The Rainmaker Short Guide

The Rainmaker by John Grisham

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Characters

Rudy Baylor could become, in the hands of another author, a schlimazel, an inevitable victim of bad luck. Or he could be an example of late 1800s naturalism, in which all manner of disaster strikes a poor fellow who is powerless to change his destiny. Rudy goes beyond both character types because he is resilient, good-humored, smart, and still capable of idealism. He possesses an unflashy intelligence: He passes the bar exam when many others fail, and he thinks on his feet well during the trial. To survive, he does what he has to do with at least a small measure of dignity: He grubs for jobs at established firms, he works in the cash-payment underground economy of a college bar to keep his meager earnings safe from creditors, and he even steels himself to chase ambulances with Deck. Finally, in a society in which money matters, Rudy ironically develops a greater sense of caring through his experience with the Blacks. He is thoughtful about his situation and honest about the juggling of ethical standards that he performs — such self-awareness puts readers on his side.

Typical of Grisham's heroes, Rudy is bereft of family, with a dead father (who hated lawyers) and an estranged mother — the same situation as Mitch McDeere. Grisham places his characters as solitary individuals who have no one to rely upon but themselves.

Grisham populates Rudy's quest for job security with a striking assortment of characters, especially the lawyers.

Judge Kipler does not hide his appealingly acerbic attitude toward lawyers.

Rudy's courtroom adversary representing Great Benefit, Leo F. Drummond, is both a leading attorney in his community and, clearly, a corrupt one, as he taps Rudy's telephone. Behind his mask of respectability lies a person potentially as vile as his clients. Grisham allows mystery to hover over J. Lyman "Bruiser" Stone, who is both a ferocious litigator who presides over the firm of ambulance chasers, and a criminal who fears a police investigation.

The most fully developed supporting player is Deck Shifflet. Unable to pass the bar, he terms himself a "paralawyer" and chases cases on Bruiser Stone's behalf. A divorced compulsive gambler with a nervous tic and a generally unhealthy appearance, Deck operates on the grimy fringes of the legal profession and seems willing to dabble in Stone's illegal activities. His friendship with Rudy attests to Rudy's tolerance and gregariousness. Rudy and the Black case could give Deck a financial windfall and the accompanying respectability; his pathetic career consists of attempts to latch onto a real lawyer so that he can share in the wealth and glory of a big case. The women in the book remain cliches: Miss Birdie is the lonely old widow, and Kelly is the abused wife who will not turn her husband over to the police. Grisham's excuse for not developing them (readers should admit that except for Reggie Love in The Client, Grisham does not produce nuanced female characters) could be that for Rudy they fill archetypal roles. He becomes Miss Birdie's surrogate son, helping her with chores, living at her

home, and he becomes Kelly's knight and protector, a function that gets him into a violent confrontation at the novel's closing. Originally without family, Rudy gains a mother in Miss Birdie, then leaves her for a mate in Kelly, thereby "growing up" through the course of the novel.

Social Concerns

John Grisham openly disdains insurance companies. One of the many reasons that Jake Brigance in A Time to Kill (1989) hates the Sullivan firm is their association with the insurance industry: "Their clients were insurance companies who generally preferred not to go to trial and would pay by the hour for legal maneuvering designed solely to keep the cases away from juries. It would be cheaper and fairer to pay a reasonable settlement and avoid both litigation and the parasitic defense firms like Sullivan & O'Hare, but the insurance companies and their adjusters were too stupid and cheap . . ." Grisham speaking as himself is equally unkind to the industry. He describes The Rainmaker to a reporter from his new hometown paper, the Charlottesville Daily Progress (April 14, 1995), as "a frontal assault on the insurance industry. I sued them for 10 years so I don't have any affection for them." As The Chamber a year earlier asks readers to ponder anew the practice and implications of the death penalty, The Rainmaker strives to make readers much more suspicious of insurance companies. One can imagine readers thinking, "My company wouldn't treat me this way, would they?" Yet Grisham does more than muckrake an industry that in the 1990s may be an easy target. The industry corruption that the book discloses points to a stronger, more pervasive web of evil.

Grisham offers a downbeat, hardboiled view of society, in which bad coincidences happen all the time, in which the villains have a surfeit of resources, and in which successes by the good guys prove to be fleeting.

