

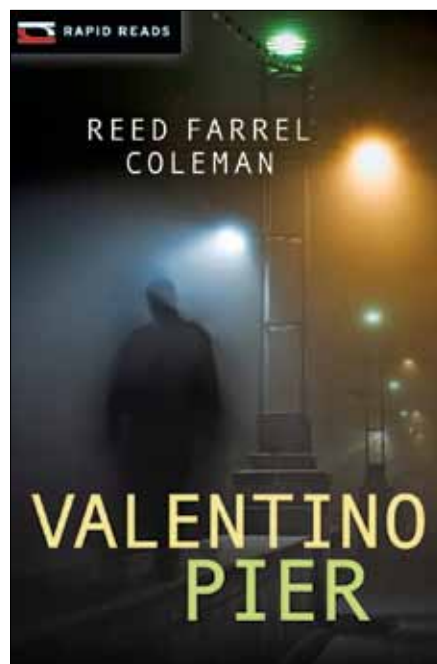
READING
GUIDEVALENTINO PIER
REED FARREL COLEMAN

Reading level: 2.5

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, crime, New York City, private eye, dogs

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**Summary**

Life hasn't been kind to private investigator Gulliver Dowd. His dwarfism makes him physically different from the rest of the population—and it's what keeps his defenses a mile high. Teased mercilessly throughout his childhood, Gulliver doesn't trust easily. And when he does, it always comes back to slap him in his (unjustly handsome) face.

After an emotionally trying day, Gulliver relaxes with a walk through his oceanside neighborhood. On Valentino Pier, a street kid stops him. He's looking for his missing dog, Ugly. Gulliver has a soft spot for children who don't have anyone to look out for them. He gives the boy his card and assures him he'll look for his dog.

Gulliver finds the dog and takes it to the vet for a thorough overhaul before returning Ugly to the boy. At the vet, Gulliver meets Mia, a young woman whose warm smile disarms him—and, naturally, makes him suspicious.

Before Gulliver can return Ugly, two police officers show up to inform him that the boy has been badly beaten and is now in hospital. Gulliver's crumpled business card was found in the boy's hand, which led the police to his home. Gulliver explains how he and the boy came to meet, and earns the trust of Detective Patrick, who also happens to have worked with Gulliver's sister, Keisha, who was murdered seven years ago.

The mystery unfolds. Someone hurt the boy—Ellis Torres—likely because he knew something they didn't want him to know. Gulliver is on the case. He finds where Ellis had been living with his dog: an empty waterfront warehouse. He senses the warehouse is somehow important to this case.

The vet, Dr. Prentice, asks Gulliver back to his office and tells him that Ugly was found carrying some exotic bugs from India in his fur. He then asks for information about the boy's condition and location. At the vet, Gulliver meets Mia again, and she asks him to dinner. Shocked, Gulliver assents.

Gulliver investigates further, scouring the waterfront, knocking on doors and asking people for information. He meets Mary Shea, who regularly fed the dog and left care packages for Ellis. She tells Gulliver about some strange screaming she heard on the night Ellis was attacked.



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With lots to think about, Gulliver goes for a drive. He ends up at the hospital where Ellis Torres is recovering. He walks into the hospital room just in time to find a large man trying to suffocate the boy. Gulliver saves the boy, but the thug gets away. Who so badly wants Ellis dead?

Unable to sleep that night, Gulliver walks down toward the waterfront, mulling things over. His curiosity is piqued by a lone car driving down to the pier. Thinking the driver is lost, Gulliver goes to give him directions, only to be nearly run down. Something is definitely going on at the pier.

When Ellis wakes up, Gulliver returns his dog. Ellis corroborates Mary Shea's description of the weird screaming at the docks. Gulliver places a call to Ahmed, an ex-Navy Seal on whom he sometimes calls for backup. Ahmed and Gulliver return to the warehouse and deduce that someone has been unloading cargo at an unused pier behind the building.

As Mia and Gulliver's relationship develops, she challenges Gulliver's beliefs about himself. He accepts the risk of trusting her, even just a little bit. As staff at the veterinary office, Mia helps piece the puzzle together: it turns out Dr. Prentice, who recently lost a sum through his divorce, has been smuggling exotic pets into the country. His earlier meeting with Gulliver was a red herring, a ruse to learn what Gulliver knew and to find Ellis to silence him for good.

