



# READING GUIDE

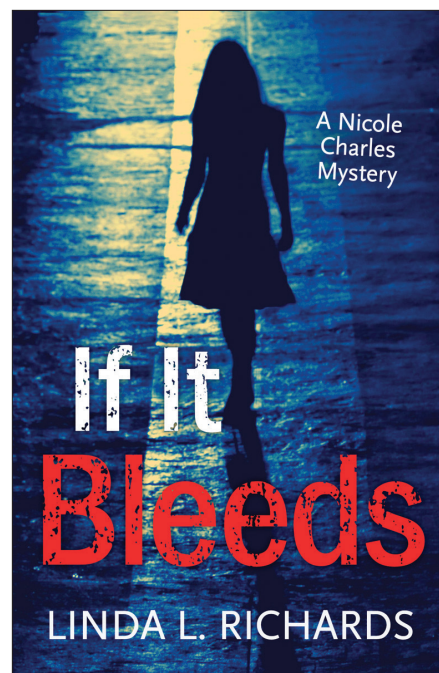
## IF IT BLEEDS LINDA L. RICHARDS

Reading level: 4.0

Interest level: Adult

Themes: crime fiction, murder mystery, female sleuth,  
journalism, newspaper reporter, urban, art world

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### Summary

Journalist Nicole Charles has nothing to complain about: at 27, she works full-time at a city newspaper and can keep a roof over her head—which is more than her journalism classmates can say. Still, covering parties for the society column isn't exactly the hard-hitting reporting she trained to do.

All that changes when artist Steve Marsh dies on the night his show opens at a well-known gallery. Acting on suspicion, Nicole finds him in the back alley, slumped behind the wheel of his Audi with a sharp implement through his throat. It will be a boon for the gallery owner, she realizes: the dramatic death of a promising young artist will push sales through the roof.

Nicole feels badly for Marsh. But she also wants to be the one to break the story. A quick call to her editor, Mike Webb, confirms she can write about it. Nicole is thrilled. She takes photos, calls the police, and gives her statement at the scene—and then hotshot reporter Brent Hartigan turns up. It's not going to be only her story after all.

Upset that Webb doubts her abilities as a reporter, Nicole looks for a unique angle on the story. She finds it in Marsh's girlfriend, Caitlen Benton-Harris, who is interestingly unmoved by the death of her beau. Nicole follows this angle closely, waiting to see what will turn up; she is not going to be outdone by Hartigan.

After the party, Nicole files her story with Webb, who relents, and agrees to let her work alongside Hartigan. But in the morning, when Nicole sees her copy on the front page with Hartigan's byline underneath, she knows she's on her own: there is no such thing as loyalty in the newsroom. To make this story truly hers, she must unearth something Hartigan simply can't.

That "something" arrives with a call from Sergeant Rosa Itani, one of the responding officers on the night of the murder. Itani shows Nicole photographs of the murder weapon—what she thinks is an antique awl and which Nicole's mother subsequently identifies as an ice pick. Itani shares this information with Nicole because she understands that the fire burning in the young reporter's belly will be helpful in uncovering useful information for her own investigation. Since the police



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are still trying to figure out what the murder weapon means, she asks Nicole not to publish the photo for three days.

Nicole pays a visit to Sam, the gallery owner, to gather more information. Following her instincts, Nicole visits Marsh's studio. There she discovers a letter addressed to Sam, at the gallery, terminating their agreement. Among the other people she interviews is Reston Marsh, Steve Marsh's cousin. From Reston she learns of the bad blood between their fathers.

Connecting the dots between a painting she saw in the gallery, Sam's explanation of it, and the ice pick, Nicole follows her instincts to find the man who supplied the ice sculpture for the opening. It turns out he had witnessed a fight between Sam and Steve Marsh just before the opening, as well as another argument between Marsh and an older man. Taking her thoughts for a walk at the harbor, Nicole chances upon a boat featured in one of Marsh's paintings. On board is Eldert Harris, Caitlen Benton-Harris's grandfather, son of an old rum-running clan, and the subject of one of Marsh's most significant paintings. When Eldert informs Nicole that Steve Marsh had been cheating on his granddaughter, Nicole decides to speak with Caitlen herself. To her shock, she learns Steve Marsh and Sam had been having an affair, with the former using Sam in order to get his work exhibited in the high-class gallery. When Marsh broke it off, Sam killed him with an antique ice pick, having selected the murder weapon to make it look like it was Caitlen's grandfather.

The next day, it's Nicole—and not Brent Hartigan—who breaks the big story on the front page.