The Rainmaker covers an April-January period in which Rudy Baylor graduates from the Memphis State University law school, begins a law career after several false starts, and tries a major law suit against the Great Benefit Insurance Company. Dot and Buddy Black, whom Rudy meets on a law class visit to a senior center, had purchased medical insurance from a doorto-door salesman but could not get the company to pay for a bone marrow transplant when one of their twin sons contracted leukemia. Now their son is dying. Great Benefit's letters denying the claim are condescending and insensitive, culminating in one that reads, "We now deny it for the eighth and final time. You must be stupid, stupid, stupid!" Appalled by their story and by the letter, Rudy suspects a lawsuit could win a strong judgment against the company. Gradually, he comes to want justice for the Blacks through arguing the suit, but a primary motivation throughout is to become a "rainmaker," a bringer of wealth, by earning a huge verdict against this nefarious company. Traditionally, the winning lawyer gets a third of the settlement for himself and his firm.

But before he can take the Blacks's case to court, Rudy has to get a job.

Grisham gives a sobering lesson in the economic truth that few students interested in a law career want to face: There are too many lawyers for the market, so some law school graduates will not get jobs. Further, young lawyers face grave insecurities in whether they can pass the state bar exam (which many bright graduates fail), whether they can obtain and hold onto a position in a firm, whether they can get clients and build a

practice. For undergraduates considering law school because they think the practice of law is exciting or lucrative, Grisham offers a depressing corrective. Rudy, without family financial support, faces so many debts after a series of reversals that he has to declare personal bankruptcy.

The firm that hired him gets absorbed by a larger one that turns out all the recent and new hires before he even gets to work. (White collar unemployment caused by takeovers or by downsizing is a typical 1990s problem.)

Rudy cannot find another position except in a loosely-structured firm headed by a probable criminal in which the lawyers literally chase ambulances for clients. Rudy starts at the rock bottom of the Memphis legal culture.

The Rainmaker presents a gritty journey through the strata of Southern urban society. Rudy encounters the poor, the patrician, and the criminal underclass. Rudy eventually gains access to the office suites of Memphis' leading firms and visits the Black family's ramshackle house. Grisham populates the novel with a number of fringe characters, such as poor whites, neglected old folks, and the shady owner of a college bar who more than dabbles in crime.

As Rudy seeks a job, eventually sets up his own firm, and tries the Blacks's case, Grisham explains how the legal system works. The term "ambulance chaser" has become a cliched insult; Grisham fleshes out the term to show how lawyers learn about accidents and descend upon the victims to procure clients. (Grisham includes a short scene about such behavior in The Client, 1993.) He explains what lawyers look for when they hang out in hospital cafeterias. When Rudy establishes a one-man (plus assistant, or "paralawyer") firm, Grisham describes how he must take tedious collection cases from a friend's firm and get his name on lists for court-appointed cases just so he will have a trickle of income.

Whatever his fantasy may be, potential clients do not visit just because Rudy (or anyone) rents an office and hangs out a sign. For any new lawyer, building a client base is a precarious, frustrating activity. Rudy is on the opposite end of the spectrum from Mitch in The Firm (1991), who as an associate for a large firm gets assigned to clients' cases. But eventually, even associates in the big firms will have to build a reputation and bring in their own clients, or they will not become partners.

As Rudy takes the Blacks's case to court, Grisham teaches readers how lawyers plan for and analyze a trial.

Grisham lingers over why a cross-ex amination is effective or not, why Rudy decides not to go after a particular witness, how to arrange the documentary evidence in a dramatic sequence that will impress the jury. All this inside information adds authenticity and interest to Grisham's work.

Rudy's research of Great Benefit reveals a grand scheme in which the company planned simply not to pay claims and thus harvest a greater profit. To protect itself in the lawsuit, the company alters documents, dismisses workers involved in the Blacks's

case, and stonewalls in court. Their lawyers, from the same firm that bought out Rudy's original employer, resort to bugging Rudy's phone to get information on his strategy. The crude denial of the Blacks's claims only hints at a much vaster, more encompassing evil.

Grisham is not subtle in his version of the company's malevolence.

