



READING GUIDE

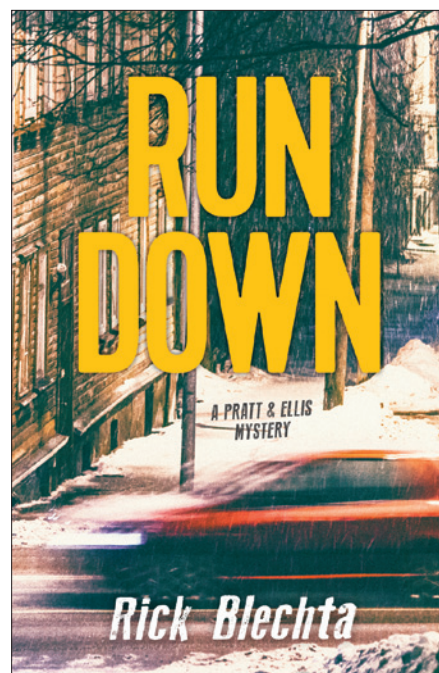
RUNDOWN RICK BLECHTA

Reading level: 3.3

Interest level: Adult

Themes: crime fiction, murder mystery,
police procedural, Toronto, police partners,
hit-and-run, revenge

978-1-4598-1010-5



Summary

Rundown begins with Detective Mervin Pratt being assigned the second hit-and-run case that Toronto has seen in a two-week period. This victim was a woman out jogging with her dog; the car, stolen and later abandoned. Two weeks prior, it had been a similar incident involving a businessman in a parking garage. After receiving his orders, Pratt calls his partner, David Ellis, hating that he has to pull the younger man away from yet another date night with his wife. Together, the two set out to find the connection between the pair of incidents.

Pratt goes to the hospital while Ellis takes photos of the tire tracks at the crime scene. At the hospital, Pratt meets the victim's husband, Darren Smith, as well as Curt Dewalt, a longtime acquaintance of the victim. Dewalt sparks Pratt's suspicion. He had been a childhood friend of Rebecca Smith's, but is reluctant to speak with Pratt. When Pratt and Ellis debrief the next day, Pratt decides to follow the lead that both victims were 36 years old. They visit the grieving Darren Smith again, asking whether he knows the first victim, Bruce Moore. He doesn't. The detectives gain permission to look at Rebecca Smith's emails, at which time Ellis discovers a cryptic message to Rebecca from Dewalt, hinting at trouble to come.

Pratt pays a surprise visit to Dewalt's investment banking firm, but is told by the man's employer that he hasn't shown up for work. He gets Dewalt's home address, and calls Ellis to join him. The building concierge tells them, however, that Dewalt had left in a taxi early that morning with nothing but a large shopping bag.

Pratt and Ellis each spend an enormous amount of time researching leads—Ellis often by sneaking out of bed after his wife has fallen asleep. His diligence, however, unearths a possible third victim in the case—Sara Penrose, a 36-year-old woman in Ottawa. Pratt instructs him to follow up.

Pratt and Ellis pay a visit to Bruce Moore's widow, Susan, hoping she may have some information on the case. Susan Moore greets the detectives upon arrival. Also present are her dead husband's parents. She has never heard of the other victims, including Sara Penrose. The arrogant and domineering Bruce Moore Senior agrees that the names mean nothing to him, either.



RAVEN BOOKS *an imprint of*
ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
www.rapid-reads.com • 1-800-210-5277



But Mrs. Moore identifies a girlfriend named Sara that her son had had during the summer after graduating high school, when they were vacationing in Muskoka, although she doesn't remember her last name. Pratt decides to investigate the Muskoka connection.

Pratt learns that Rebecca Smith's maiden name was Collins; her father was an influential businessman who owned a big marina in Port Carling and a cottage in Muskoka. At a press conference, the police chief and the detectives invite tips from the public to help solve the case. Later, Ellis makes another connection in the case, telling Pratt that Sara Penrose was actually Saara Lahti, and had spent her teenaged summers at her grandmother's cottage in Muskoka. She had changed her name in university.

With the backing of the Ottawa police, Ellis heads to Port Carling to sniff out Rebecca Smith's father while Pratt searches Dewalt's condo for clues. The police in Port Carling tell Ellis he needs to speak with retired constable Ray Featherstone for more details about that timeframe, but Ellis has no luck locating the man. He speaks with a 30-something woman who works in the marina that Rebecca (Collins) Smith's father had owned. The woman describes both Rebecca and Saara Lahti as having hung around together during the summers.

