



# READING GUIDE

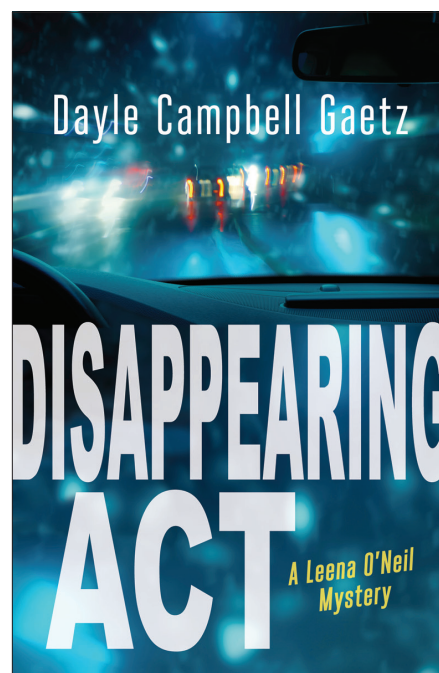
## DISAPPEARING ACT DAYLE CAMPBELL GAETZ

Reading level: 4.2

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, murder, private investigator, female sleuth, legal investigator, online courses, divorce, estranged families

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### Summary

Leena O’Neil is a budding private investigator who has changed her name from Colleen and fled her mother’s and sister’s oppressive judgment to start a new life. She is shocked when, three years after disappearing, she receives a panicky phone call from her estranged sister, asking her to pick her up at the ferry. Like Leena, her sister has changed her name—from Gina to Georgia. Georgia has cut her hair and is dressing in a way to disguise her identity.

Although still cold and cruel, Georgia seems afraid—and she’s sporting significant injuries, including a limp for which she uses a golf club as a cane. She explains that someone tried to run her off the road; she thinks it was her husband, Mark, who had been having an affair. Georgia suspects Mark wants her dead, because then he gets the house plus a larger share of the BMW dealership Georgia helped him buy.

Leena learns on the news that Mark’s body has been discovered in a local park, beaten by a golf club—and that her sister is a suspect. When Leena confronts Georgia, the older woman denies her involvement. She says she herself had two attempts made on her life, including being run off the road on her bike by a car that then crashed into a fire hydrant. After that, she knew she needed to skip town, and that’s why she called on Leena.

Uncertain of her sister’s innocence, Leena takes Georgia to stay with her friend Vern, a backwoods dweller with experience in espionage. Vern supplies the women with burner phones, and Leena heads back to her old hometown to investigate Mark’s death. Her first stop is the BMW dealership, where she speaks with Mark’s partner, Larry Russell. From the receptionist, Leena learns that Georgia was overheard threatening Mark for trying to kill her. She follows the tip that Mark was seeing a waitress at the diner next door, staking out the place until the woman drives up in her yellow beetle. Leena dines at the establishment and speaks with the woman—Christie—and learns through conversation that the woman had just purchased the car about six weeks earlier. Upon leaving the diner, Leena looks at the front fender and sees that it’s dented—and marked with red paint.



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When Georgia confirms that she was run off the road by a yellow beetle, Leena suspects the girlfriend might be implicated. Georgia instructs Leena to check Mark's will, which is in the safe at their home, reasoning that if he had changed the will to include his girlfriend, then perhaps Christie was at the root of it. When Leena goes to her sister's house, she learns from a police officer that the murder weapon—a nine iron—had been found in the back of Georgia's SUV.

Curious to know whether it was indeed Christie's yellow beetle that was used to run Georgia off the road, Leena returns to the dealership, hoping to learn more. Things look suspicious when she is forbidden to look at a yellow beetle that's in the shop for repairs. She is puzzled at why, if a different car was used in the attempt on Georgia's life, Christie's fender would be damaged and show scrapings of red paint. Who is trying to cover up what?

Maybe it had been Christie's car after all? Pretending she is applying for a waitressing job, Leena returns to take photos of the waitress's car. But a conversation with Christie reveals that the woman knows nothing about how it became damaged. Leena invites Christie out for drinks and digs for more information about her affair with Mark, as well as her possible motives for killing him. Instead, she learns how Christie witnessed his murder and fled the scene for fear of their affair being found out. Leena likes the woman, and now wants to prove both her and her sister innocent.