Thus Grisham sets up the classic confrontation of a young, honest, little man against a powerful evil force.

Rudy does well in court due to a combination of factors. First, he is lucky, mainly in getting a friendly, liberal judge who clearly despises Rudy's adversaries. (Judge Tyrone Kipler recalls Judge Harry Roosevelt from The Client.) Next, Rudy gets help from other lawyers spread around the country who have cases against Great Benefit or are friendly to his side. From them, he amasses a treasure of incriminating documents that he could never have obtained himself. Third, Rudy is resourceful, similar to all Grisham's heroes. After learning of the phone tap, he keeps it attached and feeds disinformation to his opponents; a sequence in which he pretends over the phone to have tampered with the jury leads to a very funny courtroom confrontation which actually gives him the most advantageous jury he could have wanted. And similar to Jake Brigance, Rudy shines on the cross-examination of witnesses and the juggling of exhibits.

Fortune and hard work together yield an impressive outcome for the case.

But the huge jury verdict in the Blacks's favor will never be paid because Great Benefit's parent company looted its assets and sent the money to secure foreign banks. So the novel's victory of David over Goliath proves ephemeral: The Blacks and people like them will never receive redress for their denied claims, and Rudy will never get the payoff to rescue his ailing firm. The evil that is out there is just too strong. The happy coincidences in which a new judge got the case and in which Rudy found important documents seem to be teases, as if fate deliberately took Rudy to the brink of success only to snatch him back.

Early criticism of The Rainmaker accuses Grisham of writing a grand wish-fulfillment in which Rudy beats the bad guys and wins the girl, a young woman he rescues from an abusive marriage (see for example the review by Malcolm Jones Jr. in Newsweek [May 8, 1995]). Yet the toughness of the novel lies in its implication that defeating one evil exposes a vaster one.

The financial forces behind Great Benefit will not allow themselves to be caught. The subplot about Rudy's girlfriend, Kelly Riker, makes a parallel point that an apparent solution is often not so. Rudy gets her away from her husband, but the husband soon confronts them and forces a violent and fatal altercation.

In a society in which evil empires such as Great Benefit reign seemingly unchecked, those who suffer most are the little people, such as the Blacks.

Unsophisticated folk, they bought the policy in unthinking trust of a traveling salesman and in the naive belief that letters of complaint would get decent responses. Instead, they get the "Stupid" letter. Most such people sadly resign themselves to being denied.

Rudy learns that well under ten percent of them ever see a lawyer. Testimony reveals that the company paid claims only if customers got lawyers involved early on; Dot Black realizes that had she sought legal help earlier, maybe she could have saved her son's life. The novel exposes the divisions between the haves and the have-nots and how the have-nots become prey for the acquisitive haves.

Grisham presents a subplot about Miss Birdie Birdsong, a lonely older woman who gets attention from her family by pretending to be wealthy from her second marriage. She can only be important if she seems to be a have.

Otherwise, no one really cares about the have-nots except eccentrics and fringe figures, a type represented by two liberal law school professors who teach filler classes that few students care about. Rudy met the Blacks through his class, Legal Problems of the Elderly, known as Geezer Law, a boring elective almost no one takes.

The professor wants to expose students to real clients with real legal needs, but no students really care, excepting maybe Rudy, who sees the Blacks's case as a potential golden goose.

As the case progresses, so do Rudy's sensitivities. Initially spooked at the prospect of seeing the Blacks's physically wasted son Donny Ray, Rudy eventually becomes good friends with him. When Great Benefit offers a small settlement, but one big enough to give Rudy a good financial cushion when he takes his one-third share, he counsels the Blacks against taking it. He realizes the moral implications of the question and decides that settling would be selling out his clients. After Donny Ray dies, Rudy and Dot unite in a crusade to expose and punish the malevolence of Great Benefit by taking them to trial.

The arc of the novel follows Rudy's development from callow law student to true advocate.

Techniques

For the first time, Grisham uses a first person narrator, who tells his story in the present tense. In his best work, notably A Time to Kill and The Chamber (1994), Grisham had developed a satiric, emotionally flat, even sarcastic narrative voice. He changes style here to convey Rudy's personality.

Rudy's voice is less ironic, less flashy.

Rudy opens up about his feelings, speaks plainly, uses short sentences.