Pratt goes to Rebecca's funeral and speaks with her parents. Mr. Collins immediately denies knowing anything about the other victims, but his wife remembers a Saara Lahti, as well as Bruce Moore, who her daughter had once dated. Her husband pulls her away from the conversation, arousing Pratt's suspicion.

Ellis decides to stay in Port Carling for the night in hopes of catching Ray Featherstone. His wife Jenn is upset, which makes Ellis sad, but he knows he has to do this in order to handle the case properly. When Ellis returns to Featherstone's house, a neighbor tells him he's away visiting his daughter.

During the night, someone torches Ellis's motel room. He smashes the window with a chair, escaping with cuts and first-degree burns. While Ellis recovers in hospital, he and Pratt decide to keep digging in Muskoka, and call another press conference to ask anyone with information to step forward. One caller does, identifying middle-aged Marni Cunningham as a rundown victim in the Muskoka area 18 years prior. The caller says that the boy who ultimately went to jail didn't actually commit the crime. Pratt and Ellis recognize the case now for what it is: someone has just been released from prison, and is exacting revenge.

The OPP inform the detectives that the perpetrator's name is Daniel Johnson, and that the young Danny Johnson was imprisoned for vehicular homicide. Johnson was paroled a year ago, and disappeared immediately from a halfway-house program. Pratt suspects old constable Featherstone, who would have dealt with the case, might have been who attempted to murder Ellis. Their chief informs them of a fourth death, that of Thomas Lamport, a Vancouver Island developer, who was also recently run down.

Ellis finally connects with Ray Featherstone, who dismisses the possibility that there might have been other people with Daniel Johnson at the time of Ms. Cunningham's death. When Ellis explains the case and Johnson's connection to the string of hit-and-runs, Featherstone dismisses Ellis's ideas, ending the call abruptly.

Pratt unearths a convict who's willing to speak with him about Daniel Johnson. Anthony Whipple tells Pratt he and Johnson had neighboring cells for 13 years. In return for a good word at Whipple's upcoming parole-board hearing, Whipple agrees to give Pratt the names of the people who had been in the car with Johnson all those years ago.

Years ago, late in the evening, a car full of teenagers had pulled into Johnson's family gas station. Danny filled the car for them but the engine flooded when driver Curt Dewalt tried to





start it, rendering the kids unable to get to the party they were heading to. Beautiful, sexy Maggie MacDonald flirted with Danny then, coercing him to hot-wire a car for them, and Danny agreed. He hot-wired Rebecca's parents' car from the nearby parking lot, and went along for the ride. After Curt Dewalt plowed into a woman walking on the roadside, Danny Johnson was the only person to stay with the car. As the other teens fled into the bushes, Johnson backed the car off the woman's abdomen and stayed with her as she died.

But it was game over for Danny Johnson. When he explained to the police what had happened, the other teenagers denied it—and their parents had money to back them up, likely by paying off Featherstone and the police who were involved. Danny Johnson's family went broke trying to defend his case, and the boy went to jail. Pratt realizes Curt Dewalt is now at risk of being killed by the revenge-seeking Johnson, as is the sixth person who was in the car—Maggie MacDonald.

Ellis speaks with Daniel Johnson's father, who is now living as a hermit in a bush cabin. Johnson Senior is very clear that the other six kids were at fault, and not his Danny. Ellis realizes that Johnson Senior may well have been the man who tried to light his motel room up.

When Dewalt turns up dead from being crushed by a car, Pratt redoubles his efforts to locate Maggie MacDonald. They give another press conference, naming both Johnson and MacDonald, and urging her to call them. A call comes in from a man identifying himself as the husband of the woman they're looking for. He had discovered the truth while reading his wife's teenaged diary, where she had written about the accident and how the group of teens had been sworn to secrecy.

It turns out Maggie MacDonald has grown up to become powerful Crown attorney Gwen Trudell, who is in the running to be named a judge. Pratt and Ellis track her down to the provincial courthouse, SWAT team in tow, hoping to secure Trudell and catch Johnson as he comes after her. An exciting chase ends with Pratt shooting Johnson as the ex-con is about to drive an SUV over the bound and gagged Trudell in a nearby parkade.

