



# A Time to Kill

## A Novel

Written by John Grisham

Dell | Mass Market | 978-0-440-24591-9 | 672 pp | \$9.99/\$11.99 Canada

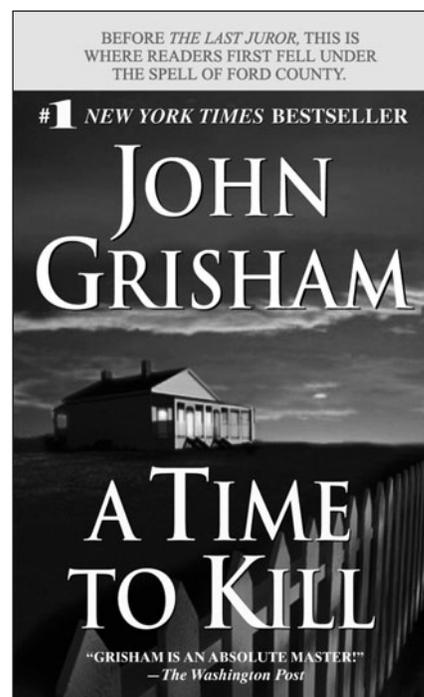
Dell | Trade Paperback | 978-0-385-33860-8 | 528 pp | \$13.00/\$20.00 Canada

ALSO AVAILABLE IN HARDCOVER

Reading Level: 5th Grade

“Grisham’s pleasure in relating the Byzantine complexities of Clanton (Mississippi) politics is contagious and he tells a good story.... An enjoyable book.”

—*Library Journal*



### • note to teachers •

John Grisham’s novel opens with the senseless rape of the ten-year-old daughter of a respected African-American family in the northwestern Mississippi town of Clanton. The suspects, who are largely uneducated and not employed in any respectable fashion, are promptly arrested. The criminal court process begins routinely with the preliminary court judge formally holding the pair over for a grand jury indictment. However, the victim’s father takes matters into his own hands by riddling the suspects’ bodies with bullets from a Vietnam War era M-16 rifle, right on the courthouse steps. The remainder of the book deals with events leading up to and through the father’s trial for murder.

As a literary work, elements of this book such as plot, character development, and setting can be analyzed and discussed in class. The author addresses themes such as prejudice, friendship, commitment, ideals, family values, father/daughter relationships, retribution, and justice.

In the social studies classroom, *A Time to Kill* serves as a catalyst for discussions and activities about the judiciary branch of government, namely the criminal justice system, and the role that politics play in our society. In addition, the importance of civic duty is related, as Attorney Jake Brigrance essentially tries this case pro bono.

High school students will find the reading and analysis of *A Time to Kill* a rewarding experience. The novel provides an accurate, detailed account of the criminal trial process, the characters are well developed and highly believable, and high school readers are old enough to emotionally process the mature subject matter of the plot. Grisham takes care to provide an overall sense of the crimes’ luridness without being unnecessarily graphic.

However, the use of the N- word is prevalent in certain characters’ dialogue. Thus, students should understand, before reading this book, that it is set in a southern state during the 1980s—a time when the use of this term was still somewhat acceptable. For a mini-lesson on the history of the term up to its recent “funeral” in Detroit, Michigan in 2007, refer to the following link: [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19680493/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19680493/).

Introducing students to poignant works of sociologic significance benefit both language arts/reading classrooms and social studies classrooms. The crime of rape, augmented by race relationships, complicates the judicial process in the 20th century American classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee. Grisham’s novel, *A Time to Kill*, addresses the same cultural issues. Victims and defendants of each novel share socioeconomic similarities. In both novels, the question of whether justice is truly served through our court systems is addressed. Enhance students’ experiences as they read *A Time to Kill* by drawing comparisons to Harper Lee’s classic.

## • about this book

Early in his law career, Grisham conceived the plot for *A Time to Kill* by witnessing a trial involving the rape of a young female. He imagined himself as the father of the victim.

In *A Time to Kill*, the traumatized child is black; the implicated rapists are white. The victim's father resorts to vigilante retribution. After the father pleads insanity, the ensuing chapters take the readers on a harrowing journey into the darker recesses of the criminal justice system. In addition, the novel unveils a resentment that continues to smolder among influential members of the Deep South long after the Civil Rights era.