When Prentice catches Mia snooping, he takes her hostage. It's up to Gulliver to rescue her. Prentice tells Gulliver to meet him at Valentino Pier, where they (and the man who had tried to kill Ellis) engage in a standoff. Ahmed arrives just as Gulliver is about to be shot to bits by Prentice's henchman. Together they subdue both the henchman and the vet, free Mia and call the police.

Mia and Gulliver begin a committed relationship. Ellis Torres recovers and is placed in foster care. Detective Patrick informs Gulliver that the vet confessed, and Gulliver closes yet another case

Questions for Discussion

1. In chapter 1 of *Valentino Pier*, Gulliver Dowd recalls the names people used to call him in school: *midget*; *runt*; *dwarf*; *freak*. Why are youngsters so hard on people who look different? Does it change when we reach adulthood?
2. Gulliver has been picked on and ridiculed his entire life. He has built up defensive walls to protect himself from other people's unkind behavior. The only time he felt strong was when he was with Nina, his girlfriend in high school. In the wake of being duped by the same woman as an adult, Gulliver reflects that nothing good ever lasts. What would you say about this topic in conversation with Gulliver?
3. In chapter 3, when Gulliver meets Detective Patrick, his knack for remembering faces helps him recall how he came to know the man. How does this ability assist Gulliver in his line of work? What is your strong/special ability? Does it help you in your work?
4. Detective Patrick brings Gulliver up to speed on the identity of the boy who was injured behind the warehouse. He calls Ellis Torres's mother a "tweaker" (ch. 4). What does this mean? How can you use context to understand the meaning of an unfamiliar word?





5. New York City has a large population of people who live in poverty. They are what Gulliver thinks of as “faceless. Nameless. Powerless. No one watched out for them” (ch. 4). As you see it, what is at the root of homelessness?
6. When he trained in martial arts, Gulliver’s karate sensei taught him a breathing technique that he uses to slow his heart rate and help himself focus. What is your understanding of the mind/body connection?
7. In chapter 6, we learn that sometimes, in his line of work as a private detective, Gulliver has to “spread cash around” to “[improve] people’s memories.” Private investigators see the worst of human nature. How would being a PI influence one’s ability to trust other people? How has his work contributed to the development of Gulliver’s personality?
8. In chapter 6, when he meets Mary Shea in the warehouse district, Gulliver admonishes her that she “mustn’t judge the gift by the wrapping.” A similar idiom is *Don’t judge a book by its cover*. What do we miss out on when we judge a gift by its wrapping, or a book by its cover?
9. Rabbi, Gulliver’s best friend, is a handsome man who just hasn’t found the right woman yet, despite being busy and active on the dating circuit. Gulliver suspects his best friend may be even lonelier than he himself is. Can you explain why this might be?
10. Despite Mia’s overtures, Gulliver fights hard not to hope that she might be attracted to him—that they might be able to build something together. Is hope a good thing? Is hope a bad thing? What makes it good? What makes it bad?
11. How does the author use Gulliver’s internal dialogue and the dialogue between characters to develop Gulliver Dowd more fully? Use examples from the book to support your answer.
12. In a mystery, a red herring heightens suspense and adds challenges to the mystery by misleading the reader—or the detective. Go back through *Valentino Pier* and make a list of red herrings.
13. Detective Patrick had been one of Keisha’s friends before she died, a fact that Gulliver only figures out as he goes back through his files on his sister’s murder. He finds it incredible that of all the detectives at the NYPD, Patrick is the one who picked up the case of Ellis Torres. “That happens in life sometimes. Things come together by accident” (ch. 15). Describe a time in your life when things came together by accident.
14. Draw a story map or diagram that shows the main conflicts in *Valentino Pier*. Consider the four types of conflict in literature:
 - a. human vs. human
 - b. human vs. nature
 - c. human vs. society
 - d. human vs. self
15. What is the significance of Gulliver leaving Detective Patrick the way he did in the book’s finale?

