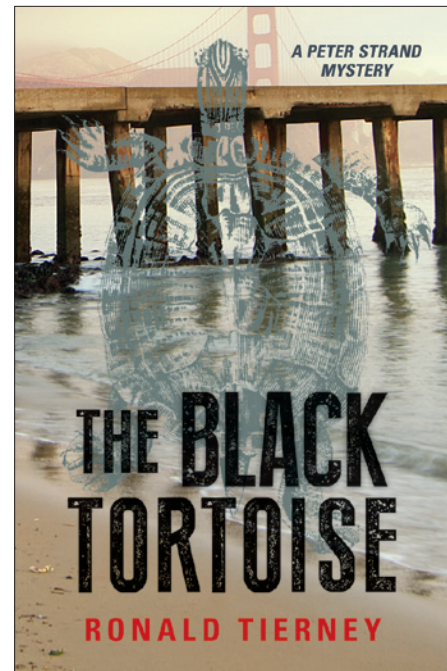


READING GUIDE



THE BLACK TORTOISE RONALD TIERNEY

Reading level: 4.8

Interest level: Adult

Themes: financial investigation,
Chinese American, Native American,
bi-racial, identity, crime fiction

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Summary

Half Chinese, half Cherokee Peter Strand is a young accountant living in San Francisco who specializes in financial fraud. Mr. Lehr is Strand's major client, although the two have never met. In *The Black Tortoise*, Lehr asks Strand to investigate suspicious activity at the Black Tortoise Foundation, which manages the Fog City Arts Centre.

When Strand meets the foundation's executive director, Madeline Creighton, he finds a haughty, self-important woman, heavy on the jewelry and makeup and light on warmth—unless she's sucking up to potential funders. Madeline gives Strand the name of the foundation's funds manager, Emelio Salazar, who Strand finds to be gossipy, but not unbearable. Emelio appears to be a good steward of the foundation's money, and his work is backed up by frequent external audits.

Emelio invites Strand to attend an open house at the home he owns with his lover Patrick, and says he'll introduce him to some of the foundation's staff. Strand finds the house to be far more luxurious than what would typically be affordable for a finance director at a nonprofit foundation, but Emelio insists he got it cheap, and that the absent Patrick helped him buy it. Strand meets Craig Anglim, the director of sales and marketing; Marguerite Woodson, director of operations; and Vanessa Medder, client liaison. Vanessa's handsome partner, Jorge Medina, a Silicon Valley programmer, is in attendance as well. Madeline is not there, preferring to mingle only with people whose pockets are deep. At the end of the open house, Emelio provides Strand with the requested copies of all the foundation's financials, as well as a list of everyone's job descriptions and salaries.

In examining the documents, Strand finds nothing amiss. Nonetheless, he plans to interview each of the staff. Marge Woodson has the highest expenditures, but she defends them in the interest of preserving history and the old pier where the foundation is situated. She is unhappy with Madeline for pilfering one of Marge's workmen to soundproof her own office without first asking Marge. Marge tells Strand how much money it cost the foundation to court and then move Madeline from the east coast to San Francisco, and confirms that the foundation staff all dislike her. Craig Anglim doesn't want to talk much about rentals, revenues or his own commission, instead



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taking Strand on a tour of the facility. He tells Strand that everything is automated, including ticket sales, which the foundation handles for all rentals and events. Vanessa confirms this, noting that the foundation's clients like the convenience of the automated process. She also confirms that Madeline is very busy and, when she is around, she leaves her staff pretty much alone.

Strand has lunch with Emelio, who tells Strand about how Madeline was paid for months before even arriving in San Francisco. Emelio confirms that since she took the helm, revenues have declined while expenses have gone up. He tells Strand that Craig Anglim is having an affair and can't afford to lose his job because of the impending divorce. He says that Madeline filched David, the IT guy, for her own purposes to help her with both of her laptops and her cell phone, and that Vanessa is just a pleaser whose job it is to deal with demanding clients, and as such she is excellent at keeping Madeline satisfied. Vanessa also handles all the box office payments. Strand digs for information around Madeline's historic theater company back east, as well as the fact that she still owns a consulting company with her husband. He decides to finish his interviews with the foundation staff, then report back to Mr. Lehr that even though there are morale and management problems, he doesn't find anything illegal at the Black Tortoise.

When Strand returns to speak with Madeline the next morning, he arrives before the foundation staff to find a body floating in the water at the end of the pier. He calls 9-1-1. Marge arrives, notes that an untended railing has given way, possibly contributing to the death, and takes charge as the first responders fan out to investigate. Madeline is inside her office, unaware of the event. The body belongs to David, the IT expert. Mr. Lehr instructs Strand to stay on the job, despite the investigation now involving the police.

Strand butts heads with Inspector Hadley from homicide as he shares what he knows. He realizes too late that he should have spoken with David about his work helping Madeline with her technology-related demands, and deepens his investigation into David's life as he tries to uncover a motive. Through his investigations Strand learns Emelio is actually an illegal immigrant without a green card; he's not an accountant either. He sees in Madeline's contract that she is not forbidden from operating another business—in this case her consulting business—but he is shocked at the amount the foundation would have to pay to terminate her. It's a scam for sure—but it's nothing illegal.

He goes to David's house, where he finds Hadley and her team looking for evidence. They exchange information over coffee and Hadley confirms that force had been used to get David into the water. They agree that they can't see a motive for David's murder—at least not from Madeline, since losing her job would hardly be a negative outcome, given the generous termination terms in her contract. If anything, she needed David's continued assistance.

