



# READING GUIDE

## THE BLUE DRAGON

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Reading level: 4.3

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, murder, crime fiction, Chinatown,  
San Francisco, Chinese Americans, forensic accounting,  
amateur sleuth

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### Summary

In *The Blue Dragon*, San Francisco-based crime investigator Peter Strand is hired by a client to calm the concerns of tenants living in Chinatown's Blue Dragon apartment building in the wake of a recent murder. While Strand typically deals in white-collar crime, his client believes that Strand's Asian heritage will lend him credibility with the building's residents. But while Strand looks Chinese, he identifies as American, having been raised from a young age by affluent white parents.

The murder in question is of tenant Ted Zheng, a charming and flighty young man who had yet to settle into a career and an adult way of living, and who had been found murdered in the cellar two weeks prior. Strand's initial questioning of the tenants quickly burgeons into a full-scale investigation as he unravels the threads of how each tenant's life connected to Zheng, who had often been called upon by various tenants for odd jobs, from painting to assisting the elderly Mrs. Ho with errands. Strand is assisted in his investigation by resident manager Ray Leu, a nosy, joke-cracking man who keeps tabs on the tenants' comings and goings with an electronic alert system.

While the police suspect Zheng's death is gang-related, Strand believes there may be more to the story. Complicating the mystery is the recent death of the elderly Mrs. Ho, a third-floor tenant who fell down the elevator shaft during repairs. Given its proximity to Zheng's murder, her death feels suspicious.

Strand interviews all tenants, including Sandy Ferris, Ted's girlfriend, who turns out to have no connection to the murder. Nor does the sexy, fierce May Wen who had been sleeping with Ted outside of her marriage to investment counselor David Wen. Sisters Barbara and Linda Siu, a nonworking woman and a lawyer respectively, while somewhat involved in Mrs. Ho's life and financial affairs, also have nothing to do with either death. Mr. and Mrs. Cheng Ye Zheng, Ted's shopkeeper parents who are raising Ted's young child, offer a study in contrasts between "old China" and the newer, American way of living, but also have nothing to do with his death.

Professor Norman Chinn and his lover, caterer Steven Broder, raise suspicion, as does cranky old Wallace Emmerich. As Strand learns more about the tenants, he develops a friendly relationship



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with Ted Zheng's father Cheng Ye, acquires a distaste for Norman Chinn's preference for young Asian boys, and doggedly follows every lead. When Strand sorts through Zheng's clothing and possessions, he discovers some keys, a photograph of a half-clothed Zheng, and a check hidden inside a jewelry box. One key is to a mailbox where Mrs. Ho kept her will; the other key opens May Wen's apartment. The photograph turns out to have been taken by Norman Chinn, who had a crush on Zheng. But the photograph only leads to the inner workings of Chinn's fractured relationship with Broder. The check, written to Mrs. Ho from her joint account with Barbara Siu, turns out to be a red herring too. The will, however, provides all the answers Strand needs.

After reading the will—and seeing Wallace Emmerich named as benefactor—Strand suddenly understands. The older man had been poisoning Mrs. Ho slowly with digitalis in her tea. Once her mental faculties began to slip, he had her sign a revised will that named him as benefactor of her estate. Then he pushed her down the elevator shaft. When Ted Zheng discovered the changed will inside Mrs. Ho's mailbox, he confronted Emmerich—and was struck with a lead pipe and left in the cellar to die.

### Questions for Discussion

1. The Chinatown setting is well developed in the first few pages of *The Blue Dragon*, as well as throughout the book. Find examples of this. What other books have you read that have a well-developed setting?
2. In chapter 1, as Ray Leu leads Peter Strand into the cellar of the apartment building, he explains how the concrete steps were the only thing left after fire destroyed all of Chinatown during the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. What do you know about the San Francisco earthquake?
3. As he goes through the list of tenants and their possible connection to the case, Strand reflects on how upset he feels at the idea that life is so disposable: *Someone had bludgeoned all the life from Ted Zheng and left his carcass crumpled in a dark corner of a cellar like a broken commode* (ch. 2). What's your take? Is life disposable?
4. What do you know about Ray Leu's personality by the end of the first few chapters? Does he remind you of any character(s) from other books or movies?
5. What does Inspector O'Farrell mean in chapter 2 when he says Ted Zheng's girlfriend belongs on a Wheaties box?
6. Make a character map of Wallach Emmerich. Include physical attributes as well as personality traits. What is so appealing about cantankerous characters such as this?
7. Ray Leu has wired the front door of the Blue Dragon so that every time it opens after 8 p.m. a light and buzzer go off in his own suite. What is your opinion of this? Is it an invasion of privacy? How so? Is it any different than if Mr. Leu sat in the lobby and took note of people's comings and goings?
8. In chapter 4, when Peter meets Mr. Zheng, Ted's father, the man comments on the difficult relationship between his wife, Gong Li, and their son: *"My wife, she is very difficult. She is old China. That was the problem, Mr. Strand. Ted was young America."* Comment on the tensions inherent in intergenerational relationships that also bridge very different cultures.





9. When Peter Strand meets May and David Wen, he senses that they are people who enjoy riding trends and who want “desperately to be or at least appear successful” (ch. 6). As you see it, why is this outward display of success so important to people? Don’t we know better by now? And if we do, what is it that makes it so difficult for us to live in a more authentic manner? Discuss.
10. In a mystery, a red herring heightens suspense and adds challenge to the mystery by misleading the reader—or the detective. Go back through *The Blue Dragon* and make a list of red herrings.
11. Bit characters sometimes enter a story to illustrate a point or to reflect some aspect of the protagonist’s personality or situation. Knowing this, what is the “point” of the conversation between Peter Strand and the homeless man in chapter 8?
12. In chapter 8, Peter Strand stakes himself out in front of the Blue Dragon to observe the residents’ comings and goings. Surrounded by a sea of people in San Francisco’s busy Chinatown, he feels an ever-growing sense of not belonging. Why does he feel this way? What factors in Strand’s own life have led him to this place—and how can he get out?
13. Can you feel any sympathy for the character of Norman Chinn? Why or why not? Justify your responses.
14. As you see it, why does Peter Strand become so involved in the case? Why doesn’t he just stick to the original assignment of checking in with each of the Blue Dragon’s tenants?
15. How does Peter Strand change over the course of this story?





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