*A Time to Kill* can be utilized in both a language arts and a social studies classroom. The themes described in the preceding "Note to Teachers," can be covered in varying degrees depending on the classroom ability levels. Students will ultimately gain a deeper appreciation of the writer's craft, civic duty, and the operation of the criminal court system. One caveat is the author's use of derogatory racial terms in character dialogue. As mentioned earlier, offering special guidance regarding the author's purpose for using these terms (including the N-word) is highly recommended.

Language arts standards are also met by using this book. The activities in this guide are designed to enhance reading and writing skills. Visit the following website to access the National Council of Teachers of English standards: [www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm](http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm).

Social studies strands and standards can be met by using this book as well. Visit [www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/) to access the National Council of Social Studies standards/strands.

## • about the author



JOHN GRISHAM is a native of the Deep South; he was born in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and his parents eventually settled in Southaven, Mississippi. Grisham went on to receive a bachelor's degree in accounting from Mississippi State University and a law degree from the University of Mississippi in Oxford. He later returned to Southaven to set up a small law practice. In 1983, he was elected to the House of Representatives in Mississippi.

By his own account, Grisham didn't seriously consider becoming a writer until, by happenstance, he became a mesmerized spectator of a rape trial in which a young girl was sexually brutalized. He imagined himself as her father, and obsessed over how he could legally free a father who sought justice by taking matters into his own hands. Grisham admits in his Author's Note at the start of the Delta Trade Paperback version of this book that, as he watched the trial unfold, he actually thought about "personally... shoot[ing] the rapist."

*A Time to Kill* is Grisham's first novel. Again, according to the Author's Note, much of the protagonist's actions and reactions mirror Grisham's personality and how he practiced law. Thus, the reader is provided with a credible account of the intriguing world of the criminal law practice.

Grisham has gone on to write more than twenty novels. Many of these novels, including *A Time to Kill*, have become major motion pictures. In addition, John Grisham wrote *The Innocent Man*, a nonfiction account of baseball prodigy Ron Williamson's conviction for murder. This 2006 work recounts the initial crime, Williamson's arrest, trial, and sentencing to death. Williamson spent years on death row before he was exonerated.

**AUTHOR WEBSITE:** [jgrisham.com](http://jgrisham.com)

## • discussion and writing

**Summary: Chapters 1 – 7: The Crimes:** It is a nondescript day in May, in Ford County, Mississippi, circa 1984. A young adult, Billy Ray Cobb, and his apprentice Pete Willard, spend this day drinking, smoking marijuana, and taking turns raping a ten-year old African American child. Cobb and Willard essentially leave the girl for dead, but she's discovered and ultimately survives the ordeal. The local police then detain Cobb and Willard. While most of the townspeople do not condone the rape and assault of the girl, the racial component of the incident leaves many of them conflicted, especially about the unwanted attention it brings to the community. As a result, this once serene town is now divided and under siege. Carl Lee Hailey, the victim's father, obtains a gun from a Vietnam war buddy and murders Cobb and Willard. His act of retribution becomes national news.

1. What is Billy Ray's prized possession and how did he get it?
2. Why did Tonya envision her Daddy "desperately" running through the woods?
3. After reading through Chapter 2, describe Sheriff Ozzie Walls.
4. Novice lawyer, Jake Brigance, has "wondered why every small Southern town had ... no Lincoln or Grant" street names. Explain.
5. A portrait of William Faulkner hangs in Attorney Brigance's office. Why?
6. What is Parchman?
7. Describe the purpose of a preliminary hearing in a capital case?
8. Describe the meeting between Carl Lee Hailey and Jake Brigance in the courthouse after the preliminary hearing for Cobb and Willard. What should Brigance do?
9. Describe Carl Lee's actions leading up to the ambush. Is he a sane man? Explain.

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**Chapters 8 – 10: Preliminary Preparations:** In these chapters, Jake and Carl Lee negotiate attorney fees. Dell, of the Clanton Coffee Shop, continues to be a trusted confidant for Attorney Jake Brigance—Carl Lee's chosen lawyer. Politically motivated Rufus Buckley is introduced as the prosecuting attorney.

