

# READING GUIDE

## RAPID READS



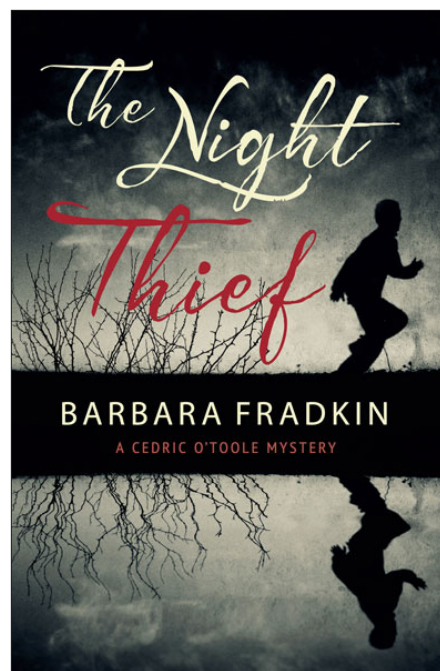
### THE NIGHT THIEF BARBARA FRADKIN

Reading level: 3.2

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, murder, male sleuth, accidental sleuth, handyman, scrub farm, homelessness, homeless children, incest, children's services, foster care

978-1-4598-0866-9 PB



#### Summary

In *The Night Thief*, handyman Cedric O'Toole finds himself embroiled in another mystery: someone has been stealing food from his garden. When he stakes out the garden one night, he finds a shadowy figure entering and exiting via the gate. That's no animal. The next day, O'Toole's dog Chevy tracks the figure's scent to a cave on his property, where he discovers one of his horse blankets...and the stolen garden bounty.

The thief turns out to be a blue-eyed ten-year-old boy who speaks rough English. He is illiterate, yet intelligent. O'Toole nicknames him Robin, after Robin Hood. He coaxes Robin back to his house, where he feeds him soup. When O'Toole comments that he should call the police because the boy's people will be looking for him, the child reacts with terror. O'Toole is puzzled, but promises not to call. After he tucks Robin in to sleep, he washes the boy's sweater. He is shocked when what looked like dirt turns out to be dried blood.

The boy is gone the next morning. O'Toole shops for extra supplies at his Aunt Penny's store, in case the boy returns. Unable to conceal his secret from his aunt, Penny exhorts him to report the boy to the police. Not wanting to break his promise, O'Toole instead consults his crush, Constable Jessica Swan, about whether any children have been reported missing. While she has no such reports, his questioning arouses her suspicion.

O'Toole continues to feed and house Robin each night, even teaching him some reading basics, but the child is gone by morning, taking with him food, clothing and other supplies. In return, he milks the goats, collects the eggs and keeps the farm tidy. When O'Toole and Chevy track the child through the woods a second time, they stumble on his secret: a girl who has the same eyes as Robin and who Robin explains is his sister. She has been gravely injured. O'Toole takes her home and calls Aunt Penny, who tends to what turns out to be a wound from a rifle. Recognizing that this young girl has had a child, she wants to get the police and Children's Services involved. O'Toole, having been handed around by Children's Services enough in his own youth, protests, but ultimately loses.



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Aunt Penny and O'Toole travel to the police station to file a report. Sergeant Hurley listens to their story, noting that the children could have been living in one of the many remote homesteads in the hunting territory just north of their town. He suggests that the boy might be the girl's son, born of an incestuous relationship. Shocked, O'Toole returns home to discover that the ambulance has arrived, but the children have fled once again. He's glad. They're healthier than before; Robin is looking out for his sister/mother; and they're not going to fall to Children's Services just yet.

Following a lead from a local hunter who remembered the blue-eyed girl as a camp cook, O'Toole heads out to a remote property belonging to a man called "the Rooskie"—the girl's father. The property is fortified by bear traps and spikes, but appears to be abandoned. Around back, he discovers the man's decomposing body. O'Toole reports it to the police. The investigation reveals the man was shot in the back by a rifle found in the barn. The fingerprints match those on a cup and bowl in the barn that O'Toole knows were Robin's. The fact that an American man had been in a nearby village just a few weeks earlier, asking questions about a blue-eyed girl, only complicates the picture.

Wary of the media, O'Toole rigs his farm entrance with a rudimentary alarm system. He continues setting food out at the back of the house for Robin, who takes the food and returns the emptied jars. When O'Toole's alarm sounds one night, he spots a truck with a Confederate flag bumper sticker roaring away.

