Camino Island: A Novel

by [John Grisham](https://www.amazon.com/John-Grisham/e/B000AQ40M8/ref=dp_byline_cont_ebooks_1)

Mercer Mann, a young novelist struggling to come up with an idea for her next book, is recruited by a shadowy company to locate five priceless F. Scott Fitzgerald manuscripts that have been stolen from the Firestone Library at Princeton. In John Grisham’s latest thriller, the inspiration-starved Mercer spends a lot of time moaning about her lack of juicy subject matter, even as she runs down clues to the Fitzgerald theft and befriends a cunning rare-book dealer she suspects may be the crime’s mastermind. About midway through, you may feel like tapping Grisham’s heroine on the shoulder: “What do you mean, you can’t think of a plot? Look around you! You’re living in a dandy one!”

The veteran suspense novelist is off on a happy lark with “Camino Island,” a resort-town tale that reads as if Grisham is taking a vacation from writing John Grisham novels. Instead of hurtling readers down the dark corridors of the courthouses that dot his 20-plus legal thrillers, here he gently ushers us onto an island off the coast of Florida, a sleepy place whose town’s social life is enlivened by a busy independent bookstore run by a garrulous peacock who has a different-colored seersucker suit for every day of the week.

At Bay Books, Bruce Cable presides over book signings with authors on tour and regular dinners with local writers. But since his real money comes from trading in rare first editions, this makes him a suspect as a possible fence for the Fitzgerald manuscripts, the clever theft of which gets “Camino Island” off to its suspenseful start. Law enforcement goes after the thieves, but so does a mysterious private company that specializes in “security and investigations.” Enter Mercer Mann and her thwarted second novel. A representative from the unnamed company taps her to get close to Bruce. Why does she agree? The company will write off her college-loan debt as well as hand her a hefty paycheck. (As with so many thriller plots, it’s best not to get bogged down in the plausibility of this setup.)

Grisham is crafty in his construction. “Camino” begins with the theft, and the quick, precise portraits of the perpetrators lead you to assume this is going to be a caper novel. Then the focus switches to Mercer, and you start wondering how this innocent with writer’s block is going to connect to the criminals. Cable, the colorful bookseller, is the glue that holds Grisham’s plotting together. He’s also a way for Grisham to have more fun than usual. “Camino Island” contains leisurely passages in which Cable gasses on entertainingly about collecting first editions by writers ranging from Virginia Woolf to J. D. Salinger to John D. MacDonald. Sometimes, though, Grisham gets a bit too relaxed, letting his dialogue become both simplistic and florid, as when Mercer, pondering Woolf, sighs sadly: “She killed herself. Why do writers suffer so much, Bruce? So much destructive behavior, even suicide.” There are also repetitions: In these pages we encounter “seasoned thieves” and a “seasoned raconteur,” and find Cable described as a “seasoned professional” when it comes to sex. That’s a lot of seasoning.

Yet these flaws don’t impede the jolly appeal of the novel’s storytelling. Grisham has said that he and his wife dreamed up “Camino Island” during a long car ride to Florida, and the book provides the pleasure of a leisurely jaunt periodically jolted into high gear, just for the fun and speed of it.