1. What deal on attorney's fees is struck between Carl Lee and Attorney Brigance in Chapter 8? How much does Jake say a similar case would cost?
2. Compare the Hailey family with the families of Cobb and Willard.
3. What does Brigance's response to Ethel's concern about disturbing phone calls reveal about his attitude toward others affected by his decision to take the case?
4. According to Chapter 10, for what are lawyers fighting?
5. Jake and Banker Stan Atcavage discuss a broken deal. Describe it.

## • discussion and writing (continued)

**Chapters 11 – 15: The Stage Is Set:** Much of the groundwork and timing for the impending trial is delineated in this section. Jake Brigance, Rufus Buckley, and Omar Noose define their roles. As you read through this section, compare the three characters, using examples from the book.

1. When the *New York Times* interviews Brigance, what deep-seated resentment comes out in the interview? Is it justified?
2. Compare the Brigance church with the Hailey family's Mt. Zion Chapel CME.
3. To whom does Carl Lee apologize? Why do you think his apology is so readily accepted?
4. What is the purpose of the grand jury and the arraignment?
5. The author compares Honorable Omar Noose to Ichabod Crane (the protagonist in Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*). Why?
6. Mack Loyd Crowell's influence almost kept the grand jury from indicting Hailey. What did he do?
7. What group is resurrected in Ford County?
8. Harry Rex is optimistic about winning the Hailey case. Why?
9. Carl Lee wants to talk to the judge personally and explain his actions. What does this tell you about Carl Lee?
10. Outward appearance is important in this section, and throughout the book. Why?

**Chapters 16 – 19: First Blow and an Orchestrated Rebound:** In this section, Jake's arrogance is cut to the quick by Carl Lee's Vietnam War buddy, Cat Brewster. Three wise men appear to aid and abet Jake's redemption.

1. Cat Brewster easily sways Carl Lee. Why?
2. Explain why the cross burning occurred just a bit late.
3. What do we find out about Bo Marsharfsky and the 1968 Memphis garbage workers?
4. When Jake retrieves the Hailey case, describe the three people who help him. How do they help?
5. Jake spars with his wife and with himself about ethics. Is Jake ethical? Explain.

**Chapter 20 – 23: The Doctor Visits and the Gag Order:** Carl Lee perceives that he is not insane, yet he's delivered into the hands of psychiatrists who probe his mental fortitude. Judge Noose restricts public bantering about the trial.

1. Who provides a psychiatrist for Jake?
2. Reverend Agee collects the Hailey fund donations. Is he fair? Explain.
3. What do we find out about Tonya in this section?
4. In this book, the N-word, and, the terms "rednecks" and "Pollacks" are used. In Chapter 20, Carl Lee refers to the North Vietnamese as "gooks." Why are these terms used?
5. Describe Brigance's second conversation with Marsharfsky. Is Brigance ethical? Explain.
6. Dr. W.T. Bass is the defense's psychiatrist. Describe him.
7. What group provided extra money to Carl Lee Hailey's Defense Fund? Who gets the cash?
8. Describe Carl Lee's trip to Whitefield in Rankin County.
9. Describe the pros and cons of implementing a change in venue for the Hailey case.
10. What disgusting detail about the rape was revealed at the change of venue hearing?
11. Has Tonya recovered from her ordeal? Explain.
12. How does Jake get the money to stay in business?
13. What is Gwen most concerned about when she visits Carl Lee? Why is this ironic?

**Chapter 24: Blow #2:** The NAACP finally arrives. Sheriff Walls, at the bequest of Reverend Agee, sets up a meeting with the NAACP, Brigance, and Carl Lee.

1. Describe Norman Reinfeld. Is he ethical? Explain.
2. Jake tells Ozzie, "We need to have a prayer meeting." Before you read on,
3. What do you think Jake is going to discuss with Carl Lee?
3. What is the final decision? Explain.

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**Chapters 25 – 27: Death's Door and the Hailey's Legal Team:** The Ku Klux Klan turns up the heat, but thankfully, someone from the inside covertly turns it down. The members of Hailey's pro bono legal team begin working in earnest.

1. How does Jake find out about the bomb planted beneath his bedroom window?
2. What promise has Jake finally broken in this section?
3. Where do Brigance's wife and daughter go?
4. Where does Brigance find out about Noose's change of venue? What was the decision?
5. Why does Jake make his way to Lucien's house?
6. Ellen Roark clerks for Brigance for free. Describe her.
7. Circuit Court Clerk Gillespie stands up to Jake's jury list demand. Who gets the list for Jake?
8. Jake, Lucien, Roark, and Harry Rex are all members of Hailey's legal team. From what is known of them so far, describe their assets and liabilities to the Hailey case.
9. Why does Jake visit Tank's? Is this ethical? Explain. Is he obligated to visit? Explain.
10. What happens to Bud Twitty in this section? Who does Ethel blame?

