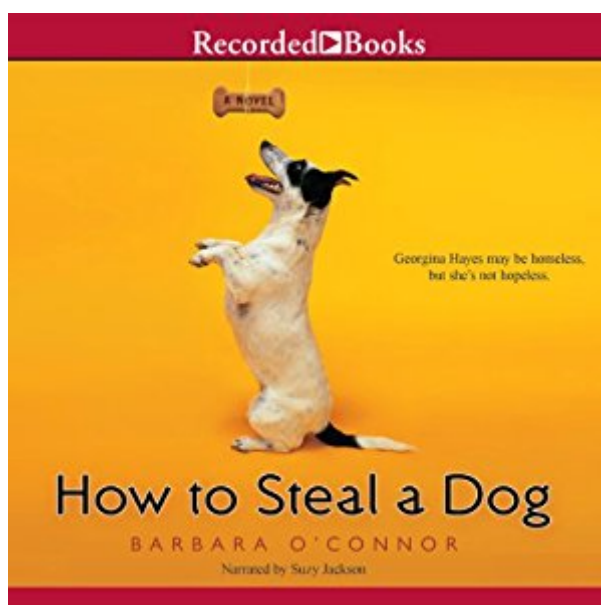


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# How To Steal A Dog



## Synopsis

Barbara O'Connor's *How to Steal a Dog* blew critics away and quickly became a fan-favorite. After being abandoned by her father, Georgina Hayes is forced to spend much of her time watching her younger brother, while their mother works two jobs to make ends meet. When she sees a missing-dog poster offering a \$500 reward, Georgina cooks up a scheme to steal a look-a-like dog and claim the reward. But things don't quite go as planned.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"How to Steal a Dog" by Barbara O'Connor surprised me, not simply because it covered serious subjects of separation, homelessness, and theft, but also because of how Barbara O'Connor tackled issues. Dark problems are not often explored in children's books. When they are, they rarely feel so real to life. Georgina's father walked out on the family, leaving them without enough money to continue to rent an apartment. His departure is never explained, but the ache left in Georgina's heart is succinctly summarized in one heartbreaking sentence: "I wanted my daddy to come on home and change everything back to the way it was before." The embarrassment she feels about living in a car is also apparent in another compact sentence: "If there was ever a time when I wished the earth would open up and swallow me whole, it was when I turned around and saw Luanne looking at me and that car and all." While the book revolves around a homeless family, it never becomes the equivalent of an after-school special designed to raise reader awareness about the plight of the homeless. It also never stoops to using their homelessness as a backdrop for the tale. Chapter after chapter, we feel the impact of homeless life: The family lives out of a car; They need

to change locations regularly to avoid being arrested; They eat whatever free meals the mom can scrounge from the restaurant where she works; Their clothes and hair become scuffier in appearance. In the middle of this misery, Georgina sees a reward poster for a lost dog, which inspires her idea to steal a dog: After all, a \$500 reward would provide the family with a home. The book revolves around her putting this plan in action. This is a children's book, which means we know that Georgina will probably not end up in prison. What we don't know is whether Georgina will figure out that stealing is not a good idea. Yet the book never becomes a tract against theft. Georgina struggles with her conscience when she first meets the owner of the dog she stole, later when she decides to tie the dog up at an abandoned house until she can return it for a reward, and many more times throughout the book. In the end, her life does not suddenly become perfect, but this is all the more satisfying for this is how the book remains real.

I really liked this one. Georgina is desperate; it seems like her overwhelmed mother will never keep her promises to her children, after their father leaves and they are forced to live in their car. Georgina is tired of sleeping in the car, never having her homework, fearing that her classmates will find out. So she naively hatches her plan--steal a dog, then claim the reward. She is too young and hopeful to imagine what could go wrong, but it all does. And she struggles with guilt--for lying, for hurting those she starts to care about: the dog Willie and Carmella, his owner. As she struggles with the problems she has created, and talks with a homeless man who tries to help her, with his help she sees that "Sometimes the trail you leave behind is more important than the path ahead of you." Yes, there are troubling moral issues here, but that's an opportunity to discuss: is it wrong to act badly under bad circumstances? What else could she have done? What would you have done in her place? As a librarian and a mom, I can see a lot of potential for considering people less fortunate than most of us, and for talking about choices and consequences. I plan to read this one to my three kids, ages 8-12.

"How to Steal a Dog" is such a catchy little title with such a cute little dog posed against the cheeriest of colors that I assumed humor would jump off the pages. Not so. Actually, I initially missed that dog bone tied to a string. All is not as it appears. Be forewarned: This is a sad book. Even the conclusion, which reverses the terrible existence of one family's homelessness, is sad. But that's the point: The numbing reality of too many Americans is homelessness. Another numbing reality is the woman whose husband runs off, leaving her with the children and all the responsibility. An already poor circumstance soon renders a woman on the streets, or in this case, living in their

car. Georgina, the character through whose viewpoint we access the story, is so embarrassed that she won't tell her best friend. When she does, the friend deserts her, treating her, more or less, like an untouchable. Georgina and her brother pretty much fend for themselves because the mother works two jobs. To deflect suspicion about a parked car in one place too long, the mother parks in a new spot each morning before she goes off to work and the children to school. To help raise enough money for a real home--an apartment, house, whatever, it doesn't matter--Georgina makes a plan to dog-nap a hapless canine and get \$500 in reward money. Her thinking is to find a dog whose owner simply cannot do without that companion and is willing to pay reward (think: ransom, extortion, rescue) money. She and her brother walk around until they find what appears to them to be a really nice house, the only one, in a run-down neighborhood. Yes, I thought that, too--What's wrong with this picture? One large house in a declining neighborhood. What Georgina sees is that the name on the mailbox and the name of the street are the same: Eureka! This must be a rich family! So go all the decisions made by one desperate little girl in a desperate situation. And that's the author's point. There's nothing humorous about this book. It is a desperate story of desperation. With each decision and new act, Georgina buries herself into a deeper morass of immoral, unethical, unkind behaviors. The reader is left, drifting in a sense of dread, wondering how the story will end, how the girl will abandon this horrible plot of getting reward money off the woes of another terribly sad human being. The end cannot be good, the reader thinks. It is and it is not. The conclusion left me drained, powerless to help the girl, the dog, or the owner. I know, I know, it's only fiction, but good writers can give us the truest truths in fiction, stories wiped clean of extraneous content, baring only the sordid reality--in this book--of homelessness and, almost as bad, one awful decision after another. What I advise is that each child who reads this book sit down and discuss it with an adult who has also read it. This novel is not a classic in the classic sense, but "How to Steal a Dog" is worthy of reading because it yields itself to great discussion. It is recommended for readers ages 9-12. Middle school is definitely an appropriate place. In fact, I would love to be in a classroom whose focus is this book and listen to discussion or study products (power point, posters, glogs, a blog discussion--anything but a traditional book report) to assess the moral climate of that discussion and how the teacher connects.

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