



READING GUIDE

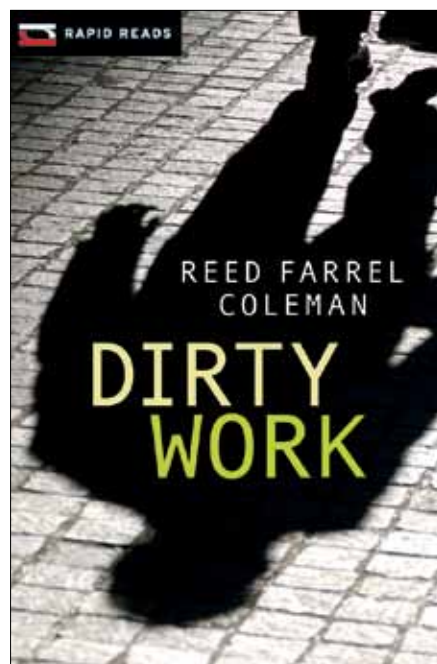
DIRTY WORK REED FARREL COLEMAN

Reading level: 3.8

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, crime, relationships, runaways

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Summary

Gulliver Dowd is a tough, worldly private investigator who also happens to be a dwarf. His short stature has led the world to treat him in a certain way; Gulliver has strengthened certain parts of his personality in order to deal effectively with social biases. Only a handful of people have ever given him hope about human nature: his friend Rabbi; his sister Keisha (killed while on duty as a police officer several years ago); and Nina, a girl who loved him for two months back in high school.

When Rabbi connects Gulliver with a client who is interested in hiring him to solve a disappearance, the last person either of them ever expected it to be is Nina. Though he has tried to forget her—and forgive her—through the intervening seventeen years, Gulliver still has feelings for Nina. When Nina informs him that the girl who’s missing is not only her own daughter but Gulliver’s too, the case takes on a whole new level of seriousness.

Spurred forward by the concern bestowed by his sudden mantle of parenthood, Gulliver willingly accepts Nina back into his life and sets out to pull every string he can to find Anka, who has gone missing from her private school. He hires Ahmed, an ex-Navy Seal and a mutual friend of his and Keisha’s, to help him track down the beautiful sixteen-year-old.

As his investigation deepens, Gulliver pieces together Anka’s story. A security guard at the school confirms the presence of an older man with whom Anka has been spending time. Gulliver visits mob boss Joey Vespucci, who loaned Nina the money to start her steakhouse. After ably disarming Vespucci’s guarded thug, Gulliver ends up winning the admiration, respect and trust of one of the most powerful men in New York—and learns that the guy has nothing to do with Anka’s disappearance.

Gulliver also taps Anka’s longtime boyfriend for information. The young man confirms the suspicion that not only was she spending time with another male, but that something had changed in her life over the summer before she went missing. Someone—or something—else is at play.

When Gulliver’s van is blown up, he chases the culprit, who seems familiar in a way that Gulliver can’t quite pinpoint. The man gets away, but Gulliver understands that he has some sort of stake in the issue. Suspicious that Nina knows more than she’s letting on, Gulliver allows himself back





into her world—and bed—to find out what she’s holding back. It’s a dangerous move, and it pulls his heart back into the game, setting him adrift on a sea of hope for their future together as a family.

But the morning after, something clicks in Gulliver’s brain, and he makes a phone call to Nina’s aunt, the woman who stood by her niece during the difficult years she was raising her daughter alone. From the aunt, Gulliver learns more about Nina, about Anka—and about his suspicions that maybe he isn’t the girl’s father after all. He realizes that perhaps Nina had just created that story to get Gulliver hooked deep enough into the case that he wouldn’t turn her away. From Joey Vespucci, he learns Nina was an escort—a businesswoman who will stop at nothing to see her ends met. His worst fears are confirmed.

Gulliver puts together dates in his mind and traces credit card bills. He finally locates Anka—and her father, Eddie Gorman, a classmate of Gulliver’s and Nina’s boyfriend for most of high school. The girl is delighted to finally be reunited with her father, and is furious with her mother for lying to her all these years about his true identity.

The mystery solved, Gulliver delivers Nina’s comeuppance by telling her that her habit of betraying people has finally come home to roost: he’s gone from her life forever, and her daughter will likely be too, now that she’s old enough to choose which parent to align her loyalties with.

Questions for Discussion

1. A book agent or submissions editor would give Coleman’s first page a thumbs-up based on the level of intensity and engagement. How much can you tell about Gulliver’s character from just the first paragraph of *Dirty Work*? What kind of conflict has Coleman already set up for his character?
2. As Gulliver thinks about his sister’s death in the first chapter, he observes that sometimes things go wrong. “It doesn’t matter why, they just do,” he reflects. Is Gulliver uncommon in this approach to making sense of negative events? Do you yourself seek a deeper meaning and reason for events? What is behind this human tendency to look for meaning?
3. What’s in a name? As you see it, for what reason did the author pair his main character with the name he did?
4. Gulliver is driven by his rage to track down his sister’s murderer. What other book or movie characters have you encountered who have a similar *raison d’être*?
5. In chapter 2, while he’s waiting for his new client at Black and Blue, Gulliver reflects that in Manhattan it’s all about the now: tomorrow doesn’t mean anything, because you can never be sure of it. Do you think most of humanity lives this way? What would possibly set Manhattan apart?
6. In chapter 8, Gulliver reflects that he never would want to go back to high school. *Just recalling how intensely he had felt everything back then was enough to make him feel sick to his stomach.* Think about your years in high school. Would you go back? Why or why not?
7. In a group or with a partner, discuss how disability and physical differences are viewed by the wider society. As you see it, is strength of character developed to a greater degree in the people who live with these conditions than by people who don’t? Explain.





8. When Nina says Dillon Kent comes from a “good family,” Gulliver challenges her, saying, “Some of the most fucked up people I’ve ever met come from *good* families” (ch. 9). Explain how this can be so. Why do we implicitly believe, despite clear evidence to the contrary, that having money means you’ve got it together?
9. In chapter 13, Gulliver reflects that, despite its usefulness to a private investigator, the Internet can be an ugly place. What does he mean? With a small group, discuss the benefits and drawbacks of this tool.
10. In chapter 14, when Anka expresses anger that her mother lied to her about not knowing who her father was, Gulliver tells the girl that people lie—and he explains all the different reasons why they do. Do you agree with his fairly blasé acceptance of this fact? Do you think we owe each other more than to simply accept that we all lie to each other? How do you think Gulliver’s job as a private investigator affects the way he sees human nature?
11. Gulliver advises Anka to sit down and have a conversation with her mother about her betrayal. “You may hate her now. But she’s the only mom you’re ever going to have,” he says (ch. 14). As you see it, how important is forgiveness?
12. Whose worldview are you more inclined to agree with: Ahmed, who expects people to let him down? Or Gulliver, who hopes that things can change—and who needs hope in order to keep on living?
13. Gulliver knows he needs to see Nina face to face and have the conversation that will end their relationship once and for all. He doesn’t want to let his anger “be like an open wound” that would bleed him dry over the years (ch. 15). What is the difference between cutting someone out of your life...and simply walking away?
14. Would you say Nina believes in love? How many different kinds of love are there? Do you believe in true, romantic love? Or is it always some sort of contractual arrangement?
15. Most books and movies tend to follow universal themes drawn from the situations that play out in our own lives, and which teach us about life itself. What theme(s) do you see in *Dirty Work*?