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**Chapters 28 – 32: Pre-trial Jitters:** Reverend Agee reluctantly delivers the goods while residents of Mississippi loudly stake claims of the courthouse grounds. The ever-present press stands poised to feast on the remains of any trial day frenzy.

1. What is revealed about the church collections? What does Jake do?
2. Reverend Agee, using Attorney Reinfeld, attempts to wiggle out of a tight spot? How?
3. How do Carl Lee and Ozzie convince Reverend Agee to cough up the cash? Explain.
4. Who is Mickey Mouse?
5. Just before the trial, who descends on the courthouse grounds?
6. Why doesn't Jake want Clyde Sisco as a juror?
7. What happens after the Mississippi Imperial Wizard for the Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan reveals himself?
8. Why do the reporters get a new name?
9. How is the Klan rousing the interest of potential jurors?
10. Brigance tells Roark that five days before the event, Carl Lee informed Jake about what he planned to do. Reflect on all that Carl Lee has since experienced. Was he sane? Explain.
11. Who is brought in to protect the peace?
12. Who dies in this section? Is it Jake's fault? Explain.
13. Jake and Ellen review the jury list. What does Jake's knowledge of the jurors tell you about him?

## • discussion and writing (continued)

**Chapters 33 – 36: Jury for the Prosecution:** With all the pre-trial tampering over, a jury is selected. The clouds of conviction begin to gather and roil.

1. The defense team plots their stations at trial. Describe their stations.
2. Lucien taught Jake that fear and what other quality was good to manifest to the jury? Why is this ironic given what we know about Lucien Wilbanks?
3. Brigance tries to strike the whole jury panel. Does it work? Explain.
4. In Chapter 33, Harry Rex Vonner refers to the PLO. The PLO stands for the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Describe them.
5. Analyze this quote from Brigance in Chapter 34, “If we prove Carl Lee Hailey was legally insane when he shot Billy Ray Cobb and Pete Willard, is there a person on this panel who cannot find him not guilty?” Why did Jake articulate his question in this manner?
6. Why was Gerald Ault, Brigance’s secret weapon? How did he get dismissed?
7. What is the gender and racial makeup of the jury? Is this a jury for the prosecution or for the defense? Explain
8. Who dies in this section?
9. Compare the opening statements of Buckley and Brigance.
10. How did Brigance discredit the testimony of Cora Cobb and Earnestine Willard? What purpose did it serve for the defense?
11. Using examples from the first day of testimony, explain whether the prosecution or the defense has the advantage.
12. Buckley insists on a pathologist’s testimony when Brigance is willing to stipulate. Why?
13. What is the author’s purpose for including Hinky Myrick in the story?
14. How has the trial changed the daily activities and attitudes of Clanton residents?
15. During day two of the trial, what prosecution witness was actually more beneficial to the defense? Explain.

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**Chapters 37 – 38: Unrecoverable Testimony:** Brigance’s carefully-laid trial plans seem irretrievably lost in a deluge of special interests that are acting on their own agendas.

1. This section opens with a sniper shooting. Since the crimes, how many bystanders have been gravely wounded? Who is responsible?
2. How does Buckley unravel the testimony of Dr. W.T. Bass?
3. Describe Brigance’s measured countenance in relation to the Bass revelations.
4. What new revelation does Brigance find out during Saturday’s recess of defense testimony?
5. Is a trial by jury fair? Support your answer by using evidence from the book.
6. Do you think a juror will be paid off? Why or why not?
7. Research and describe the M’Naghten Rule. Based on what you now know about Carl Lee and his actions, does the rule apply to him? Use evidence from the book to support your answer.
8. Research expungement. If a criminal case is expunged, why was Buckley allowed to bring it up in court?
9. What goes up in flames at the end of this section? How is this symbolic of Brigance’s present state of mind?

**Chapter 39: Caught in a Landslide:** The catastrophic fire wrenches away the last bit of security Jake has known. In the wake of its destructive vengeance, Jake begins to seriously assess the wretchedness of his newly-found meager existence. Jake is comforted by a less than positive, yet loyal friend.

