

READING GROUP GUIDE

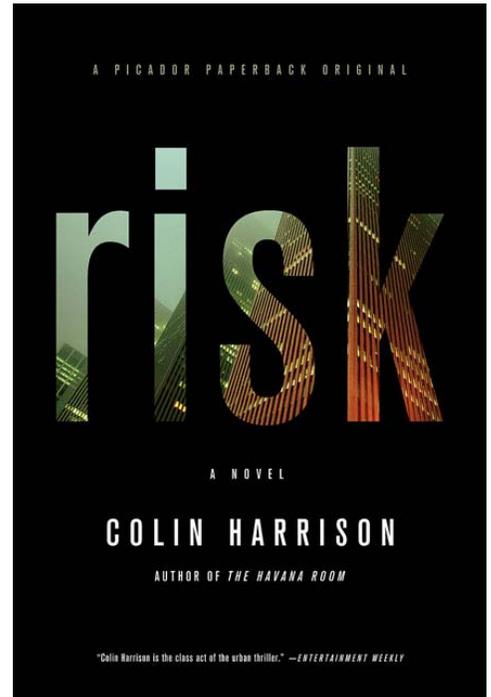
Risk

A Novel

by Colin Harrison

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Risk* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Risk*.

About the Book

George Young is a quiet, middle-aged man with a handy little talent – more than twenty years as an attorney at a top insurance firm has given him a nose for suspicious claims. By default he has fallen into the modest profession of a white collar detective, so when Mrs. Corbett, the widow of his firm’s founder, needs a little dirty work done, she knows just where to go. Her request is simple: find out why Roger, her down and out son, stepped in front of a truck and was killed. Much as George would like to decline Mrs. Corbett’s assignment, some years earlier her husband had plucked him from obscurity as a young attorney at the city prosecutor’s office, and this debt compels him to help her. The investigation ultimately uncovers a side to Roger that Mrs. Corbett

never knew existed, and George is faced with a few dramatic revelations about himself as well. Colin Harrison's *Risk* is more than just a mystery, it's a multi-layered tale about the perils of truly knowing, and of not knowing, one's self.

About the Author

Colin Harrison's previous novels, *The Finder*, *The Havana Room*, *Afterburn*, *Manhattan Nocturne*, *Bodies Electric*, and *Break and Enter*, have been published in a dozen countries. He and his wife, the writer Kathryn Harrison, live in Brooklyn, New York, with their three children.

Discussion Questions

1. When Mrs. Corbett asks George to investigate her son's death, she already assumes that it was an accident – what she really wants to know is why Roger was standing on the particular corner where he was killed. How does her motivation set *Risk* apart from other mysteries? Is this a mystery without a murderer?
2. Why do you think Roger was drawn to Eliska, what about her entranced him (was he, in fact, entranced)? And do you think that she merely used him, or that she may have had sincere feelings?
3. Roger's wife, Valerie, divorces him when he is unable to get back on his feet. Is her behavior ruthless, or did Roger default on the expectations of their marriage to provide her with a prosperous life? Is she partly responsible for Roger's death?
4. When George is in Roger's storage unit, he finds a pair of boots that fit him perfectly, and he decides to walk off with them. Why do you think George feels entitled to the boots? Do you think that he identifies with Roger in some way, and is here beginning to sense their connection?
5. Money plays an important role in *Risk* – While George lives in pleasant middle-class security, Roger took risks and soon found himself dangerously close to the black market money that courses outside of legal systems of commerce. Discuss all of the characters' financial status, their views on money, and how money has gotten some of them into trouble.
6. From Eliska's hands to the Christmas ornaments to the maps, common items are imbued with uncommon worth in *Risk*. Discuss what exactly makes these items valuable – their history, their desirability – and the mysterious power of appraisal as it is played out in the book. Consider as well some of the fishy insurance claims that George is investigating – what does it mean to insure something that is priceless?

7. George briefly profits from his investigation when he sells the Christmas ornaments to a precious metals dealer, but then purges himself of the spoils. Why does George choose to do this, would you do the same? What are the risks of keeping the money?
8. From SoHo to Rockefeller Center to Canarsie, *Risk* is a virtual tour of New York City. Discuss the ways in which the city is a character in the story.
9. Discuss George's approach as a detective, he seems to have a very light touch. For example, he manages to hand off the ornaments and outfox the Russian mobsters with a few carefully orchestrated moves, and some lucky timing – no gunplay, no violence. In what ways are George's modest methods of handling a dangerous situation realistic? Is he perhaps easier to sympathize with than a superspy or a more hardboiled gumshoe?
10. At the end of Chapter 4, George's wife Carol notices on the video of Roger's death that he is about to walk toward Grand Central, but then turns around. They speculate that he was about to walk in the direction of his old life in the suburbs. The moment is haunting. How would you describe the overall tone of *Risk*? Does it have a certain elegiac, ruminative quality? Did you find that unusual for a mystery?
11. Roger, George and Mrs. Corbett each stand at the threshold between knowing and not-knowing a vital piece of information that will change their lives. Is pursuing information about oneself always risky? Are we sometimes better off not knowing the full story? How would you have handled George's assignment?
12. How would you judge Mr. Corbett's character – surely he did not treat his wife well, but do you think he redeemed himself by supporting George from afar? Did he perhaps help George too much, was his interference not entirely a favor?
13. We all have an origin story – a narrative that describes where we come from – but do these sometimes mythic tales truly explain who we are? If the story changes, as it does for George, does that mean you are a different person?

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