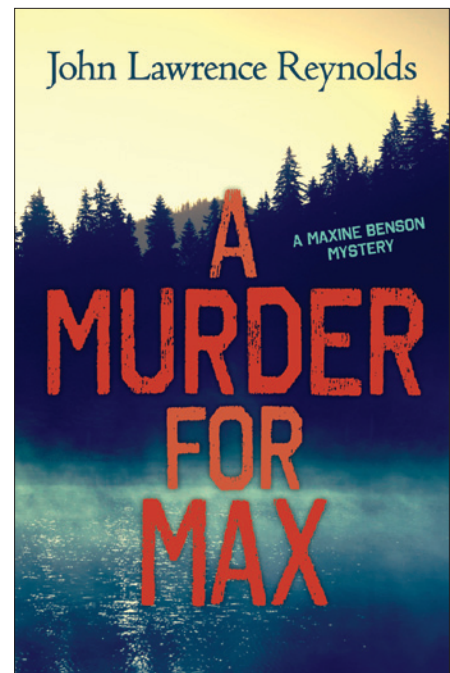


# READING GUIDE



## A MURDER FOR MAX JOHN LAWRENCE REYNOLDS

Reading level: 2.8

Interest level: Adult

Themes: crime fiction, murder mystery,  
police procedural, chief of police, small towns,  
female sleuth, real estate

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### Summary

Newly divorced at 43, Maxine Benson has fled the big-city politics of Toronto policing and is looking for a fresh start in small-town Port Ainslie. A capable and oft-awarded police officer herself, Max works with two staff to oversee all of Port Ainslie: quiet, sad-faced constable Henry Wojak and office manager Margie Burns—a 68-year-old grandmother renowned for her withering armlock.

Max is convinced the town and its council don't think a female can do a proper job as police chief—and she is determined to prove everyone wrong. The best way to do this, she reasons, is to solve a major crime on her own, without the assistance of the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP).

When local ne'er-do-well Billy Ray Edwards shows up dead, Max realizes this is the opportunity she's been waiting for. Billy Ray, while pleasant enough during his childhood years, had grown into a surly, threatening figure disliked by most residents. No one is particularly surprised or unhappy when Billy Ray is killed.

The murderer's motive appears to be Billy Ray's resistance to sell his house. Positioned along one of the most ideal stretches of sandy beach on Port Ainslie's Granite Lake, Billy Ray's property is a key acquisition for a firm that's laying plans to build a resort that will draw much-needed dollars to the town. While the neighbors are all pleased to accept the development company's land purchase offers, Billy Ray is the lone holdout. Even though the developers had offered him a million dollars, he stubbornly refused to sell—and threatened to shoot anyone who came onto his land. Billy Ray's motivation for not selling the house? He didn't want his ex-wife, Deborah, to receive half the money.

Max and Henry Wojak had driven out to the Edwards house at various times in the past to speak with Billy Ray about his conduct in many matters, but their reprimands had always been met with a misogynistic insolence that raised even calm old Henry's hackles. That was Billy Ray, though.

Eventually the developers lost patience with Billy Ray. On Monday, they gave him one week to sell before taking their plans for the resort elsewhere. By Wednesday afternoon Billy Ray is dead,



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shot in the back of the head while sitting in his garage during one of the worst thunderstorms in the town's memory. He was holding a loaded shotgun in his lap, ready to defend his highly contested property.

Although she is under instruction from the town council to hand major crimes over to the OPP, Max decides to conduct her own investigation and try to catch the murderer herself. The fact that Billy Ray is so widely disliked means nearly everyone could be a suspect, especially if they were in the vicinity of the Edwards home during the storm. And many were: a group of furious townsfolk had decided to band together and confront Billy Ray about his selfish refusal to sell his land. They are all at the crime scene when Max rolls up.

It could have been Seth Tornsey, or Seth's girlfriend, Brenda Karp, who had moved in briefly with Billy Ray after his wife walked out on him. Brenda had helped Billy Ray freshen up the house, after which he kicked her out and refused to return her heirloom jewelry.

It could have been realtor Ivan Curic, who had priced all the properties for the resort company. Or vineyard owner Ryan Kelly. Or handsome, affable Ben Black, the plumber to whom Billy Ray owed money. It could even have been Constable Henry Wojak, who arrived on the scene before Max.

Max orders everyone who was present at the scene of the crime to report to her office, at which time she interviews each one. The coroner's report shows Billy Ray was shot with a .22 at around noon—right during the height of the thunderstorm. Many Port Ainslie residents own a .22, so Max has to dig further for more evidence.

Max learns Ben Black was in the area between house calls, to drop in and talk to Billy Ray about the money he was owed. Ben had loaned his rifle to Seth the previous week for target practice. Brenda Karp had taken Seth's gardening truck to Billy Ray's to ask for her jewelry back, but met Sam Little on the way, who informed her that Billy Ray was dead.