He can be plaintive and honest about his efforts to be ethical, about his bad luck, and about the state of lawyering in Memphis. In the same revealing passage when he muses about his old roommate, Rudy thinks, "I started law school less than three years ago with typical noble aspirations of one day using my license to better society in some small way, to engage in an honorable profession governed by ethical canons I thought all lawyers would strive to uphold. I really believed this . . . Now, I'm depressed by the truth . . . I've been reduced to a poacher in hospital cafeterias, for a thousand bucks a month." As the passage indicates, he tells the story as if he is talking to you, in an informal, frank manner. The book's humor comes from his self-deprecating comments; he is never too depressed that he cannot find droll amusement in his experience. He explains about a liberal law professor, "He refuses to insure his life, health or assets, but rumor has it his family is wealthy and thus he can afford to venture about uninsured. I, on the other hand, for obvious reasons, live in the world of the uninsured." The novel's opening line is equally funny, but in the same odd and self-belittling way: "My decision to become a lawyer was irrevocably sealed when I realized my father hated the legal profession." With Rudy as narrator, Grisham changes from his arch style to offer a warmer, less self-assured approach to the material.

As is a staple of his books and the legal genre, Grisham takes readers through the arcane details of a trial. As Rudy tells how the proceedings work, he analyzes as he goes, inserting his reactions into scenes, explaining why he did something just after describing his doing it. Especially in describing the questioning of witnesses, Grisham's usual skills at dialog are evident.

Grisham does not streamline the plot; instead it goes on tangents and includes a few red herrings, such as the fire at Jonathan Lake's building and Miss Birdie's putative fortune. One result of this loose plotting is that Grisham can present a full social picture, from top to bottom, of Memphis society. The tangents do connect, lightly, to the main story: The Miss Birdie plot concerns money and greed, and the sequence involving Lake's firm debunks Rudy's naive views of lawyers.

Themes

Rudy's adventures in the legal world of Memphis inevitably bring him to ethical questions. In court during the trial, Rudy is an ethical paragon, but he is less morally secure during the ambulance chasing episodes. In A Time to Kill, Jake Brigance debates what actions he can ethically take to get Carl Lee back as a client, and decides that he has to cross the ethical boundaries.

Grisham bestows similar quandaries on Rudy. Rudy uses the prospective lawsuit for the Blacks as a lure to get firms to employ him, and then he plots when he will pounce on the Blacks with papers to sign so that he can take on their suit. Although aware that he operates in a gray area with the Blacks, he recoils from the methods of Deck Shifflet, who barges into the hospital rooms of the newly injured to hawk his legal services. Deck figures that if he did not invade the sick room, some other lawyer surely would, so Deck might as well have the business as anyone. He summarizes his standards as, "I mean, I believe a lawyer should fight for his client, refrain from stealing money, try not to lie, you know, the basics." Yet he speaks of clients in terms of their monetary value, bemoaning that his firm once lost a client who eventually won a two million dollar settlement. The accident victims he visits surely need help, as do the Blacks. Yet Grisham suggests that lawyers fight for their needful clients chiefly in the hope of monetary reward.

Whether earning these financial rewards will bring personal success is yet another question. Rudy is open in his admission that behind much of the nobility of which law students speak is the desire for "big money and success on a high level." A local model of lawyerly success is Jonathan Lake, who as a new attorney took on the case of a burned biker injured when struck by a wealthy drunk driver. Lake won a huge settlement, quenching both his moral and his financial thirsts. Rudy envies such success (and almost gets it with the Blacks's case). He thinks of his best friend from the undergraduate days, who is now happy despite his modest salary because he likes teaching school. Rudy considers, "Craig's job is immensely rewarding because he's affecting young minds. He can envision the results of his labors. I, on the other hand, will go to the office tomorrow in hopes that by hook or crook I'll seize some unsuspecting client wallowing in some degree of misery." The theme that the drive for money leads to unhappiness is hardly new; what freshens it here is Grisham's focus on a character who has chosen his career path rather naively, who wants to be idealistic, but who really needs to make money. The charge that lawyers can be greedy is hardly new; what freshens it here is Grisham's probing of how the quests for clients, jobs, and courtroom victories necessitate considerable greed.

