



One Great Book: Volume II, Episode 2 *The Pelican Brief* by John Grisham

[Show Notes](#)

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One Great Book Volume II, Book 2: *The Pelican Brief*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

Once upon a time in Southaven Mississippi, a young lawyer witnessed a trial. The trial inspired him to write a book. It was a good book, but it didn't sell. He wrote another book, which nobody wanted to buy, because his first book didn't sell, but despite this, he was finally able to get it published. That book was *The Firm*, and it changed John Grisham's life. Incidentally, it changed my husband's life, as well, and I'm so grateful. *The Firm* was the book that made Will fall in love with reading, finally, when he was seventeen years old, because NOBODY writes a breathless legal thriller like Grisham. Because of *The Firm's* huge success, Grisham was hired to write *The Pelican Brief*, my favorite Grisham novel, and one that's overlooked these days—but I *have* to tell you about it because it is One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

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John Grisham says that for his family, *The Firm* changed everything. And it's no wonder, *The Firm* went on to sell 7 million copies. And a key reason why is because of a chance conversation.

While he was on early book tour for *The Firm*, a publishing exec mentioned offhandedly to Grisham that "you know, the big guys come out every year." He meant Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Michael Crichton—they all write a book every year. Grisham says, heard that message loud and clear. He was starting to like this writing thing, and wanted to keep at it. He was halfway through *The Pelican Brief* at the time, but he says after that conversation, he went home, locked himself away for sixty days, and finished the thing. Because a new year was coming, and he needed a new book.

The action in this book begins with headline news, a tragedy that's also a mystery. Two supreme court justices are assassinated on the same night. It's clearly not a coincidence; these crimes were purposeful, but what purpose? Whose purpose? And why these two justices?



[3:28]

No one can figure it out.

Rosenberg is old, eccentric, liberal. He's 91; he's wanted to retire for fifteen years and the only thing he's been waiting for is a Democrat in the White House. Jensen is a moderate "with an occasional leftward impulse," who was nominated by a Republican. They don't typically vote together.

Meanwhile, in New Orleans...

Darby Shaw is a Tulane law student, number 2 in her class and within striking distance of number 1, the kind of girl "that every boy fell in love with at least twice in high school. And maybe at least once in law school." Early one October morning, she flicks on the news in the French Quarter, aghast at what she sees. She shakes her law professor boyfriend—that is *secret* law professor boyfriend—awake, to tell him his hero, Justice Rosenberg, has been murdered.

But why Rosenberg and Jensen, together?, they wonder, as they watch the news. "Why not McDowell or Young, both of whom are consistently more liberal than Jensen? It doesn't make sense."

Darby is just a law student, but her instincts are solid, even that first morning, and as a reader, you're desperate to listen in as she shares her theory. She knows why, the big picture version, if not the details: "Someone or some group wants a different Court, one with an absolute conservative majority. The election is next year, a Democrat could be elected President. Why take a chance? "Kill them now, a year before the election," Darby says, "Makes perfect sense, if one was so inclined."

[MUSIC]



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Darby has a curious mind, so pretty soon she's blowing off her classes, searching for a suspect. Somewhere out there, there's a case or an issue on its way to the Supreme Court, and someone wants a different court. Darby sets out to find it.

At the end of five days of digging, she writes a brief, a mere thirteen pages that will change—perhaps ruin—multiple lives. It details a 7-year-old lawsuit in Louisiana, still in the lower courts, about an oil company that wants to drill, but if they do they're certain to harm the state's endangered brown pelican. There are billions at stake. And Darby posits that if Rosenberg and Jensen are removed from the court, Big Oil will win.

Darby writes the brief, then decides her theory is way too far-fetched, and trashes it. She doesn't want anybody to see it. But her boyfriend fishes it out of the trash, finds it intriguing—especially because the brief shines a spotlight on someone the President knows—and sends it to his old law school buddy, now special director to the FBI in DC.

And that is when all hell breaks loose.

The next thing she knows, Darby witnesses a murder in the French Quarter. It's clear as day this killing was intended for *her*, because of the pelican brief, and she runs for her life. In this cat and mouse game, Darby's the mouse, and the cat is ruthless, powerful, and well-financed. Whoever these guys are, they've already killed two justices, two civilians, and they have billions of dollars they're happy to use to take her out, next.

Darby would very much like to see her 25th birthday, so she tries to disappear. But she also wants to nail the bad guys. She can't nab the criminals herself, and she can't get the feds to believe her, so she does the only thing she can think of, something that blew my mind when I first read this book in 1993. Darby calls up Gray Grantham, an investigative journalist with the *Washington Post*, and promises him the story of a lifetime—if he can help her prove her case. The rest of the book focuses on their quest to nab the bad guys through good journalism. And as a reader you will be rooting *hard* for good to triumph, even though you can see it's a long-shot.



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I've yet to see a critical "best of John Grisham" list that names his third book as his best; that spot usually goes to *A Time to Kill*, or *The Partner*, or *The Client*. [Spoken as side note: All those titles remind me of the hilarious B. J. Novak story *The Something*, in which John Grisham wakes up to discover his new novel has been published with his placeholder title *The Something* instead of a real one. You have to find it and read it.]

But *The Pelican Brief* is my favorite, and now is a great time to dive in because it has all the makings of a juicy summer read: it's a heck of a page turner, a political thriller-turned-blockbuster action movie. It's not a *new* book, but stories about seeking justice in the face of political corruption and cover-ups will never get old.

In short, if you like the sound of a political thriller set in the atmospheric locations of New Orleans and D.C., featuring not just men in navy suits but a whip-smart heroine trying to save her skin by breaking the investigative story of a lifetime, and a story in which justice is served not by men wielding guns but by reporters writing words for the masses to read, *The Pelican Brief* may be the next great book you're looking for.

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I'd love to hear what you think about *The Pelican Brief* on Twitter or Instagram @AnneBogel that's Anne with an E, B as in books, O-G-E-L. You can also find me on Instagram @WhatShouldIReadNext.

Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.