

Broadway Books Readers' Guide

Something Missing

A Novel

Matthew Dicks

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"A quirky and endearing first novel that makes you wonder if that misplaced stick of butter or can of soup means there's a burglar prowling your pantry. If that thief is Martin Railsback, you might be glad. He's the kind of burglar you could conceivably *want* in your house."

--M. Ann Jacoby, author of *Life after Genius*

"A funny, suspenseful, and thoroughly original debut that will keep you up to the wee hours flipping pages, having to explain your bloodshot eyes the next day. Damn you, Matthew Dicks—now everyone thinks I've been crying."

--David Rosen, author of *I Just Want My Pants Back*

About This Guide

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Matthew Dicks's *Something Missing*. We hope they will enrich your experience as you go on the prowl with Martin Railsback, Jr., the world's most endearing burglar.

Introduction

You've never met a thief like Martin, who will steal your heart—along with your laundry detergent, salad dressing, and other household necessities. A gentle oddball with an obsessive-compulsive nature, Martin has chosen an unusual occupation: He is a professional pilferer. Year after year, he has quietly stolen a cache of items from his select roster of "clients" without their ever noticing. A diverse population of married couples who fit his strict criteria, they go about their days unaware that Martin knows their schedules, their peccadilloes, and their most "secret" hiding places even better than they do. But when a tiny slip leads him dangerously close to being found out, his fragile world begins to shatter. By turns suspenseful and charming, *Something Missing* is a rare find.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the novel's title. What is missing from Martin's life? What is missing in the lives of his clients?
2. Traditionally, a client is someone who asks for services. Why do you think Martin views his victims as clients? What services does he provide?

3. What do Martin's obsessive-compulsive tendencies say about his emotional state? Besides the practical reasons, what are the common emotional threads running throughout his various rules (such as acquiring only items that won't be missed, and never falling into a routine for entering and exiting)? Why is he drawn to a profession that makes him invisible?
4. How did your impressions of Martin shift throughout the novel?
5. In chapter two, Martin meets Alfredo, the Grants' parrot. What makes Alfredo the ideal new friend for Martin?
6. How did you react to the excess possessions of Martin's clients? Did you see it as waste or as enviable abundance that the Reeds disposed of their uneaten fresh produce, or that the Grants had accumulated a hutch full of unused china, crystal, and silverware?
7. Would you have gone to the trouble of replacing Cindy Clayton's toothbrush with a clean one? Why does Martin?
8. Chapter Five describes Martin's triumphs on eBay (spurred when he invents "Barbara Teal") and his obsession with creating a perfect business model. As a scavenger, does Martin in some ways follow the traditional principles of successful corporations?
9. When Martin sends the note to Alan Clayton at the end of chapter six, he very likely saves a marriage. Why was Alan so blind to one of the most intimate aspects of his own life?
10. Why does Martin feel so compelled to help Justine Ashley keep her husband's party a surprise? What accounts for the level of involvement he feels with so many of his clients?
11. Discuss Martin's relationship with his mother and stepfather, and his reunion with his father. How did his childhood affect his sense of self-worth? How would you respond if one of your grown children took household items from you without permission?
12. When Martin rescues Sophie and Sherman Pearl, he opens the door to a new life. How did the reality of meeting them (after circumstances that resembled Jim's lateral-thinking riddle) compare to his fantasy of them? What is it like for him to experience an honest conversation with Sophie? How would you have reacted to his story if you had been in her shoes?
13. How did you feel about the security of your own home after reading *Something Missing*? Will you think twice the next time something turns up missing?
14. What do you predict for Martin's future with Laura Green?

15. If you were going to pursue Martin's profession, which houses in your neighborhood would you want to "investigate"? Whose house are you most curious about?

About the Author

Matthew Dicks has contributed to the Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service, the *Hartford Courant*, and other publications. An award-winning elementary school teacher, he also owns and operates a DJ company. He lives in West Hartford, Connecticut.