Adaptations

Actor Michael Beck, who also reads A Time to Kill and The Chamber, reads an abridged version of The Rainmaker on the Bantam audio cassette.

In spring 1995, several reports surfaced that Hollywood executives had reacted negatively to a bootlegged copy of a prepublication version of The Rainmaker manuscript. Grisham's agents then declined to offer the book's film rights for sale. The #1 best seller status of the novel during summer 1995 surely enhances the book's value for when Grisham decides to entertain offers from Hollywood.

Key Questions

By the later 1990s, Grisham's reputation precedes him, and readers have expectations when they pick up a Grisham novel whether they have read him before or not. A good starting point for discussion is how The Rainmaker fits or frustrates those expectations.

Several contexts can enhance discussion of the novel. Readers could state their opinions of lawyers, their sense of why so many college students want to attend law school, what they have learned about the law from friends and relatives who may be attorneys. As the novel broaches the issue of what it takes to be a lawyer, readers could debate that question as well. As a very popular novel that bucks a current conservative political trend, The Rainmaker can spark a lively debate about lawsuit reform measures, congressional efforts to limit big jury awards, and mid-1990s attempts to ease regulations on businesses. Literature as social criticism provides another potential context for the novel, especially given Grisham's avowed early affection for John Steinbeck. Is Grisham writing in the tradition of Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, and Frank Norris? Finally, asking for reactions to the protagonist is a staple question in discussing Grisham.

Rudy, similar to Mitch and Jake, displays traits that will both impress and possibly repel readers.

1. How does reading this novel make you feel about the insurance industry?

Do you think that Grisham presents Great Benefit as an aberration or as a typical example? How does reading the novel make you feel about civil lawsuits, especially about big awards from juries? How does reading the novel make you feel about the 1995 congressional efforts to limit awards in civil suits?

2. What role does greed play in a lawsuit? For the plaintiffs? For the plaintiff's attorney? How does Grisham make you feel about the contingency fee system in which lawyers usually take one-third of the settlement or jury award?

3. What sort of vision of the world does Grisham offer in this novel? Is it depressing? Is it optimistic? What do you make of the coincidences, both good and bad? What do you make of the ultimate failure of the courts to bring Great Benefit to justice?

4. What is Rudy's hierarchy of priorities, and how does it change (or even, does it change) through the novel? The same question can be asked of Mitch McDeere and Jake Brigance. How is Rudy like and unlike these earlier Grisham characters?

5. Why do so many people want to go to law school? Why did Rudy go?

How typical is Rudy compared to relatives or friends of yours who are interested in law school or who became lawyers? What personal qualities are necessary to be a successful lawyer?

6. How different is Rudy's early relationship with the Blacks from the tactics of Deck Shifflet in the hospital, especially with Dan Van Landel?

(There are key differences, so this question can highlight what sets Rudy apart from a street-level ambulance chaser but also how he shares a number of traits with Deck.)

7. Why is it so difficult for the Blacks to win redress? Other lawyers who learn of the case may agree that it has potential, but they lack Rudy's enthusiasm. Why? Except for the death of the original judge, the case almost gets dismissed from court. Why?

8. Why does Grisham allow the plot to go on several tangents, such as episodes with Miss Birdie, the fire at the Lake law firm, and Kelly Riker? What do these elements add to the book's overall impact? Why does he end the book, after the courtroom climax, with a second, violent climax involving Kelly?

9. What is gained by having Rudy tell his own story?

10. Taking together Rudy's handling of the Blacks's lawsuit and Kelly's crisis with her husband, how do you evaluate Rudy's ethics?

11. How do the subplots, such as the fire at Jonathan Lake's building and Miss Birdie's putative fortune, relate to the main story of the Blacks's lawsuit.

Do these subplots enhance or disrupt the flow of the novel?

Literary Precedents

Scott Turow and other contemporary lawyer-authors always serve as fruitful comparison-contrasts with Grisham.

