

The Brethren Short Guide

The Brethren by John Grisham

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Characters

The interesting thing about *The Brethren* is that none of the characters qualify as protagonists. The "brethren" of the title are obviously loathsome men. The three exjudges have their own habits, hobbies, and failings, but they are united in being unsympathetic criminals, greedy and uncaring for others. Their co-conspirator and lawyer, Trevor Carson, is equally despicable. He does not even have the level of dignity of the judges, being a small-time, small-town crook. The director of the CIA is no better.

Teddy Maynard is still working hard to serve his country even though he is in pain and confined to a wheelchair. He sees a great danger looming and wants to save the United States. However, he is also a power-happy manipulative tyrant with little regard for democracy or ordinary citizens' lives. Maynard is interesting as a Macchiavellian mastermind, but he is not a sympathetic character or a true protagonist.

He may believe that the end of saving his country justifies the means he employs to achieve that goal, but Grisham demonstrates the fallacy underlying Maynard's reasoning.

The moment Aaron Lake agrees to allow the CIA to manipulate the election for him, he also loses the reader's sympathy. He is not as powerful as the other main characters in the book in the sense that he is not initiating or guiding the action, but he is culpable of collaborating with Maynard.

Not only is Lake willing to let the CIA break numerous election laws, but he maintains complicitous silence even when he learns that Maynard is arranging heinous, murderous acts to help Lake's campaign.

There are some minor characters in the novel who are not immoral; however, they lack enough importance to count as full protagonists. It is also unusual that not only are there no protagonists, but the main antagonists all accomplish their goals: the bad guys win. Grisham's decision not to include any sympathetic heroes or heroines is an unusual move for a mainstream bestseller. Apparently, he wanted the readers to focus on what the antagonists' corruption represents in the scope of the book or in our society.



Social Concerns

At its heart, *The Brethren* is full of warnings for our society. The novel displays a frightening distrust of American officials and government. The three blackmailers are former judges of varying levels from different states, suggesting widespread corruption among our justice system officials. Not only are they all guilty of crimes to begin with, showing great fallibility in those most trusted to safeguard justice, but they have dedicated themselves to full-time crime in prison. While all were caught by the system, the sense conveyed is that they are not exceptional but typical, and any confidence the legal system regains by the fact that they were caught and convicted is lost when we see the innocent Buster in prison because of the poor judgment of a prosecutor and yet another judge.

The novel includes lawyers in its indictment of legal professionals with its portrayal of the immoral lawyer Trevor Carson. Grisham makes his characters seem very realistic, almost too much so. They have drinking and smoking addictions, marriage problems, gambling interests, exercise habits. Grisham appears intent on showing us that the legal system is full of individuals who are not above corruption and criminal activity.

Despite his indictment of the legal system, Grisham embeds the majority of his warnings in his second plot thread, pointing out the dangers of trusting the behind-the-scenes machinations of those in the intelligence community. First, he paints a frightening picture of how dangerous the most powerful people in government on the intelligence front charged with safeguarding the United States can be. The CIA director, Teddy Maynard, is willing to subvert the entire democratic election process, to sacrifice innocent lives and to break any law in order to launch his plan to protect the country against certain future military challenges he predicts. Regardless of whether the threats Maynard sees are real, there is little doubt that his work to save the United States threatens everything worth saving in the country.

As Grisham puts Maynard into action, he has Maynard winnow down all the possible U.S. officials to the cleanest, most honest one, Aaron Lake, and then shows that this clean-cut type who does not even eat sugar has a dark secret. Worse for the reader's faith in government than the revelation of Lake's secret sexual preference is that this rare, honest politician does not hesitate to participate in the plan to break every major election law and illegally manipulate the entire election process in order to become president. All politicians are simple to entrap, Maynard declares at one point, wishing his international enemies were so easy. In numerous ways, the novel casts doubt on government officials of every level, in all branches of government.

The method by which the CIA director pursues his election scheme proclaims Grisham's next social concern. Grisham highlights the importance of money in government elections, showing that elections can essentially be bought. First, money can be used to assemble and coordinate all the staff and equipment one needs to run and to pay for spectacular events, then Congressional endorsements can be purchased, and finally the all-important commercials and air time can be paid for. Grisham even shows, with



eerily convincing realism, how by backing an issue which would generate enormous government spending within a given industry, a candidate could garner the full financial support of all the companies within that industry for his or her campaign. Grisham's cynical reading of the election process coincides with the negative views in this novel of the judicial system and intelligence communities to create a vision of an entirely corrupt government.



Techniques

Grisham opens *The Brethren* with a false court presided over by the imprisoned judges and a character who performs the duties of a bailiff but thinks of himself as the "court jester." This mockery of justice neatly foreshadows the opinion Grisham offers in this novel of the real court system, showing that it and the rest of government are not what they are supposed to be. And yet, in prison, the three ex-judges appear to pass fair decisions and help keep the peace, so Grisham shows us the positive aspects of a justice system even at its lowest. This does not, however, redeem the ex-judges.

Two main story lines intersect in this novel. The first is the squalid tale of the exjudges running their blackmail scam, and the second is the election plot, tied into an epic tale of an impending third world war.

