



READING GUIDE

HAITIAN GRAVES

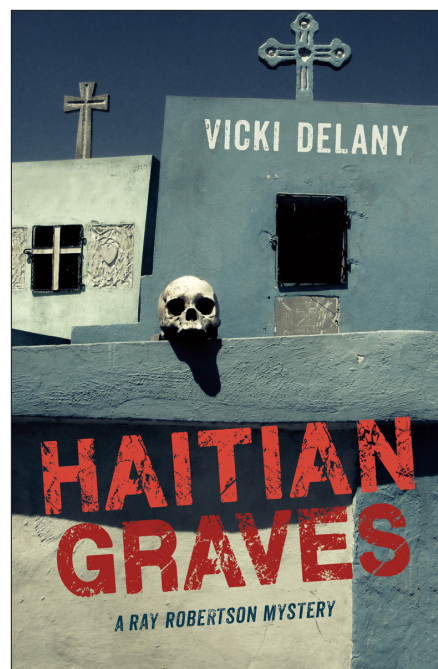
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Reading level: 3.0

Interest level: Adult

Themes: crime fiction, mystery, suspense, murder, Haiti,
UN, RCMP, police, Port-au-Prince, Vodou, child abuse,
American tourists abroad, police procedural

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Summary

RCMP officer Ray Robertson is serving a one-year term in Haiti, where he has been working as a mentor and advisor to the UN, training the Haitian national police. Robertson's marriage is under strain: his kids are grown, and his wife is back in Canada, unhappy with his new assignment.

The story opens with Robertson witnessing a young girl, likely a prostitute, being roughed up by a white man. He stops his truck with its bed full of fellow policemen, dispatches the lecherous Scotsman and disciplines an officer who is rude to the girl. Even though he knows his colleagues think he's wasting time and resources, Robertson knows every gesture will make a difference to an individual human life. He is determined to demonstrate to the locals that police officers can be trustworthy. Robertson battles daily the biases and stereotypes carried around by the Haitian policemen he works with: they don't respect women, and don't consider their needs to be equal to those of men.

When Robertson and his Haitian partner, Pierre Lamothe, are called to a suspicious death at a luxury mansion, they meet the owner, Steve Hammond: American, white, pushing sixty. Hammond is distressed at the apparent drowning of his wife in their pool. The woman looks to be in her 20s. Robertson and Lamothe question the gardener, a man of around 55, but he is shy and has little to say. Through the housekeeper, they learn that Marie Hammond was Haitian, largely friendless and likely a kept woman. The couple entertained often. The insouciant guard, Nicholas, doesn't have much to say either, but Robertson finds his reticence suspicious.

Even though Robertson is in Haiti for training, and not conducting investigations, he is dragged into the case by virtue of working with Lamothe. He decides to stick around to see how the case will turn out. He doesn't appreciate the repeated interference of Gail Warkness, a crisp woman from the American Embassy who seems a little big for her britches.

When the autopsy reveals the woman died from head trauma before being thrown in the pool, Robertson speaks with Hammond again, this time accompanied by Detective LeBlanc. Hammond reveals that Marie never got along with the gardener, Alphonse. The guard corroborates this, confirming he would sometimes catch the gardener leering at Marie. But Robertson smells a rat.



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Suspiciously, the housekeeper, Paulette, has quit too. He is shocked when LeBlanc takes the gardener into custody with hardly a question. From that point on, Robertson is shut out of the investigation.

On one of his days off, Robertson finds himself looking out for an elderly Canadian couple who obviously have no “street smarts” when touring a dangerous country. In a well-deserved break from the case, they visit a Haitian graveyard.

The next day, Robertson returns to Hammond’s house on the pretense of having lost his house key somewhere inside. He knows that Hammond is working for a construction company that also functions as an arms dealer—after all, there is plenty of trade in poor, undeveloped countries like Haiti. He learns from the housekeeper that Hammond’s stepchildren are to be taken to America. Warkness finds him at Hammond’s house; Robertson takes this opportunity to express his sense that LeBlanc is likely not the type to dig hard for the real culprit. He shares his suspicion that Hammond is trying to run from the scene, but Warkness warns him to butt out or risk being deported.

Robertson tracks Hammond’s ex-housekeeper to her church. Paulette explains that Hammond paid her off to quit so that she wouldn’t speak to the police. She too believes there is more to Marie Hammond’s death. She reveals that the guard, Nicholas, spent a lot of time with Marie. Robertson finds Nicholas and asks him questions, learning that he was not having an affair but that he definitely was working for Mr. Hammond’s interests.

