



READING GUIDE

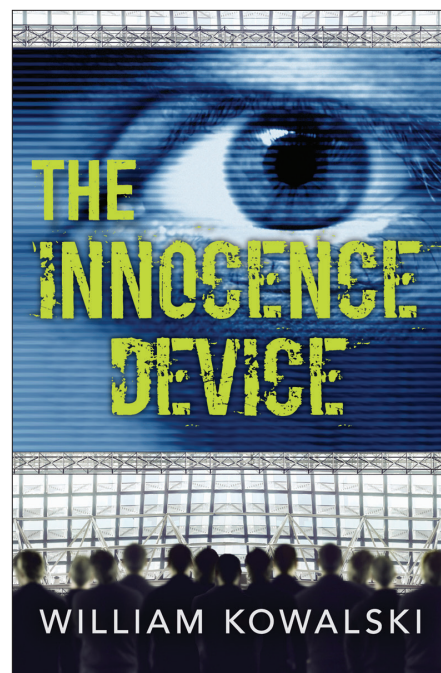
THE INNOCENCE DEVICE WILLIAM KOWALSKI

Reading level: 3.5

Interest level: Adult

Themes: dystopian, totalitarianism, crime, big business,
freedom, technology, speculative fiction

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Summary

Chago is a prisoner in the walled city of McDowell. It is 2147. All prisoners are kept behind the Wall. Nearly all men in the world are prisoners, because the laws are so strict that nearly every misdemeanor—from crime to mere impoliteness—warrants jail time. Free women live in the city as well, choosing to live with their incarcerated partners rather than alone. The city has evolved over time into a fully-functioning society, complete with children, houses and an independent economy. No one knows what goes on outside the Wall, nor whether there is a world beyond it. Everything belongs to and is controlled by JustiCorps.

Chago has been in prison since he was a boy. Many people are in the same situation. They know nothing else—just the squalor and hard-scrabble living that their day-to-day existence offers. Theft and violence are common due to the desperate living conditions. Chago has a job as an artisan, but his earnings are not enough to offset his poverty. He keeps his head down and works, looking forward to the rare visits from his son, Jim-Jim, and the boy's mother, Corazon. Corazon and Chago are not a couple. The woman, a prison guard, simply chose Chago to be the father of her child—a necessity since nearly all men are in prison. She is firm, however, in her belief that a boy needs his father, and so she allows Chago to see Jim-Jim on occasion. Chago lives for these times. He is afraid someone will see this tiny point of joy in his world and take it away from him.

One day, the Warden announces a new invention to reduce overcrowding in the city. It's called the Innocence Device, and it works simply: a prisoner passes through its energy field, and the device discerns whether that person is indeed a criminal, or whether he has been wrongly convicted. Those who have been wrongly convicted earn a ticket to freedom outside the Wall; those found to be criminals are killed instantly. People line up for a chance to go through the device.

Before long, a riot breaks out, led by Krios, the leader of the prisoners. He lives at the center of the city with the other wealthy (and corrupt) prisoners. Krios and his men have wrested control of the Innocence Device and are planning to force all the JustiCorps guards through it. Chago panics: that means Corazon is going to go through—and what if she's killed? She needs to take care of Jim-Jim. Chago raises his voice to Krios in protest, and as a result, Corazon is shot outright.



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Devastated, Chago is forced to carry her body out of the city for disposal.

On the outside, he is met by the JustiCorps elite, who have the city surrounded, and who promise him freedom in exchange for information about Krios's plans. But Chago doesn't want their brand of freedom. He just wants his son. He returns to the city, and is inaugurated into Krios's gang for not deserting his brothers.

In his new position of power, Chago arranges for Krios himself to go through the Innocence Device. The device instantly kills Krios and his henchmen, leaving Chago a hero and in control of the city. The Warden, who has until now been locked away in the prison administration building, is brought out and similarly destroyed by the device. As JustiCorps warships descend on the city to restore order, Chago is faced with a choice: stay and fight to the death? Or surrender, and remain forever a prisoner? He chooses neither, opting instead to find his son. In his haste, Chago unwittingly passes through the Innocence Device—and receives his judgment.

