 10. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
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24 **Write:** Put students into pairs and get them to discuss what Sam might have written in the letters to Quince Lincoln, Ruth Kramer and Elliott Kramer. After their discussion, they should work together to write the letters. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and read the letters to the rest of the class.

25 **Artwork:** Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe a scene from Chapters 9 or 10. 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.

26 **Debate:** Divide the class into two groups and write the following statement on the board: “The death penalty is a good form of punishment for criminals convicted of murder.” Get one group to argue for the statement and the other group to argue against it. Give them time to prepare their arguments—help them to come up with ideas if necessary. Then get one student from each group to present one aspect of the group’s argument. When both groups have finished presenting their arguments, choose the group that made the best argument as the winner of the debate.

27 **Pair work:** Write the following columns of words and phrases on the board. Put students into pairs and get them to work together to match the words and phrases from each column in order to make phrases that appear in Chapters 9 and 10. After you write the correct phrases on the board so that the pairs can check their answers, get them to write their own sentences using each of the phrases. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read the sentences to their classmates.

29 **Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Adam, Sam and the other characters in Chapters 11 and 12.

**After reading**

30 **Check:** Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Adam, Sam and the other characters in Chapters 11 and 12. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

31 **Read carefully:** Put students into pairs and get them to take turns reading the last paragraph in Chapter 12 out loud to each other. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read the paragraph out loud to the rest of the class.

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

What is Sam doing at the end of Chapter 12?
What do you think he is thinking about? Why do you think this?
How do you think he is feeling? Why do you think this?
Do you think you would feel the same or different from Sam if you were in the same position? Why do you think this?
What would you do if you were in the same position? Give reasons for your answer.
Do you feel sorry for Sam at the end of Chapter 12? Why/why not?
Do you think Sam feels sorry for himself? Why do you think this?
Do you think any of the other characters feel sorry for Sam? Why do you think this?

**Chapters 13–14, pages 91–101**

**Before reading**

33 **Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Adam, Sam and the other characters in Chapters 13 and 14.

34 **Discuss:** Ask students to think about why Chapter 14 is called *A New Dawn.* What is a dawn? Can the word be used in more than one way? Who do you think has a new dawn in the chapter? Why do you think this? What do you think the author is trying to say with this title? 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?

**After reading**

35 **Check:** Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Adam, Sam and the other characters in Chapters 13 and 14. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

**Vocabulary activities**

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