### Questions for Discussion

1. During the first few pages of *If It Bleeds*, the reader has little idea of where the main character is, or of what's going on. Rather, the opening scene unfolds through a number of actions, hints and character traits, leaving the reader with a number of questions. How does this enhance the storytelling?
2. Reflect on the pacing in the first chapter of the book. What elements add to the tension at the close of this chapter? How does the reader's "not knowing" keep the tension high?
3. In her job as a gossip columnist, Nicole Charles has ended up using nearly none of the skills she originally went to journalism school to acquire. She tours parties, takes photos and writes clever captions to accompany them, when really, she's dying to work as a beat reporter. But consider: how does not ending up doing what we trained for sometimes push and stretch us in new directions? After you have read the whole book, discuss the role Nicole's stifling job played in eventually catapulting her into the world of the news reporter.
4. In chapter 3, Nicole Charles meets Sergeant Itani for the first time. *I figured her to be someone's mom*, she observes. What character traits does this description encompass, without having to spell them out?





5. When Nicole finds Steve Marsh in his car, she is overwhelmed by the deep emotional context of death. She recognizes that while she will write about Marsh's murder, there are things she will leave out of her article:

*I knew that this night had held things I'd always remember. None of that made it into the police report. And I knew none would be in the paper.*

*It didn't have a place.* (ch. 3)

What holds Nicole back from writing about the full extent of her experience?

6. A number of strong female characters are portrayed in *If It Bleeds*. How do they demonstrate competence while not abandoning their femininity? Which character(s) seem to project strength *through* their femininity? Discuss.
7. When Nicole Charles speaks with Erica West about Marsh's girlfriend, Caitlen Benton-Harris, she learns that Caitlen is from a well-known family. "Her father wasn't anyone," says West, "but the mother was of the department store Bentons" (ch. 4). In the face of this information, Nicole reflects on a common truth—that while family forebears might build an empire, subsequent generations often do little more than spend the fortune amassed by their ancestors. If this is the way things often are, why do we tend to ascribe greater importance to people who come from "good families"? Discuss.
8. In chapter 4, when Nicole first speaks with Caitlen about Marsh's death, Caitlen is hostile. "You people make me *sick*," she hisses. "You're like vultures. You're already here. Circling." Yet Nicole persists, determined to make this her story. What is your opinion of reporters and the news media? Is it a job you would want to do? Why or why not?
9. Even though Nicole doesn't have a job as a "serious" reporter, she's still one of the only people in her graduating journalism class to have a full-time job. She has been able to buy a car and clothes and some decent furniture. These are the things Gen Y and Millennials have grown up assuming they will be able to afford in the Western world. After all, it's how they themselves were raised. But things are changing quickly. Do you think Nicole Charles would be able to buy her own piece of property in Vancouver, given today's housing market? Discuss how Gen Y and Millennials are being forced to shift their expectations in today's economy.
10. Nicole Charles is unwavering in her belief that she will do a great job on the Steve Marsh story. She knows she can give Brent Hartigan a run for his money. Write about or discuss another book or movie where the main character is the underdog, sometimes lacking confidence but *knowing* deep down that s/he has the skill and confidence to do the job—perhaps even better than the person who's doing it now.
11. At a couple points in the story, Nicole Charles demonstrates reasoning and an understanding of human nature not all 27-year-olds have. In chapter 9, she desperately wants to set the record straight by telling Mike Webb about how Brent Hartigan stole her story. But she desists, reasoning that none of it will help get her where she wants to go. *I opted instead to go forward*, she reflects. *There didn't seem to be much point in anything else*. When did you come around to this sort of learning, where you were finally able to control your actions enough that you could sit on your anger and impulsive righteousness in order to further your cause? Or is this a skill that some people have, while others don't?



# RAPID READS



12. When Sergeant Itani shows Nicole the photo of the antique ice pick, she mentions that Brent Hartigan has “grandstanded” on her in a couple of cases in the past, and that she wouldn’t mind seeing him taken down a peg or two (ch. 10). What does the term “grandstanding” mean? What do Itani’s words tell Nicole about the young woman’s antagonist?
13. At the end of chapter 21, Nicole observes that the ending to her story has a twist—and that that’s something they don’t teach you about in journalism school: *every truly good ending has a big twist*. Can you disagree?
14. Review how Nicole Charles writes the lead to her first article (chapter 6). Using this pithy, 5W format, write one sentence that effectively summarizes the book’s plot.
15. Why is *If It Bleeds* so apt for this book’s title?



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