Previous to The Rainmaker, the most well-known novel about a civil lawsuit is The Verdict by Barry Reed (1980), source for the celebrated 1982 film written by David Mamet and starring Paul Newman. Reed, a member of the Massachusetts bar, had co-authored two nonfiction studies of medicine and the law and focuses his novel on a medical malpractice suit. Reed's main character is older and more jaded than Rudy Baylor, yet both books describe how the lawyers react emotionally to complex cases in which they face wellfinanced, powerful adversaries. Jonathan Harr's A Civil Action (1995), about a Massachusetts lawyer's suit on behalf of leukemia victims against a company accused of spewing dangerous pollution, offers a real-life contemporary case to contrast to Grisham's novel.

In his profile in People Weekly (March 16, 1992), Grisham professed a high school enthusiasm for reading John Steinbeck, an enthusiasm that may provide a source for the spirit of The Rainmaker. The social criticism and the focus on the status of the have-nots that dominate Grisham's novel are two hallmarks of Steinbeck's most famous works. His In Dubious Battle (1936) exposes the sorry working conditions of California fruit pickers, and his The Grapes of Wrath (1939) dramatizes an Oklahoma family's tragic experiences after the double crises of the Depression and the Dust Bowl. Several works from the turn of the century employ the same themes. Upton Sinclair's The Jungle (1906) attacks both the horridly unsafe methods with which the meat processing industry prepared its goods and the inhumane ways the industry treated its largely immigrant workers.

Frank Norris writes of the abuses of the railroad trust in The Octopus (1901) and of the wheat traders in The Pit (1903). Similar to The Rainmaker, these novels unsubtly ridicule major American businesses in hopes of stirring greater public awareness and center their narratives on how the little people become victims of these businesses.

If early twentieth-century muckraking seems an unexpected yet appropriate context in which to see The Rainmaker, then these connections show how Grisham stretches the genre of the legal thriller.

Related Titles

The Chamber and The Rainmaker are daring entries in Grisham's canon for two reasons. First, neither exactly fits the thriller genre; thus they both test whether Grisham's legions of fans will continue to buy his books when he goes in new directions. The huge bestseller status of both (and of A Time to Kill when it was re-issued) demonstrate that Grisham's popularity extends well beyond his reputation as a good suspense writer. Second, in the conservative 1990s, Grisham takes politically liberal stands that many readers will not endorse. Most Americans support capital punishment, yet Grisham ridicules the legal machinations that surround the death penalty in The Chamber. The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a growing pro-businesses atmosphere, leading to efforts in Congress to scale back the regulations imposed in previous decades; in 1995 Congress hotly debated a bill to limit awards in civil lawsuits. The spirit of The Rainmaker diverges dramatically from this trend.

The Rainmaker affords the opportunity to define the key traits of Grisham's protagonists and of his style.

First, regarding his main characters, they tend to be in their mid-twenties, just out of law school, still idealistic and respectful of the profession. Rudy Baylor, Mitch McDeere of The Firm, and Adam Hall of The Chamber fit the type, while Darby Shaw of The Pelican Brief (1992) is a third-year law student. Even Jake Brigance and Reggie Love are young or in fifty-two-year old Reggie's instance, "recent" lawyers. Second, the novels usually concern defining moments in the characters' careers in which they decide their futures: Jake sees a chance at being the major lawyer in his county, Adam changes his career track by taking on a new specialty, and Rudy weighs whether he can survive financially and ethically as a lawyer.

Third, these characters are independent and self-sufficient (even if they have spouses). They have no financial resources and must rely on hard work and persistence to succeed. (Darby, who has an inheritance, is the exception.) Their parents are either unmentioned (Jake), dead, or estranged.

Mitch, Adam, and Rudy all have dead fathers and emotionally distant mothers. (Grisham's proclivity for dead or absent fathers — Darby and Mark Sway also fit the type — is somewhat disturbing and psychologically suggestive.) Fourth, as characters in thrillers, Mitch, Darby, Reggie, and to an extent Rudy confront powerful conspiracies.

In each novel, one battle against the evil forces may be won, but the ending does not give absolute assurance that the evil is defeated. Fifth, at the endings of the thrillers, the characters feel the need for long-term protection.

Grisham does open himself to the charge that his endings are repetitive letdowns: The three thrillers conclude with flights to hoped-for safe havens, and Rudy likewise flees in both fear and disgust at the conclusion of The Rainmaker. (That A Time to Kill only

loosely fits these common traits of the other novels attests to the originality of Grisham's first book.)

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