1. What do we find out about Roark's head injuries? What does this tell you about her?
2. How does Sheldon Roark encourage Brigance?
3. Since taking the Hailey case, Brigance has thrown up twice. Describe each of the circumstances. In this section, he cries. Describe the circumstances. Something ice cold and hard about Attorney Brigance is melting. What is it?
4. "Jake sipped his beer and searched for daylight through the windshield." This statement can be interpreted in more than one way. Explain.
5. Jake is at his lowest point ever. Why does he put up with Harry Rex?
6. How does Lucien Wilbanks come to Brigance's rescue?

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**Chapter 40: Finding the Flame and Digging Out:** Even in his darkest hour, Brigance persists. He plucks a loose thread and begins unraveling the fabric of the prosecution's testimony.

1. Brigance masterfully discredits the prosecution's psychiatrist. How?
2. Dr. Rodeheaver ultimately blows everything for himself. How?
3. With the trial over except for final statements, Jake avoids Harry Rex and goes where? Why?
4. Examine Brigance's closing argument. Questions to consider: How does he endear the jury to Dr. Bass and re-establish the relevance of the doctor's testimony? How does Brigance portray Buckley as a father figure? What part of Looney's testimony does he call to mind? He paints a mental image of the rape scene from the tormented and hallucinating perspective of Tonya. Does this help the insanity plea? Why?
5. Who is chosen as foreman of the jury?

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**Chapter 41: Post-trial Jitters:** Though the jury is sequestered at an unknown hotel in an unknown neighboring town, the meddling minds of special interests are still much too resourceful.

1. What offer does Jake decline? Is Jake ethical? Explain
2. What happens to Barry Acker?

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**Chapters 42 – 44: The Anatomy of a Verdict:** A sense of reason becomes manifest by a heretofore nondescript juror. Stray pieces of the plot are placed together.

1. Describe Rita Mae Plunk.
2. What part of the jurors' deliberations were not supposed to be discussed as a result of a sustained objection by Buckley during Brigance's closing argument?
3. Rita Mae Plunk and Musgrove make the exact same observation about the demonstrations outside the courthouse. Noose makes a highly similar observation. What does the slight variation in Noose's observation tell you about him?
4. Why is this jury not willing to deadlock?
5. Who is Mickey Mouse? What happens to him?
6. What is Wanda Womack's relationship to Mack Loyd Crowell?
7. Explain how Wanda Womack's proposal swayed the jury.

## • suggested activities

### Language Arts

1. Select a character and use evidence from the book to complete a character traits graphic organizer. (Dr. Janet Allen's "Fleshing Out a Character" organizer from her book, *Yellow Brick Roads*, Stenhouse, 2000, is an excellent example of an organizer.) Present full-length human silhouettes of the characters with their traits written on the silhouettes.
2. Keep a journal that lists examples of the themes in the novel: prejudice, racial violence, friendship, commitment, ideals, family values, father/daughter relationships, retribution, and justice. Select one theme and write an essay comparing the author's perspective to your own. Support both the author's perspective—using evidence from the book—and yours.
3. An internal conflict in this book is pride/arrogance vs. justice. Create a T chart for the internal conflict. Using evidence from the book, write an essay arguing which was more pervasive.
4. Grisham's knowledge of the legal system is obvious in this book. He also utilizes historic events to build relevance in the plot. Use [news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/1/newsid\\_2538000/2538169.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/1/newsid_2538000/2538169.stm) to read an account of a race riot in Oxford, Mississippi. Write an essay comparing that event with the race riot in *A Time to Kill*.
5. In the beginning of the novel, Grisham describes the details of the vehicles that Cobb and Brigance drive. In fact, the make/manufacture of a number of characters' vehicles are disclosed. Keep track of these vehicles (and who drives them). Write an essay about the character traits disclosed by each of the cars.
6. Write an essay comparing Brigance's closing statement in the book, *A Time to Kill* vs. his closing in the film adaptation.