Unexpectedly freed by the device, Chago finishes out his life on the outside, watching his son grow and raise a family of his own in a changed, and healthier, world.

Questions for Discussion

1. Setting refers to the time and place in which a story occurs. Describe the setting of *The Innocence Device*. Can you sketch the way it looks in your mind? How does the setting expand as the story progresses?
2. In *The Innocence Device*, much of the world's population is contained within prison walls. An entire civilization has sprung up inside the Wall. In what other books or movies have you encountered an entire society contained within a physical boundary? Where has this occurred throughout human history? What do these civilizations share in common?
3. Krios lives at the center of the city, inside the old prison building. This is a place where only the wealthy reside, where privilege "radiates outward from the center," and where "the closer you are to the center, the more you have to lose" (ch. 1). Examine this idea. How is this true of the real world? How does this truism breed fear?
4. Most of the prisoners live in squalor. They have little food, scant shelter, few possessions and few obligations. This is in sharp contrast to how the wealthy prisoners and JustiCorps employees live. Who would you argue lives more freely? Explain.
5. *JustiCorps* is good and merciful. Brainwashing? Truth? Or force-fed doctrine? Discuss. How do different characters view JustiCorps?
6. It is considered very bad manners in McDowell for people to look inside the doors of each other's homes. Why is this?
7. How does the finale of chapter 1 pique the reader's interest? What do you want to know after reading it? Circle back to this chapter ending once you have finished the book. Are you any closer to understanding what Chago was referring to with the following observation?: *If the world could see inside him, they would see what kind of person he really is. And they would destroy him in a moment.*
8. Prisoners in McDowell live independently, in homes of their own construction. They also work in exchange for money—yet if JustiCorps is supposed to feed all the prisoners three





times a day, could it be argued that they are meant to be looking after the people's basic needs? If so, what is the need for a money-driven economy?

9. The Innocence Device is able to discern whether a person has done "bad" things in their lifetime. It will exterminate those who have and exonerate those who have not. But "bad" is highly subjective—isn't it? For example, as a child, Chago killed a bully in defense of his own wellbeing, because the boy was stealing his food. Does this make him bad? Talk about the moral grey area surrounding the concept of "bad," and how it relates to the prisoners' feelings about the Innocence Device.
10. When the prisoners learn of the Innocence Device, Binny is keen to go through it. He hates his life as a prisoner, so either way, going through the device will set him free. On one hand, if he is found to be a criminal, the device will kill him. On the other, if he has done no wrong, he will be set free outside the Wall. He doesn't care about the means; he just wants his freedom. Many other prisoners, however, don't see it that way. What do you think? Would you feel the same way as Binny? Is holding on to life worthwhile if it means you're never able to live freely?
11. Good descriptive writing shows readers, through expressions, bodily sensations and actions, what a character is feeling. There might not be any direct mention of a character's emotional state at all. Here's an example of showing from chapter 7 where Chago first hears the prisoners are taking over the city:

Chago is electrified. He can't believe what he's hearing. He has never heard those words before. He feels his heart leap in his chest. Suddenly, he feels a thousand pounds lighter.

What is Chago's emotional state in this paragraph? How do you know? Find other places in the book where the author shows us how a character feels instead of simply labeling their emotions. Why is this effective?

12. At the end of chapter 7, the prisoners go crazy with joy when Krios tells them JustiCorps has been overthrown. Why are humans so eager to hitch their wagons to an enigmatic leader? Where have you seen similar fervor throughout history? What is at the root of this yearning to follow?
13. When Krios addresses him in chapter 11, Chago reflects that if there's one thing he has learned from being in prison, it's how to keep his mouth shut. How does silence confer power?
14. A central question in the book is whether one should take the chance of passing through the Innocence Device, allowing it to read one's entire history of conduct. How would our current justice system change if this kind of knowledge were readily available?
15. When Chago wakes up and suddenly finds himself in a position of power, he notices that no one speaks to him. Everyone gives him a wide berth. He is regarded with awe. Discuss the aphorism that "it's lonely at the top."

