



READING GUIDE

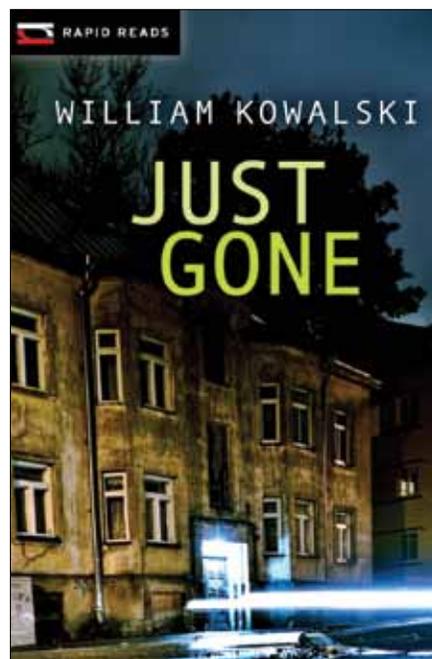
JUST GONE WILLIAM KOWALSKI

Reading level: 3.0

Interest level: Adult

Themes: homelessness, poverty, crime, magic realism

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Summary

Living in the ghetto, Mother Angelique made the decision early not to be one of the dozens of women who got left high and dry by unreliable men. Instead, she spends her life helping the children of those same women, reasoning there are already enough kids in the world and not enough adults to care for them responsibly. She works in a shelter in the same neighborhood in which she has always lived.

One day, two children arrive at the shelter. Chantay and Jamal immediately take a special place in Angelique's heart, perhaps because their mother has been shot, but also because Angelique has never before seen a boy so badly bitten by rodents. Angelique becomes interested in Jamal's continual references to a man named Jacky Wacky. The boy often refers to Jacky Wacky as "getting" people who abuse children. Initially, Angelique believes the man is simply part of an elaborate story Jamal has created to explain his unpredictable, hurtful world—as is the way of shelter children.

Over time, the story of Jacky Wacky takes shape. He's an adult who dresses in rags and always carries two suitcases, one black and one white. Reputed to have supernatural powers, street kids know he protects children and punishes the adults who abuse them.

Realizing the children's mother has been left dead in her apartment for days, Mother Angelique calls an old police friend, Sergeant Kosinski, to investigate. Wanting to keep the children out of the hands of social services, Angelique convinces Kosinski she can arrange a placement. She hurries the children into the care of Mrs. Mingus, a pious woman who sometimes helps out at the shelter.

When Mrs. Mingus turns out to be the wrong person to look after vulnerable children, Chantay—pregnant and convinced the baby's drug-dealer father will provide for her—opts for life on the streets rather than trust Mother Angelique to relocate her. Jamal disappears as if by magic. In her search for Chantay and her brother, Angelique learns from a street child that Jamal has been keeping company with someone who sounds exactly like the Jacky Wacky he used to describe.



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Time passes and Chantay returns to the shelter briefly. Ruined by crack, she confesses to Mother Angelique that Jamal took her baby away in order to look after him better—and that he spends all his time with Jacky Wacky.

Cancer overtakes Mother Angelique. As she convalesces in the wake of surgery, she takes time off work. One night, the shelter burns down, and she is chilled to learn from a witness that a man who matches Jacky Wacky’s description gathered up all the children during the fire and took them away. Angelique calls in Sergeant Kosinski, and assures him the children are all safe.

Yet there’s a man in hospital who was badly burned in the fire and who was found with the missing children. And he’s asking to see Mother Angelique. Together, Angelique and Sergeant Kosinski travel to the hospital to visit him. It’s Jamal. He’s spent years raising up Chantay’s boy, M’kwon, to take over his work in making the ghetto safer for its most vulnerable inhabitants.