This thread seems like a classic spy thriller, except that it is only a sketch of a plot.

Grisham zooms in on the first storyline, the tale of the fallen judges in mimesis, full close-up mode with extensive dialogue and description, while offering the secondary plot in diegesis, or summary-style story telling with indirect dialogue and exposition. When the characters from the secondary plot, Lake and Maynard, intersect with the first plot, then they are given scenes full of detailed description as they happen, especially with Maynard's agents, but this mimesis is in context of the first storyline, the blackmailing scam, and the second story-line always remains in the background.

The point of view in *The Brethren* is thirdperson omniscient, as the view follows all the action from a neutral, removed perspective. Characters' thoughts are rarely given, at least not in depth, and yet the amount of descriptive detail given makes the characters appear very realistic. Grisham's use of detail is one of his most conspicuous traits.

The novel creates a believable sense of group life for the three judges through its use of concrete details. We see what they wear, what prison jobs they have, how much they get paid for those jobs, where they spend most of their time; we witness them ironing out the details of their scam, reviewing minor details, and drafting extortion letters. We see the good and bad habits of each, learn about their past and present marital statuses, and study their attitudes toward prison. The reality of minimum security life and the reality of the blackmailing ring are both depicted in fine clarity. As a matter of fact, we not only see the brethren running their scam in regards to the main victim, Lake, but we see numerous examples of how it plays out with lesser victims. And then we watch as the CIA exhaustively pieces together the scam bit by bit. This level of detail creates an aura of authenticity around the fiction. Readers may not have any protagonists to cheer for, but they do have fully-rendered situations to study.



Themes

By focusing on flawed characters, Grisham appears intent on commenting on the universal nature of corruption. In his novel, corruption certainly is present in all arms of the United States government. However, he also shows the unofficial prison court, run by unscrupulous men, ironically fulfilling a beneficial role in the prison. Without the ad-hoc court to decide disagreements, there would doubtless be more conflict and even violence in the minimum-security prison. Therefore, Grisham shows some faith in the idea of justice and a court system even while repeatedly reinforcing the theme that all humans are flawed and subject to moral and ethical failings.

Accompanying the theme of corruption is that of greed, for it is greed which drives the brethren in their illicit behavior. It is even greed, greed for power, which leads the congressman Lake to fall. Only the CIA director's corruption is not related to greed; his fall appears more related to the old maxim that power corrupts.

With the actions of the CIA director, Grisham explores the question of when the ends justify the means. If a government leader believes his country to be in peril, does that justify any action on his part in its defense? If so, what exactly is he defending? What defines a "country"? These are some of the philosophical questions Grisham explores. After building a compelling motivational case to justify drastic action, Grisham does a masterful job of arguing through the text that the ends do not justify the means.

Key Questions

In many ways, Grisham's novel emphasizes milieu and theme over character and plot. Using thorough description, Grisham carefully paints a world inside a prison where a small group of men are doing something abhorrent. Readers gain a strong feel for the fictional workings of this prison scam as well as other aspects of the prison and justice system. Carefully intertwined with this environment is a secondary plot concentrating on theories about the function of our government and our election system. Thus, Grisham highlights many topics of importance in our society today.

1. In the CIA subplot, Teddy Maynard is willing to break laws and sacrifice individuals for the good of the nation. Does the fact that, unlike the other characters, he is not breaking laws for his own benefit justify his actions to any degree?

2. Does the lack of female characters affect your involvement in the novel?

3. What are the advantages to not including any protagonists?

4. Does reading a novel which weaves such a realistic web of details around its characters affect how you view similar real life figures such as judges and politicians at all?

5. Much of the body of the novel is dialogue. Does the dialogue sound realistic to you? What criteria can you use to tell if dialogue between character types you may never have met such as judges or CIA directors is in fact realistic?

What effect does this have on your perception of the novel?

6. When Grisham makes money the key to any election, it implies a pervasive negative influence. How important is money in your life? Do people you know who have more money seem to have an advantage in many different areas?

Literary Precedents

Tom Clancy novels are obvious contemporary models for the world military/political intrigue plot in *The Brethren*. This subplot is also reminiscent of older spy thrillers such as the classic La Carre novels.

The view of society as corrupt has roots in hard-boiled detective novels such as Raymond Chandler's, Dashiell Hammett's, or Ross MacDonald's.

Related Titles

After rising to fame with adventure/ chase novels in *The Firm* and *The Pelican Brief*, John Grisham has been experimenting with different narrative forms within the legal fiction subgenre. He is a legal expert, and his novels go into great detail on aspects of the legal profession such as ambulance chasing, jury deliberation, and inheritance law in *The Rainmaker*, *The Runaway Jury*, and *The Testament*, respectively. In *The Chamber*, Grisham focuses on the death penalty and its execution. With *The Brethren*, Grisham continues to focus on the legal system by having his main antagonists be ex-judges in prison, partnered with a crooked lawyer. However, Grisham continues to attempt to develop his range in this novel, not only staying far from any real courtroom action but including a full-fledged spy plot for the first time.

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