



READING GUIDE

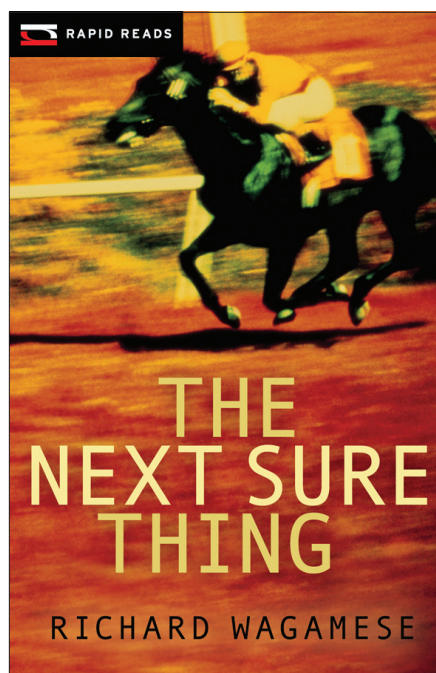
THE NEXT SURE THING RICHARD WAGAMESE

Reading levels: 3.8

Interest level: Adult

Themes: gambling, violence, trust, integrity

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Summary

Cree Thunderboy has talent both as a blues singer/songwriter and as a bettor at the horse races. The 23-year-old has a knack for picking winners by studying the numbers, examining the horses and obeying his intuition.

But Cree's life is forever changed when he meets a slick, well-dressed and powerful man by the name of Win Hardy. Impressed by Cree's ability to put money on the right horses, Hardy offers him a deal he can't refuse: he'll arrange to have Cree record a CD and music videos in return for Cree's advice on which horse will be that day's biggest winner. It sounds too good to be true, and—as Cree's best friend Ashton suspects—it probably is.

Cree quickly figures out he's just signed up to work for a member of Leo Scalia's mob. By the time he realizes he wants out, he learns that Hardy already has Cree's family in his pocket—and that with one misstep, their lives could be on the line. Together, Ashton and Cree agree that they have to come up with a plan to buy Hardy off so that Cree can regain his freedom.

Cree learns that Hardy's horse winnings are being funneled to Solly Dario, a man who covered one of Hardy's bad losses at a Las Vegas casino. Bingo: Cree has discovered Hardy's weakness. Now he can make plans for how to escape the guy and his scary henchmen—if he doesn't get killed first.

Seeking a way out of his predicament, Cree contacts Dario himself. He explains the sticky situation and asks the Mafioso for help in escaping a dangerous spot while paying off Hardy's debt at the same time. In return, he assures Dario he'll let him in on any tips for sure things at the track—but without strings attached.

Agreement in place, Cree studies the numbers. Heart in his mouth, he advises Hardy to bet on a loser while he himself wagers a fistful of Dario's cash on the real winner. Cree comes out the clear victor when he's able to pay off Hardy's debt, leave a little extra in Dario's pocket—and escape the clutches of the mob for good.



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Questions for Discussion

1. Music is Cree's passion—specifically, playing the blues. What's your passion? What would you spend your time on, for no pay, just because you love it so much?
2. Cree talks a lot about what "real bluesmen" are like. As you see it, is he subscribing too heavily to an archetype of how he "should" behave? Are there advantages to this way of thinking? Disadvantages?
3. After you've read the first chapter, take a moment to reflect on how *The Next Sure Thing* is written. What makes the writing in this book different from the writing in other books you have read? You may have noticed a feeling of authenticity—the feeling that Cree could actually be a real guy telling you this story in his own voice. How does this feeling of authenticity add to the reading experience?
4. When Cree is at the track, just before he meets Hardy for the first time, he's so excited that his legs are bouncing up and down. This is the author's way of creating a clear picture in the reader's mind. Write three similar phrases to visually describe a feeling you have experienced. Your phrases could explore anger, for example, or maybe passion, fear or joy.
5. Hardy explains to Cree that the nervous energy in his legs is his "tell." What's your tell?
6. Cree doesn't normally open up and trust people, but for some reason he trusts Hardy—and ends up telling him all about how he figures out which horse to bet on. Hardy is one of those people with charisma—a compelling charm that inspires the devotion of other people. Charismatic people are all around us—sometimes good, sometimes not so good. Write about a person in your world who has charisma. Do you perceive this person's charisma in a positive light?
7. When Cree wins his first race and Hardy takes him for a drink, we see that Cree is sharply observant of Hardy's body language and habits. As the story goes on, keep a list of how these observations assist Cree in gaining a greater understanding of Hardy.
8. We get a very clear picture of Cree's personality from his dialogue and interactions with other people. On a blank sheet of paper, create a character map of Cree. What do you know about his personality? His values? His dreams? Add to this character map as you read through the book.
9. When Hardy finally convinces Cree to go to work for him, Cree tells him that it all sounds too easy. Hardy laughs, and replies that the best things always are. How is Hardy right? How is he wrong? Explain.
10. In chapter 4, Jerry and Vic force Cree to sign the papers for Hardy. Ashton doesn't like what's happening. If you could give Cree some advice at this point in the story, what would it be?
11. Cree decides to bet some of Hardy's money without the boss's knowledge, to show Hardy he's not a pushover. But Ashton thinks it's dangerous. Cree tells his friend he doesn't see the problem, and Ashton agrees that he won't—until after it's done. How is this true in other areas of life?





12. Loyalty is a central theme in *The Next Sure Thing*. When Hardy finds out Cree bet on a horse without his knowledge, he delivers the young man a tough talk—brutal, actually—about loyalty. As you see it, what is loyalty? When is it healthy? When is it not?
13. Cree learns that by signing the documents to work with Hardy, he has basically put his family on the line. His life has taken on a completely different direction in a matter of hours. Life is like that—although not always on such a terrifying scale! Write about a time when your life—or the life of someone you know—changed completely in a short span of time.
14. Ashton tells Cree the mobsters don't have enough brains or skills to do anything for themselves. But they do have skills, because they are incredibly powerful and effective in getting their way. Using what you already know about the mafia, make a list of the skill set a Mafioso must have to get the job done.
15. What does it say about Ashton that he sticks by Cree throughout all the drama and danger in the story? Write about a character from a different book or movie who demonstrates this kind of unshakable loyalty.
16. In chapter 15, when Cree explains his plan to Ashton, his friend is nervous to the point of wondering whether he'll even see his thirtieth birthday. Cree tells him it's all about the road and not the map. What does he mean by this? How is this true in the real world?