O'Toole decides to check up on the kids, following Robin's footprints through the snow. He finds tire tracks, and follows them with trepidation. When he finds the truck, he searches it and learns that the man, Leonard Steele, is from Alabama. The American has come. Cedric follows the sound of a gunshot up the hill toward the kids' lean-to, where he discovers the girl holding an armed man at gunpoint. The man is trying to convince the girl that he is her uncle, and to come with him. O'Toole and the children trick the man into stepping into a nearby bear trap, where he is held until police arrive.

Now safe, the children are taken by Children's Services. They are to be taken back to Alabama. That's where their father, the Rooskie—Luka Horvat—had met and married Leonard Steele's sister. When Luka Horvat proved difficult to live with, his wife had tried to leave, along with their daughter, who was eight at the time. Horvat killed his wife and abducted his daughter, fleeing to the Canadian back woods. After years of searching, the girl's uncle had finally tracked her down. But instead of insisting Horvat hand over the girl, he gave in to his anger and shot the Russian in the back. Upon witnessing this, the young Robin tried to shoot him, hitting the girl by accident. Steele will go to jail, and the children will be taken in by their maternal grandparents in Alabama. While O'Toole is sad, he realizes the decision is out of his hands.

### Questions for Discussion

1. After reading the first chapter of *The Night Thief*, what kind of man do you think Cedric O'Toole is? Begin a character web where you keep track of O'Toole's traits. Include personality and moral qualities, as well as physical, intellectual and interpersonal characteristics. Add to this map as you progress through the book.





2. A simile is a comparison using the words *like* or *as*. Here's an example from chapter 1, as Cedric stakes out his garden at nighttime: "The dry cornstalks stood like stiff sentries in the moonlight." Find other examples of similes in the book. How do similes create powerful images in the reader's mind?
3. For what reason might Cedric's mother have hoped her son would grow up to be a doctor?
4. Cedric sells fresh goat's milk from his Aunt Penny's store. Raw (unpasteurized) milk is typically not sold in stores. What do you know about its health benefits? What do you think about the regulations that prevent its sale? How much of our own health should people be responsible for, as opposed to governments?
5. What would you do if you discovered a dirty, frightened child had been living on your property? How would you have approached him, and tried to make him feel comfortable?
6. As you see it, what motivates Aunt Penny?
7. Early on in the story, Cedric is intent on delivering Robin back home, even though the boy seems intent on fleeing it. Imagine yourself in Cedric's shoes. As you piece together parts of the young child's story, what do you think you would struggle with the most? What would you choose to do?
8. How do Cedric's own experiences growing up with an unstable mother shape his decisions around how best to look after Robin, and later the girl?
9. In chapter 9, Cedric reflects that Aunt Penny knows a lot about people's living situations around Madrid, including the men who, after a night of too much drinking at the pub, take their frustration and anger out at home. *For some wives, it is just the price to be paid for a home*, he thinks. Is it a reasonable price? Talk about violence against women, and how much of it is hidden. Why does it remain hidden?
10. What draws people to the lifestyle of a hermit, cut off from the rest of the world? Have you ever considered just leaving it all behind and living in utter solitude? Explain.
11. Nowadays, it seems that responsible parents are getting into trouble more often with the police and Children's Services for allowing their children to explore the world without always being under the watchful eye of adults. Sometimes this backfires, though: Neighbors and bystanders are much more likely now than in earlier generations to call the police about children who walk to the store alone or play unsupervised at the park. These children *are* in no danger. But there still exist many thousands of children who are in grave danger—from physical and sexual abuse at the hands of adults. What can we do as a society to better direct public funds toward making life safer for children who are in real danger?
12. What does Jessica Swan mean when, in chapter 17, she says Leonard Steele was *singing like a canary*?





13. Discuss or write about the main conflict in *The Night Thief*. Consider the four types of conflict in literature:
- human vs. human
  - human vs. nature
  - human vs. society
  - human vs. self

Which type of conflict is most prevalent throughout the book? Are there others?

14. Describe the relationship between Cedric O'Toole and Jessica Swan. Can you think of another, similar relationship between characters in a different book (or movie)? What makes this relationship interesting to readers?
15. What are your impressions of the story's ending? What did you find satisfying about it? What do you think will happen next?