Trudell shows up for her statement accompanied by a well-known criminal lawyer. Although Trudell initially puts up a good defense, she breaks after Pratt shows her an old photo of her and her five closest friends back in their Muskoka days. Trudell confesses her guilt at holding the secret that put Danny Johnson in jail so long ago; how Bruce Moore's and Rebecca Collin's parents knew the kids were lying, and coerced them to keep mum lest the accident ruin their lives. Curt Dewalt continued to pressure the group even after their promise, saying that he'd already been in trouble with the law and that if he went to jail, he would make sure the others did too.

Ellis and Pratt explain their findings to their staff inspector, reasoning that Trudell will resign and likely go to jail. They both want to see Featherstone brought up on charges too, and are frustrated to learn that this likely won't happen. The story ends on a happy note, with Jennifer Ellis informing her husband that he's about to be a father.

Questions for Discussion

1. When Staff Inspector McDonnell orders Pratt to bring his junior partner Ellis along as they investigate the most recent hit-and-run incident, Pratt explains that Ellis is at the movies with his wife—and he's loath to disturb him, as the young officer has already stood his wife up twice (ch. 1). McDonnell laughs grimly and comments that she shouldn't have married a cop; he himself is on his third marriage. Brainstorm a list of stressors that police officers likely face in their interpersonal relationships as a result of their vocation.





2. *Rundown* is told from a number of different points of view (third-person omniscient), instead of from just one character's point of view (first-person, or third-person limited). What are the advantages of telling a story this way? Are there any disadvantages? What is your preferred style of narration when you read a book?
3. Pratt has a natural aptitude for sorting details and finding patterns. Ellis has a natural aptitude for working with technology. In what areas do you have a particularly strong aptitude? Have you incorporated this strength into your career in any way?
4. What does Pratt's consideration of Ellis's marital relationship say about the older man's personality and values?
5. In chapter 8, when Pratt goes online to read the news that's already been published about their current investigation, he muses that the media has it all wrong, as usual. As you see it, is media a trustworthy source of information? If not, what is its value—and what should we use in its absence?
6. Ellis works late into the night on the investigation, foregoing sleep. So many people are sleep deprived nowadays, whether because of work or other time demands. Discuss how this negative trend impacts our society. What do you understand about the importance of sleep in optimal human functioning?
7. In chapter 14, Ellis decides to stay in Muskoka overnight in hopes of connecting with Ray Featherstone in the morning. Jen, his wife, is angry that he's missing yet another family event. Ellis sadly reflects on how he thought Jen understood his job—and the fact that he is prepared to work hard in order to secure a better future for them and their eventual children. With a partner or in a small group, discuss the concept of sacrifice in committed relationships. Does someone always give so that the other can take? Give examples to support your answer.
8. In chapter 19, Pratt goes to Collins Bay Institution to see Anthony Whipple, an old friend of Daniel Johnson. As soon as he sets foot in the building, he feels depressed. As you see it, how effective is the current North American approach to incarceration? What do you think should change?
9. Inmate Anthony Whipple, who knows Daniel Johnson's story well, forces Pratt to make a deal: if Pratt puts in a good word for Whipple at the man's upcoming parole-board hearing, Whipple will furnish Pratt with the names of everyone who was in the car on the night Marni Cunningham was run over. Pratt agrees. What is your opinion of this police tactic? Better in the long run than sticking straight to the books?
10. In the flashback of chapter 20, Maggie MacDonald uses what we sometimes refer to as "feminine powers" to coerce Danny to hot-wire a car. Jane Fonda once said, "God gave women intuition and femininity. Used properly, the combination easily jumbles the brain of any man I've ever met." Talk about this type of women's power. Some would argue there is nothing more powerful. Agree? Disagree?
11. After speaking with Whipple and gathering the truth about Danny Johnson's wrongful imprisonment, Pratt ends up feeling badly for Johnson. Explain how he feels this way.



RAPID READS



12. In chapter 23, the police chief speaks with Pratt and Ellis after the press conference. Ellis picks up on the older man's "blame shifting." What does this mean? Where do we see other examples of blame shifting in the day-to-day world?
13. When Gwen Trudell (Maggie MacDonald) finally confesses the deeper truth of that long-ago summer night, she tells Pratt that two of their parents saw through the kids' made-up story denying their involvement in the hit-and-run incident. Those parents and their lawyer swore the children to secrecy, lest the truth ruin their entire lives. What kind of message would that have sent to youngsters who were developing their adult understanding of the world? Discuss.
14. As you see it, are people inherently good, or inherently evil? Explain your reasoning.
15. 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. What do you understand to be the theme of *Rundown*? Is there more than one?



RAVEN BOOKS *an imprint of*
ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
www.rapid-reads.com • 1-800-210-5277