



READING GUIDE

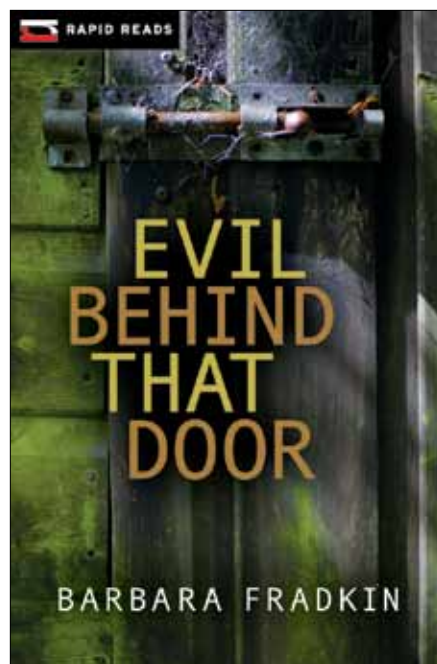
EVIL BEHIND THAT DOOR BARBARA FRADKIN

Reading level: 3.2

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, murder, family issues

978-I-4598-0100-4 PB



Summary

When Pete and Connie Mitchell disappear after a Valentine's Day drinkathon, all eyes turn to their adult son, Barry. But the police can't seem to link Barry to his parents' death.

Wanting to get the family home spruced up for a quick sale, Mitchell calls on handyman Cedric O'Toole to help. While the two aren't exactly friends, they go back all the way through childhood. O'Toole knows Mitchell well: his moods, his motivations, his tendencies. He's not an easy guy to get along with.

When O'Toole discovers a long-forgotten wooden door in the Mitchell's basement, Barry Mitchell wants nothing to do with it. But his obvious fear over what might be behind the door is all O'Toole needs to light his investigative fire. When he arrives the next day to find the house empty, he finds his way into the cold cellar. Far in a corner, he discovers a pile of small bones, complete with a skull that could possibly have belonged to a child.

Shaken, O'Toole seeks out old-timer Aunt Penny, who knows everyone's history. He learns that Barry Mitchell had a younger brother who apparently died of cancer when he was only three. But O'Toole suspects the family's story doesn't line up with the truth. He waits for another chance to get into the cellar, then takes the skull to Aunt Penny. Together, they determine that the cause of death was likely a sharp blow to the head. It's enough to make O'Toole want to share it with the police.

Further snooping around the Mitchell place yields additional puzzle pieces: the electrical system of the snowmobile on which Connie and Pete Mitchell traveled to the bar on the night of their disappearance had been tampered with. When the police drag a snowmobile—and Pete Mitchell's body—out of the lake, O'Toole's suspicion is confirmed: someone wired it to short out while crossing a notorious patch of thin ice. Barry, who hated his father? Pete, who was an angry sonofabitch and maybe just wanted to escape? Connie, whose favorite child was killed on Valentine's Day, and who lived under her drunken husband's thumb for all the intervening years?





When O’Toole tries to replace the skull to make it look like he hasn’t been tampering with evidence, Mitchell walks in on him. He’s furious, and terrified at having his worst suspicions confirmed: that his brother didn’t die of cancer, but rather by a head injury for which Barry himself was blamed—and his little body has been in the basement this whole time. Fearful of being thrown in jail, Mitchell locks O’Toole in the cellar and sets the house on fire. As he prays for the firefighters to find him, O’Toole figures out the mystery: Pete killed the little boy in a fit of rage and blamed his eldest son for it. And Barry Mitchell has borne the weight of this injustice his whole life.

As he’s recovering in the hospital, O’Toole, Aunt Penny and the attractive Constable Jessica Swan figure out that Connie had rigged the snowmobile to crash through the ice, taking her husband with it. Revenge for him having killed her son thirty years ago to the day. As for Connie, she’s pocketed all the jewelry Pete gave her over the years and has set out for a new life as far as she can get from her hometown, leaving her eldest to pick up the pieces.

Questions for Discussion

1. The author kicks off *Evil Behind That Door* with a powerful first line. How is the first line important to a story? How is it important to a book’s success in today’s competitive market? Discuss.
2. In chapter 1, O’Toole reflects that he’d better accept Barry Mitchell’s beer even though it’s only one o’clock in the afternoon: “When Barry Mitchell offers, you go along.” How is it that some people have this kind of power over us? Can it ever be a good thing? What prevents us from refusing to go along with that kind of power?
3. O’Toole says his mother left him to grow up “like a weed in the garden while she watched her soaps and listened to Elvis” (ch. 1). Compare this to your childhood. How does this style of parenting differ from what we characteristically see among middle-class North Americans today?
4. A *simile* is a comparison using the words “like” or “as.” Authors often use this literary device to enhance a descriptive passage. In chapter 2, the following simile describes the door to the secret room in the Mitchells’ basement: “The door was solid as a Douglas fir.” In chapter 13, O’Toole reflects on how frightened he is to be locked in the small basement room: “I felt my heart racing, my thoughts skittering around like scared chickens.” How does the use of similes add to the way you experience the story?
5. Like plot, setting and characters, *theme* is an important literary element in any novel. Theme is an idea or message about life revealed in a work of literature. It’s not really a moral, but it’s kind of a guiding message all the same. Discuss the theme of *Evil Behind That Door*. Where in the book is the theme most apparent?
6. How was Barry Mitchell’s personality shaped as a result of the environment he grew up in? Find evidence in the book to support your explanation.
7. What is the assumption behind O’Toole’s thought that Constable Swan would never be interested in a “scrawny, dirt-poor handyman” (ch. 4) like him? Does it hold true in the real world? Why or why not?





8. O'Toole talks about his inventing in a self-deprecating way, yet we can see his passion for it—and his belief that one day, he'll hit on something that will change the world. What are the ingredients for material success? How much does this kind of staunch self-belief factor into that success?
9. O'Toole is compelled to explore the Mitchell house, even though he somewhat dreads what he might find. This is a common human characteristic. How has our curiosity—whether morbid, ill-conceived or downright dangerous—ultimately helped to advance the human race?
10. O'Toole isn't the only one in town who seeks out Aunt Penny when he needs advice. What archetype does the character of Aunt Penny fit? Where else have you come across a character who plays a similar role?
11. In chapter 10, as he gets deeper into the mystery, O'Toole reflects that he hates the mess of other people's lives, and that it's just easier to keep to himself. If he's alone, no one can complicate things. How is he right? How is he wrong?
12. What do you think about the way Connie finally freed herself from a husband whom she despised?
13. As the mystery is finally pieced together, O'Toole reflects that Pete Mitchell had “killed one son and let the other carry the blame for thirty years” (ch. 16). What would motivate a person to do this?
14. As you see it, how fair is it of Connie to leave Barry “holding the bag”? To likely not ever get back in touch with him?
15. If you were in Cedric O'Toole's shoes at any point during this story, what would you do differently, and why?