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### Social Studies

1. Search reliable Internet sites, and look through current newspapers and magazines for examples of hate crimes occurring locally and around the world. Write a short summary of the issues involved, and provide a perspective as to whether or not they are being resolved. Use these summaries, clippings, and articles to create a scrapbook (or virtual scrapbook). Then, using examples from the scrapbook, summarize the project by providing a perspective on the present decline or proliferation of hate crimes.
2. With a partner, create a flow chart (virtual or otherwise) of a criminal court case based on the events in this book. At each juncture, provide a brief summary for the purpose of that step. Provide hand-rendered illustrations along with your summaries.
3. With a group, select one scene from the trial (preliminary hearings to the final verdict). Act out the scene.
4. In groups, define, illustrate, and use a set of legal terms (see below) in context. Each group should then make a presentation to the class. The groups can also act out their set of terms.

## • vocabulary (legal)

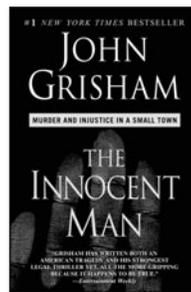
The following terms are used in Grisham's novel. Understanding these terms will help in understanding the criminal trial process:

acquit • arraignment • capital murder • civil case • circuit court • complaints • county court • criminal case • deliberation • disbarment • disciplinary committee • docket • empanel • expunge • grand jury • indictment • jurisprudence • larceny • litigants • Motion for Continuance • Motion In Limine • preliminary hearing • pre-trial motions • statute • stipulate • tribunal • venue

## • beyond the book

1. Use the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago mock trial website [www.crfc.org/lessons/mocktrial.php](http://www.crfc.org/lessons/mocktrial.php) to enhance students' understanding of the trial system. This site has a number of free (or for purchase) mock trials available.
2. Free juvenile case simulations are depicted at the Columbia Education Center [www.col-ed.org/cur/](http://www.col-ed.org/cur/). Example: shoplifting: [www.col-ed.org/cur/sst/sst164.txt](http://www.col-ed.org/cur/sst/sst164.txt).
3. Through prior arrangement with students, parents, law enforcement, and school administration, stage a mock arrest of a student group for an offense. Set up a mock courtroom (or utilize a real courtroom) to try the case. Use as many professionals as possible.
4. An alternative to an act out: Learn about the Judicial Branch of the American Government by following the Dred Scott v. Sanford case all the way to the Supreme Court decision of 1857: [edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=614](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=614).
5. Read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Compare the actions of both defense lawyers as they build their cases.
6. Compare the courtroom scenes of the movies *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Time to Kill*.
7. Go to the following website to understand the Mississippi Court System: [www.msbar.org/10\\_the\\_courts\\_judicial\\_system.php?spot=902&archive=26](http://www.msbar.org/10_the_courts_judicial_system.php?spot=902&archive=26).

## • other titles of interest



*Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody

*The Dreams of Ada: A True Story of Murder, Obsession, and a Small Town*, Robert Mayer

*The Innocent Man: Murder & Injustice in a Small Town*, John Grisham

*Lay that Trumpet in Our Hands*, Susan Carol McCarthy

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee

## • about this guide's writer

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Hansberry, Lorraine. **A Raisin in the Sun**  
Hayes, Daniel. **Eye of the Beholder**  
Hayes, Daniel. **The Trouble with Lemons**  
Homer. Fitzgerald, Robert, trans. **The Odyssey**  
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Kafka, Franz. **The Trial**  
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Mitchell, David. **Black Swan Green**  
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Otsuka, Julie. **When the Emperor Was Divine**  
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Remarque, Erich Maria. **All Quiet on the Western Front**  
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See, Lisa. **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan**  
Shaara, Jeff. **Gods and Generals**  
Shaara, Jeff. **The Last Full Measure**

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### Nonfiction:

Angelou, Maya. **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**  
Armstrong, Karen. **Islam**  
Baldwin, James. **Nobody Knows My Name**  
Baldwin, James. **The Fire Next Time**  
Bible. **The Five Books of Moses**  
Bryson, Bill. **Short History of Nearly Everything**  
Cahill, Tierney. **Ms. Cahill for Congress**  
Cary, Lorene. **Black Ice**  
Chen, Da. **Colors of the Mountain**  
Collins, Billy. **Poetry 180/180 More**  
Conway, Jill Ker. **The Road from Coorain**  
Dumas, Firoozeh. **Funny in Farsi**  
Farrow, Anne, et. al. **Complicity**  
Frank, Anne. **Diary of a Young Girl**  
Haley, Alex. **The Autobiography of Malcolm X**  
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