After Jamal dies, Angelique makes it her mission to find M’kwon. As a woman who has spent her life serving God, she is compelled to find the answer to her questions: is Jacky Wacky a manifestation of divine judgment, right here on earth? And is his role passed down from one ghetto child to another over time? Her answer comes one night as she walks home through the gang-ridden streets of her neighborhood. When she’s victimized by a bunch of purse-snatchers, Jacky Wacky appears out of thin air to disperse the group. Though he won’t answer her direct questions about how he gets his power and what he keeps in that black suitcase he’s always carrying around, when he disappears into the night Angelique realizes that, like much of the divine, it’s beyond her understanding. She’s just going to have to trust that there is good in the world after all.

Questions for Discussion

1. Mother Angelique starts *Just Gone* by reflecting on her purpose in life: to look after the children that other people leave behind. She has held this conviction for a number of years. Do you know your purpose or mission in life? Why is a personal mission so clear for some, yet so unclear for others?
2. Select any page from chapter 1 of this book. Underline or highlight areas where Angelique’s unique voice comes through. At this point in the story, what can you tell about her just by the way she speaks and thinks? Provide as much detail as possible.
3. In chapter 2, Angelique initially suspects Jamal and Chantay are being “cagey” with her when she asks about their histories. What does this word mean? If you didn’t know what it meant, how could you use the surrounding context to create an understanding of its meaning?
4. What city do you think the story is set in? What is the author’s reason for leaving it nameless?
5. Angelique ends up putting the children in Mrs. Mingus’s care while ignoring her deeper instincts about the older woman. What is your feeling about intuition and instinct? Does it work for you? Explain, using examples from your life.
6. In chapter 6, when Angelique realizes her mistake in placing the children with Mrs. Mingus, an argument ensues with Chantay in which the girl refuses to believe Mother Angelique





has their best interests at heart. Instead of returning to the shelter to start again, Chantay storms off, convinced the drug dealer who has impregnated her will provide her with better circumstances. Angelique reflects that life has taught her some hard lessons—the hardest being that she can't teach people from her own experience. Rather, she has to let them make their own mistakes. Give an example of when you have witnessed this truth in your own life or in the lives of those around you. Why is this such a truism?

7. From time to time, Angelique talks about people's experience with "the machine." To what sociological and economic constructs is she referring? Explain the concept like you would to someone who has never heard of it.
8. Mother Angelique cares for the people who get "chewed up by the machine and spit out": the hookers, the addicts, the homeless, the children. These people are born into poverty that is terribly difficult to escape. What is your view on fate? Divinity? Why are some people born into seemingly charmed lives while others are consigned to suffering?
9. One night the shelter catches fire, and Angelique reflects that while she has a hard time getting people to volunteer, there's certainly no shortage of people willing to watch it burn (ch. 9). Why is this? Can you justify your explanation as being indicative of human nature as a whole? Or is it dependent on circumstances?
10. Angelique has spent her whole life on foot, walking from one place to another in the ghetto in which she lives. How different would your life look if you were to do everything on foot? Map a typical day. What would change? Over time, what things would you give up to make life easier?
11. In chapter 10, Mother Angelique and Sergeant Kosinski meet at the hospital. Angelique reflects that they're just two old warriors at the end of the battle, wondering whether they have managed to do any good in the world. Write your eulogy. What would you like it to say about the way you lived your life?
12. Jacky Wacky is a persona...and a tradition that's passed on from one person to the next. There can only be one practicing Jacky Wacky at any time. What similar traditions (religious or secular) can you think of that are passed along in this way?
13. At Jamal's funeral in chapter 12, Mother Angelique realizes that despite her doubts, she has in fact had a powerful impact on the hundreds of people who have passed through the shelter. Talk about another character—living or dead—who has similarly touched individual lives. Use myths, traditional stories, books and movies as your base for discussion.
14. In chapter 14, Mother Angelique observes that nothing gets better in the city despite political leaders' promises to the contrary. *Crime comes from poverty*, she reflects, *and no one has done anything about that*. Generally speaking, she's right. Why is this so?
15. What is your opinion of the book's title? Develop two different titles that could also be used for this book.