In discussion with her sister, Leena learns that Georgia had taken her car in for servicing at Mark's dealership a couple weeks before the murder occurred. Leena suspects this provided the murderer with an opportunity to copy her key, which then made it easy to hide the murder weapon inside her car after the act. So it seems like Mark's murder, and Georgia's attempted murder, were committed by someone at the dealership. Leena learns that managers and owners are allowed to take any car off the lot that they wish, which would have made it easy for the yellow beetle in question to be used to run Georgia down. She realizes that if both Mark and Georgia were dead, Larry Russell would then own the entire dealership.

At night, Leena breaks into the dealership's service bay and takes photos of the beetle's damaged fender. She sends the photos to Christie, who is in on the plan. When Larry Russell catches Leena in the garage, she quickly places a call to Christie and leaves the line open so that the other woman can follow them and alert the police. Leena also turns on her digital recorder.

Leena tricks Larry into thinking she has been hired as a P.I. by lawyer Davida O'Neil, Mark's mother-in-law, who she says is investigating Mark's murder, and in so doing, she gets him to spill his whole story—and catches it on her digital recorder. Larry Russell heads to Davida O'Neil's law offices, prepared to kill both Davida and Leena. Thanks to Christie's quick thinking, the older woman has been prepped for the duo's arrival. When they get to Davida's office, all three women knock Larry out. The police arrive and take Larry away, and Leena and her mother are reunited.

### Questions for Discussion

1. How does the first sentence of this book hook your interest? Discuss the importance of a book's first sentence, and of its first few pages, in engaging readers.
2. Have you ever been tempted to disappear? How would pulling off a disappearance be different today than, say, 25 years ago?





3. The author conveys a lot of information about Leena O’Neil within the first six pages. But she doesn’t just write the character’s backstory in a big long paragraph. In what way does she introduce the reader to this information? Note as many items as possible that describe, identify or otherwise develop Leena’s character.
4. Family relationships can sometimes be the most challenging—even more so when we become adults. Discuss the intensity and complexity of adult family relationships. What makes it so difficult for us to change these dynamics?
5. At the end of chapter 4, Leena offers to have someone help hide her estranged sister Georgia from the police. What would you do in her place? Explain your reasoning.
6. What characteristics make Vern interesting to the reader? What is his role in this mystery?
7. What assumptions does Leena make about her sister’s character based on the fact that Georgia is a lawyer? How do people’s occupations create (or distort) the lens through which we see them? Do you think this is a good thing or a bad thing? Is it unavoidable?
8. Agree or disagree with Leena’s comment that *the best defense is a good offence* (ch. 8).
9. For most of the book, Leena doesn’t know whether she can trust her sister when Georgia insists that she’s innocent of killing her husband. Either the woman has just suffered a shattering loss...or else she is an excellent actor. What happens to a relationship when we are unable to trust what other people say?
10. In chapter 10, Leena reflects that because her mother and sister often grilled her when she was young, she has grown up to be a skilled liar. Obviously, lying has its advantages, or else people would not engage in this behavior. So what are the perks of being dishonest?
11. In chapter 15, when Larry Russell, the sales manager of the BMW dealership, is driving Leena to an unknown destination in order to kill her, he starts to explain his reasoning for killing Mark and then scaring Georgia off. As his story unfolds, Leena observes that “sometimes silence works better than words.” What does she mean?
12. Make a plot map or timeline of the major events in *Disappearing Act*. Show how they escalate to a main climax. How is this progression effective in the telling of a mystery story?
13. Mysteries often employ red herrings—clues designed to confuse or mislead readers. Discuss some of the red herrings in *Disappearing Act*.
14. What do you know about character archetypes? Talk about the female archetype that both Georgia and her mother, Davida, fulfill.
15. *Disappearing Act* is written as a mystery. What aspects of the story make it a mystery rather than a thriller? What genre of fiction do you prefer?

