



READING GUIDE

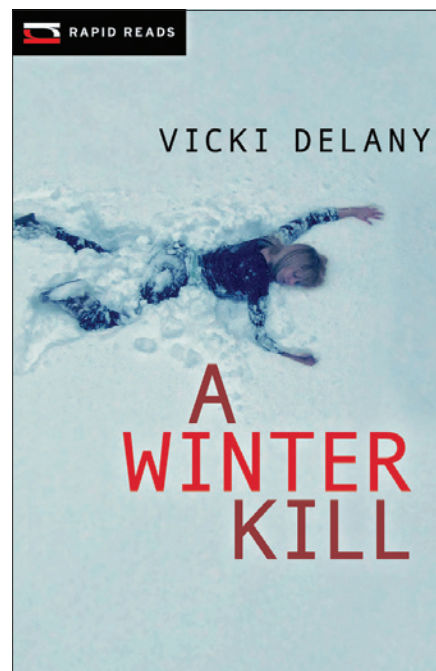
A WINTER KILL VICKI DELANY

Reading level: 2.8

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, murder, romance, ambition

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Summary

Nicole Patterson is a twenty-four-year-old probationary police officer working for the Ontario Provincial Police in the rural area where she grew up (Prince Edward County). One night while on patrol she comes across the body of a high-school-aged girl lying facedown in the snow. The girl, Maureen Grey, has been murdered—strangled to death with her scarf. But things don't add up. The way the victim's body is arranged, the clothes she's wearing, the glass ring found in the surrounding snow—all confounding elements that add to the mystery.

When it's revealed that the girl was pregnant at the time of her death, the hunt is on to figure out the father's identity, and why Maureen was murdered. Even though she's not a detective, Nicole finds herself unable to let go of the investigation. Instead (bending protocol as carefully as she can), she travels the area, talking to Maureen's schoolmates and piecing together a picture of the girl. Nicole learns that Maureen was seen as having a reputation for sleeping with whatever guy showed her any attention. She wasn't well-liked—although her classmates are happy enough to cry over her at the funeral. As Nicole learns about the girl, she shares pieces of her discoveries with lead detective Sergeant Paul Malan, guiding him in asking the right questions to help solve the case.

One boy stands out in the investigation and in Nicole's mind: Jason Fitzpatrick, a handsome and popular jock who seems badly shaken up by the girls' death. Nicole speaks with Jason on several occasions. As she does, she becomes convinced that Maureen meant something to him—and that, despite his involvement in her life, he had nothing to do with her death. Nicole is determined to solve the case—and in so doing, to make amends for a case of blatant peer mistreatment from her own high school days for which she blames herself.

The most tempting suspect in the case is Maureen's father, Pete Grey, a disheveled drunk who beats his wife and never could be bothered to provide the stable home that a child requires for optimal growth. But Nicole is convinced Pete didn't do it: why would he go to all the trouble of creating such an elaborate murder scene? If Pete Grey had done the killing, he would have done it during a drunken rage and simply killed the kid in his own home, without staging a fancy death. Nicole's suspicions of Grey's innocence are validated when she breaks up a fight between him and another ne'er-do-well in a local bar: the pain she witnesses in Pete Grey's face at the loss of his daughter tells her she's on the right track, and that he didn't kill the girl.



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As the clues pile up, it becomes evident that more information is needed from young Jason Fitzpatrick. When Nicole accompanies Sergeant Malan to the boy's home one winter evening, the two discover the boy's father to be the killer. Enraged that his son had fallen in love with a "cheap slut" and was planning to shelve his football scholarships in favor of starting a family with the girl, Brian Fitzpatrick took matters into his own hands...and took the girl out of the picture.

Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the first line of *A Winter Kill*:

Sometimes you can just tell.

What is the significance of a book's first line? Why does it have such importance in the reader's mind? What are your thoughts about the first line of this book?

2. Note the author's use of descriptive writing at the beginning of the first chapter. For example:

The long rows of boarded-up buildings on the abandoned World War II airfield were dark. Amber and white security lights did little to break the night. The flashing red and blue of my patrol car reflected off the snow.

and

I shifted my feet. Snow crunched beneath my boots.

How are these passages effective in describing the setting? Find other examples of descriptive writing that help to paint a clear picture in the reader's mind.

3. When Detective Malan and Nicole Patterson pay a visit to Pete Grey in chapter 2, the author paints his image deliberately. What sorts of biases do you feel when you meet Mr. Grey for the first time? Where have you encountered people or characters like this before? For what reasons does the author create such a recognizable stereotype?
4. As you read *A Winter Kill*, create a character sketch of Nicole. Be sure to include aspects of her physical appearance, her personality, her community, her views and any other information you feel is important in shaping her character. Is she someone you would like to have as a friend?
5. When Nicole talks with Detective Malan in chapter 3, she feels pleased to be able to impress him with her thoughtful questions. Comment on our natural tendency to seek the approval of authority figures. Does it ever go away?
6. As Nicole and her mother discuss Maureen's death, what biases can you detect in Mrs. Patterson's beliefs in the way boys and girls should behave? Is she alone in this? As you see it, why can't a girl enjoy a variety of sexual partners without being labeled? Is this culturally-dependent?
7. In chapter 6, Nicole reflects that sudden death makes anybody popular. Discuss.
8. At Maureen's funeral, Nicole's mother grows angry with Brian Fitzpatrick for speaking badly of Maureen. She points out that none of us chooses our parents. What are your views on fate? On karma?
9. In chapter 9, Nicole arrives at her parents' house to the smell of bread baking and soup bubbling on the burner. Write or talk about some of the smells you associate with your childhood. Why do they make us happy?





10. Nicole's mother tells her that Jason's family is new in town. Paired with the fact that they're outsiders, their money and flashy lifestyle lead other people to mistrust them. Have you ever been in a position where you've felt like an outsider, like you don't belong? What does it take for a newcomer to gain the trust of the people who he or she is surrounded by?
11. In chapter 9, we see Nicole's belief that social roles have changed. If Jason got Maureen pregnant, she reasons, it wouldn't ruin his ambitions. If anything, his friends would think he was "a real man" for getting a girl knocked up. Do you agree? Discuss how our expectations—and our kids' expectations—of young people are changing. How is the experience of young manhood changing for our boys?
12. In chapter 10, Nicole reflects that it's possible a relationship might blossom between herself and Larry Johnstone, but that at the moment she needs to focus on her career. Debate: *Women must choose between career and love/family. They can't have both in any sort of meaningful way.*
13. What do we do to our children when we pin our own hopes and agendas onto them?
14. Brian Fitzpatrick killed Maureen because she was going to limit his son's chances at living the life he himself had always dreamed of. His act is selfish and morally wrong, not to mention illegal. But on what basis can you empathize with this character?
15. In her final conversation with Detective Malan about the case, Nicole observes that Jason and Maureen were surrounded by nothing but bad choices. Write or talk about another situation—either in a book or a movie—where the characters were faced with the same issue.