Returning home, Robertson reflects on his experience with the elderly couple. It reminds Robertson of the importance of fondness and love between partners. He extends an olive branch to his wife.

Upon visiting Hammond again in person, Robertson’s worst fears are confirmed: the man is sexually abusing his stepdaughter and has plans to take her to the US, leaving her brother behind. Hammond killed Marie when his wife discovered his unspeakable motives—that he had married her to have access to her young daughter. Hammond flees his house with Robertson in hot pursuit. Robertson follows the man in the direction of the US embassy, frustrated that he has no evidence and that a man of Hammond’s position and power will surely be able to slip out of Haiti without being brought to justice. When Hammond’s car is struck during the chase, the man flees into the night. Robertson follows him through a graveyard, catches and subdues him, and then waits for Lamothe’s backup. Hammond offers to pay Lamothe and Robertson to keep quiet and let him go, but the officers refuse to take his bribe.

With Hammond in custody, Robertson returns to the man’s home to collect the children. He arranges for them to stay with an acquaintance who runs a home for orphans. The embassy’s Warkness still fights him, despite Robertson’s assertion that Hammond is a killer and child molester.

The guard, Nicholas, finally comes through with the truth—that Hammond murdered his wife and paid the guard and the gardener to keep quiet. Hammond is incarcerated; the kids will be safe; and Robertson goes back to work.





Questions for Discussion

1. What did you know about Haiti before reading *Haitian Graves*? How has your understanding of this country changed as a result of reading the book?
2. Read through the first chapter. Jot down any words and phrases that you feel are particularly powerful at developing the story's setting. How important is setting to a good story?
3. Robertson doesn't like the way Gail Warkness refuses to remove her sunglasses throughout their first encounter in chapter 3. What message does not removing one's sunglasses send?
4. Consider the challenges Robertson is facing in working with people who have a completely different worldview than him. What sorts of personal qualities would he have to possess in order to keep a level head in all situations?
5. "It doesn't pay to make enemies," Lamothe tells Robertson after his acerbic exchange with Warkness in chapter 3. What does Lamothe mean? How does his counsel apply to situations in the wider world?
6. In chapter 4, Robertson explains to Lamothe that Mrs. Hammond is what's known in Canada as a trophy wife. Talk about the emotional limitations of this kind of marriage. As you see it, why do some people feel it's advantageous to choose this kind of relationship?
7. When Robertson learns the detective's sister is from Montreal, he is glad the man doesn't ask if Robertson knows her (ch. 5). What is the cultural significance, for Canadians, of Robertson's wry reflection?
8. Often an author will choose to show a character's emotional and physical reactions rather than simply telling the reader how s/he is feeling. Here's an example from chapter 5, where Robertson and LeBlanc interview Alphonse, the gardener:
He rubbed his hands together, and his eyes darted between us.
What is the gardener's emotional state? How do you know? Find other instances in the book where you can determine the characters' emotions solely from their behavior.
9. In reflecting on the possibility of Alphonse being the murderer, Robertson thinks it improbable: he seems like a timid old man. Then again, he's been in police work long enough to know better than to judge anyone based on their appearance. How is this wisdom useful to his work as a police officer? Do you think people judge each other too much based on appearances?
10. In chapter 6, when Robertson meets the elderly Anderson couple at the Hotel Oloffson, he unwittingly finds himself playing tour guide for an afternoon, reasoning that once his own kids are out travelling the world, he hopes someone would be looking out for their safety in a similar fashion. Talk about other instances where Robertson's commitment to and love for his daughters helps him navigate ethical dilemmas while in Haiti.
11. How are Haitian cemeteries different than North American cemeteries, both physically and in the way they are used? Which approach do you prefer?
12. As you see it, was it worthwhile for Robertson to have stuck it out through this investigation?





13. *Haitian Graves* deals with the subject of wealthy men who live in countries “where laws were few and unprotected children many. Countries where what a man did in his own house was his business” (ch. 9). This is a real and serious problem in today’s world. As you see it, why aren’t we talking about this problem at the national and international level? What’s stopping the conversation?
14. Humans are complex and complicated, all of us with deep-rooted learnings/issues that shape our choices and behavior. As you see it, what are the deep-rooted issues Ray Robertson struggles with—as a police officer, as a man and as a human being? Explain.
15. What is the theme running through *Haitian Graves*? Is there more than one?

