



# READING GUIDE

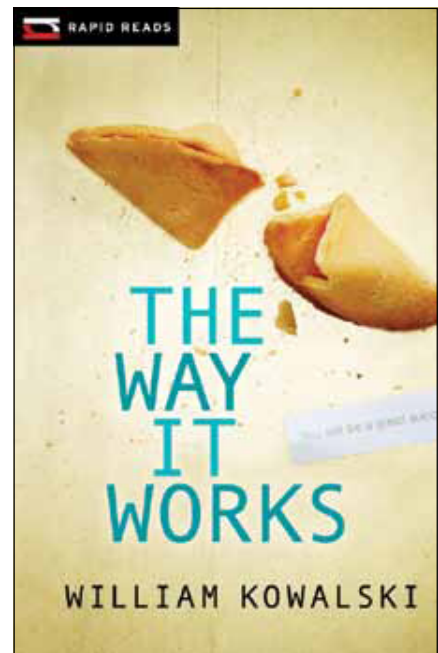
## THE WAY IT WORKS WILLIAM KOWALSKI

Reading level: 2.6

Interest level: Adult

Themes: racism, beating the odds, determination,  
literacy

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### Summary

After his uninsured mother succumbs to lung cancer, 20-year-old Walter Davis sells their possessions and moves into his car. Armed with an associate degree in business administration, Walter hits the pavement every day in his best suit, searching for a job in finance. But the economy is on the skids, and every day Walter returns to his car—jobless, worried, and a few dollars shorter than he was the day before.

Unwilling to let circumstances defeat him, Walter takes care to present himself well at every opportunity. He's a religious follower of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*—and he makes the habits work for him.

At the postal center where he keeps a mailbox, an attractive young woman catches Walter's eye. One day, he summons the courage to ask her out—and is astonished when she accepts. On their date, Walter's got all the right moves, even down to dropping a bit of Mandarin into the conversation to impress Yolanda's Chinese mother. The two hit it off. Walter just prays Yolanda won't figure out that he's homeless.

But soon after their first date, things start to go sideways. Walter's car gets towed; he loses all the cash he has so carefully managed since his mother passed away; he lands a job only to find it's part of an elaborate Ponzi scheme. Ashamed at his rapidly deteriorating situation, he avoids seeing Yolanda again.

But Walter doesn't spend too long feeling sorry for himself. Instead, he strikes a deal with the owner of the car impound lot to deliver packages for nearly half the price of a regular courier. With perseverance and professionalism, Walter gradually establishes a client base for his growing courier company. Once he's got his life under control again, he comes clean to Yolanda and her family. In the end, the two end up partners in business—and partners for life.





### Questions for Discussion

1. Experts say most North Americans are only a paycheck away from homelessness. How do you feel about the fact that it could be so easy to find yourself suddenly in Walter's position—without a place to call home?
2. As a group, discuss the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Instructors may wish to make an at-level "cheat sheet" of the habits, summarized for your students' benefit. Select three or four that you think are the most important. Explain why you chose these ones. Use examples to support your reasoning.
3. Walter's mother once told him the world judges a man by the way he dresses. Do you agree? Should it be this way? When have you found yourself judging someone by the way they look? Does this belief impact the way you present yourself?
4. Who do you think is more correct: Walter's mother, who says we are judged by how we present ourselves; or Yolanda, who says it's what's inside that counts? Are they each correct in different ways?
5. Authors frequently employ a literary device called a *simile* to enhance an image. They do this by making a comparison using the words *like* or *as*. An example from *The Way It Works* is where Walter describes Yolanda's laugh: "It sounds like a handful of silver coins jingling." Can you find other examples of similes from the book? Why are similes sometimes more powerful descriptors than plain narrative?
6. When Walter finds out the financial firm that just hired him has been broken up for running a Ponzi scheme, he is reminded of his friend Scooby's words: *if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is*. Where have you found this to be true in your life?
7. At the end of chapter 8, Walter mentions one of the seven habits of highly effective people: *know what you want and work for it*. But for a lot of people, knowing what they want is an elusive thing. Why do we sometimes have so much trouble articulating our dreams?
8. Walter is a courageous and resilient man. He knows how to take a problem and turn it into an opportunity, just like he did when he offered to deliver the envelope for the owner of the car impound lot. How does this resilience set Walter up for success? Do you share this trait? Can resilience be strengthened?
9. In chapter 10, Scooby tells Walter if a man can't make a living, he has no pride. As you see it, why is our self-worth so tied to our ability to provide for ourselves and our families? Explain your reasoning.
10. Walter reasons that people don't want to hire a courier who "looks slick." He chooses to dress the part, with a blue jumpsuit and a clearly visible nametag. Walter has a very sophisticated understanding of how people think and perceive others. How does this understanding of the human psyche benefit Walter throughout the course of the story?
11. Walter and Scooby react differently to the blows life deals them. Compare and contrast these two characters on this basis.





12. At several points in the story, Walter keeps pushing ahead when the world seems like it's crashing down around him. Even though things keep getting worse, he knows it would be dangerous to allow himself to feel sorry for himself. So—even though he has no idea what's coming next—he keeps putting one foot in front of the other. How does this refusal to give up help Walter get back on top of his life?
13. Why does it sometimes take such courage to apologize?
14. For what reasons does Walter choose to employ people at the homeless shelter? What's in it for him?
15. Discuss the significance of the book's title.