At the time of the murder, Ivan Curic was scoping out a possible second site for the resort at Rockcliffe Point. When Ivan returned to his office, he agreed with Seth to form a group of citizens bent on complaining to Billy Ray: Ben, Ryan, Sam, Seth and Brenda. They agreed not to "bother" the police chief but instead settle things with Billy Ray themselves...until they found Billy Ray dead.

Henry reports to Max that he passed Billy Ray leaving Tim Hortons in the rain. Henry also saw Sam Little and Ryan Kelly at Tim Hortons. Ryan was buying donuts and coffee, and was informed by Billy Ray himself that he (Billy Ray) was prepared to sit in his garage with his shotgun as long as it took to protect his land. Through her interrogation Max determines that Ryan was going to visit Deborah Edwards, Billy Ray's soon-to-be-ex-wife. Ryan tells her he joined the group of other disgruntled townspeople around 2 p.m. to talk with Billy Ray.

Gossipy Sam Little explains that Ryan told him what Billy Ray had said at Tim Hortons. He waved Henry down after the storm to suggest the police investigate the truth behind Billy Ray's threat of protecting his property, then went home to lay tile before agreeing to join the others at 2:00. The group approached Billy Ray's together, but when Ivan lifted the door, Billy Ray was already dead.

Max sifts everyone's information, then orders Margie to call the OPP to start their end of the investigation. She drives out to Rockcliffe Point, where Billy Ray's ex Deborah Edwards lives. Deborah is chilly, but confirms that Ryan was with her earlier that day, and that she saw Ivan prospecting at Rockcliffe Point. As the realtor who inspected and priced all the properties, Ivan turns out to have been the only person besides Brenda who knew about the broken window lock in Billy Ray's garage. Ivan was also the one to open the garage door when





everyone knew that Billy Ray was believed to be right inside, poised to kill. Max reasons that Ivan had been at Rockcliffe Point not to scout the resort land, as he claims, but to dispose of the .22 he had used to kill Billy Ray—the same weapon he claimed had been stolen during a break-in years prior.

In the end, Max solves the murder before handing the case over to the OPP. But when Henry points out that she now will have the town council’s respect, Max finds she doesn’t even care anymore.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Talk about the importance of a book’s first line. What makes the first line of *A Murder for Max* so compelling for the reader?
2. As you see it, why do people “question the wisdom” of establishing women in positions of power? Use the U.S. presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump as a starting point. Where else have you seen this issue arising? How does this kind of thinking limit our society’s potential for full development?
3. In chapter 1, we learn that perhaps Max wanted the job of police chief a little too badly, and agreed to an undertaking that wasn’t the optimal fit for her personality or spirit. Think about a time when you wanted something a little too badly. How did it turn out? What do we stand to gain from listening to our instincts instead—and why don’t we do it more?
4. Discuss the setting of *A Murder for Max*. What makes this setting ideal for the way the story plays out? What aspects of the story would have to change if the author had created a different setting?
5. If you were Billy Ray Edwards, would you have sold your property on the shores of Granite Lake? Why or why not?
6. How does the establishment and development of a frustrating character, similar to Billy Ray Edwards, enhance the plot?
7. Billy Ray Edwards is sullen, dark, rude and unlikable. What other book or movie characters have you encountered who have a similar personality?
8. Despite society’s support of the notion that each person pursue their own personal best—to seek careers and relationships that nourish us rather than make us miserable—most people still call a marital breakup a “failed marriage.” Discuss the negative connotations of this term. Should it be labeled as something other than a failure?
9. The main reason Billy Ray holds out on selling his property to the developer is that he doesn’t want his ex, Deborah, to get the money from the sale of the property. Yet in so doing, his behavior negatively affects every single resident of Port Ainslie. People do some pretty extreme things in the name of money. What drives this?
10. Create a character sketch of Ivan, from his beliefs to his physical characteristics to his personality.
11. Do you prefer to live in a small community where you know most of the people, or a larger one where you can live relatively anonymously? Why?





12. In chapter 3, when Max arrives on the scene of the murder, she is struck by the juxtaposition of a dead body with the sound of children playing joyfully nearby. She reflects that life is like that: so much joy—and so much sorrow. As you see it, is there more joy than sorrow? Does aging change the balance?
13. Max is very determined to solve the murder on her own. Eventually, however, she makes the call to get the Ontario Provincial Police involved. What is your opinion of her decision to handle the case alone? Did she do the right thing?
14. How does solving the mystery of Billy Ray's murder release Max from the burden she has always carried about her name?
15. As you see it, was Max warranted in her conviction that the town held a bias against her as a female police chief? Give examples to support your opinion.