Strand confronts Emelio about the man's illegal status in the U.S. but doesn't threaten to turn him over. Strand tells Hadley he is tracing deposits but hasn't yet found anything amiss. He realizes he likely is dealing with a sophisticated process that's set up to bypass recording of any transactions. Surely David would have had to help, then, if Madeline was behind it?

But David's bank accounts show nothing odd; in fact, his life was very staid. And there had been no marks on his body suggesting he had struggled or been knocked out before his death. Strand has Hadley seize Madeline's laptops and cell phone, convinced that she's hiding something.

Emelio shows up at Strand's house one night, feigning sadness and fear. Strand reassures him he won't turn him in, but calls Emelio out on there being no Patrick. He also asks about





the other homes he has discovered that Emelio owns. The man confesses to being part of a drug cartel, and to helping his family launder money through real estate, but insists it has nothing to do with his work at the foundation. When Emelio leaves Strand's house, however, he does so with a note of menace that dampens any desire Strand might have had to protect the man from the authorities.

The next morning Strand finds Hadley staking his house out. She gives him more information about the murder—looks like David was pushed, then held under. Strand, still stinging from Emelio's threat the night before, tells Hadley Emelio's truth. Strand then interviews Madeline, pushing for facts about her work out east and the investigation into questionable finances, but she explains that she would never do anything illegal because she would never want to live in a prison. As he leaves, Strand runs into Craig, who is checking sales in the box office. Vanessa interrupts them when she finds Craig explaining to Strand how the cut works when tickets are sold.

Strand tells Hadley to announce to the foundation staff his plans to have all the computers and servers examined surrounding the box office's activity. He suspects this will flush the killer out. His suspicion is confirmed when he awakens in his own house, naked, handcuffed to his bedframe and watched over by the beautiful Vanessa, who is also nude—and holding a large knife. She titillates him while simultaneously making minute cuts in his skin with the knife. Strand stops Vanessa's kink-then-kill plan by yanking apart the bed frame's two interlocking brass tubes and slamming them over Vanessa's head. She dies instantly—and they have their killer. The investigation reveals Vanessa and her computer whiz boyfriend Jorge had used a specially designed app to interrupt the box-office process, allowing them to siphon off revenue from ticket sales and alter the receipts before either the foundation or its clients received them.

Strand retreats to wine country, seeking a way to reclaim his safe, predictable world of being hidden—both from others and from himself.

Questions for Discussion

1. Peter Strand has never met his employer, Mr. Lehr, despite having worked for him for some time. Instead, the two of them communicate by phone and email. How much of our lives have been shaped in recent years by the loss of face-to-face communication? Use examples from your own life.
2. In chapter 1, when Strand meets Mrs. Madeline Creighton, she says Mr. Lehr "said that you were Chinese and very good with numbers." And Emelio comments that maybe Strand is from Mongolia, since he doesn't seem to feel the cold. Talk about the insidious racism inherent in these comments. How pervasive is this kind of thinking, and how does it shape the recipient's worldview? As you see it, how does it shape their life?
3. In chapter 3, Strand reflects:

Even though I was technically self-employed, I was not free. None of us are. We are rarely even free to be ourselves on our own time. To survive, to make a living, we must care how others see us and act accordingly.

Do you agree with his assessment of the societal constraints placed upon our ability to live in individual freedom?





4. When Strand meets with Emelio in chapter 5 and they fall to talking about the foundation's staff and executive director, Strand reflects that he is now caught up in tawdry, petty gossip. But what one person considers gossip versus what another person considers gossip is rather a grey area. As you see it, when does talking about other people cross over into gossip? While we all understand that gossiping is frowned upon, how easy would it be to actually go through life without ever talking about other people?
5. Why do you think Strand is so determined to keep his sexual orientation off the table when talking with Emelio in chapter 5?
6. Even though he's supposed to be conducting a straightforward investigation, Peter Strand often finds himself caught up in "the battle of egos, obsessions and emotions" (ch. 5). Think of two other careers where human behavior and emotionality are entwined with the tasks of fact-finding and truth-seeking.
7. Create a character map of Madeline Creighton. Include her physical characteristics, personality traits and any important career-related information. Can you sum her up in a single sentence?
8. When he calls Mr. Lehr to report David's murder, Strand suggests they leave the investigation to the police. Mr. Lehr laughs, however, and tells Strand to keep working. "Trust me," he says. "It's about money. It's always about money" (ch. 5). As you see it, how correct is Mr. Lehr? What other motivators besides money inspire people to steal, cheat and kill?
9. Peter Strand works a lot. When he's on an important investigation, he will often work late or over weekends. He enjoys his work. What's your stance on working a lot? Do you judge those who immerse themselves entirely in their profession? Is there ever a case for somebody to live their work fully, and not fulfill the societal expectation of balancing work with play and socializing?
10. Strand sometimes goes for a walk when he needs to figure things out. What do you do?
11. With a partner or in a group, talk about the setting of *The Black Tortoise*. How does the author make San Francisco come alive through the protagonist's eyes? Find examples to support your response.
12. Which character(s) have you "met" before? Do you recognize any of these character types from a different book or movie?
13. In chapter 10, during Strand's conversation with Madeline Creighton in the theater, she observes that getting through life until the end means being the smartest and the toughest, otherwise one will be tossed aside or devoured. Of course, there are other, different philosophies of how a life should be lived, perhaps none any more "right" than another. List and explain two philosophies that are different from Madeline's.
14. What do you wish you knew or understood about Peter Strand?
15. How do you interpret the final paragraph of *The Black Tortoise*?

