

Shade's Children Short Guide

Shade's Children by Garth Nix

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Shade's Children Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	13
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	14
For Further Reference.....	15
Related Titles/Adaptations.....	16
Related Web Sites.....	17
Copyright Information.....	18

Overview

Shade's Children is a science fiction novel that portrays a world that has been taken over by seemingly alien beings, called overlords, who have made all of the adults on the planet disappear. The aliens raise children in order to harvest their body parts. A guerilla team of children—some of Shade's children—overthrow the overlords and restore their society. The novel is fast-paced, suspenseful, and full of action, and addresses some important ideas about identity and the role of children in society.

About the Author

Garth Nix was born in 1963 in Melbourne, Australia. He grew up in Canberra, the federal capital of Australia.

When he finished secondary school, he traveled in Europe for several years. In 1983 he returned to Australia where he enrolled at the University of Canberra in a professional writing program. He also joined the Australian Army Reserve. After graduating from the university in 1986, Nix worked for several years in the publishing industry, eventually becoming a senior editor with a large publisher in 1991. In 1993, Nix quit his job as an editor to travel in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. He returned to Sydney in 1994, and began working for a public relations firm. In 1996, with two partners, he started his own public relations company— Gotley Nix Evans Pty Ltd.

In January 1998 Nix stopped working actively at Gotley Nix Evans and wrote full-time until May 1999 when he also began to work part-time as a literary agent for Curtis Brown, Australia's largest literary agency.

Setting

The setting of this futuristic novel is particularly convincing. The novel opens fifteen years after the sudden disappearance of the adults during the commuter rush hour one morning. This event is called The Change. None of the characters except Shade, the leader of the rebel children, and Ella, a guerilla team leader, remember life before the overlords. Children are raised in dormitories and each child is controlled by a computer chip implanted in the wrist. On their fourteenth birthday, the day the children call their Sad Birthday, the children are removed from the dorms. Some girls are taken to another location for breeding purposes. However, most children are taken to the Meat Factory where they are sedated until their body parts, particularly their brains, can be harvested and put into the bodies of the overlords' creatures. The central characters of Shade's Children have escaped the dorms by using a Change Talent unique to each which they discover at about the time they reach puberty. They live together in a partially submerged submarine that functions as Shade's headquarters.

The characters move through an abandoned urban landscape. Urban infrastructure still exists: buildings have operating electricity, water, heating and cooling, and security systems. The streetlights and traffic signals still work, though many of the streets are dogged with abandoned vehicles. Because the overlords and their beasts and soldiers control the surface of the city, the teams of children use the water and sewer system to move about the city when they pursue their guerilla operations against the armies of the overlords.

The overlords and their armies are the most dangerous element of the setting. The six overlords and their armies are identified by color: Red Diamond, Black Banner, Gold Claw, Blue Star, Emerald Crown, Gray Crescent. Each overlord has multitudes of creatures that form into armies, do battle with the creatures of other overlords, and hunt for escaped children. Myrmidons travel in groups of seven. Myrmidons are "Seven-foot-tall, barrel-chested monsters with long arms ending in spade-shaped hands.

Six-fingered hands, with thick, oversized thumbs." They are armored and helmeted and are the most powerful of the creatures.

Trackers are less powerful than Myrmidons, but frightening nonetheless: "Thin, spindly stick-humans that looked like half-melted plastic soldiers. Bright, bulbous eyes, too large for their almost-human eye-sockets.

Long pointed noses that were almost all red-flared nostril. . . They could smell a human out with those noses. . . . No matter where he hid." Wingers are gigantic flying creatures that are also semihuman: "[A] human body stretched out with arms stretched longer still; the taloned hands; the stumpy legs ending well above the knees; and the great leather-bellows bat wings spanning twenty feet or more." These creatures can pick up a child who has been restrained by a net and take him or her to the Meat Factory. Screamers are also flying creatures.



They function primarily as scouts, hunting for children or enemies and then screaming to alert their respective leaders. Gigantic ferrets roam the city at night, sucking the blood from their prey, whether they are children, wild dogs, or each other. During the day they rest in the dry tunnels of the water and sewer system, so they pose a threat to the guerrilla teams of children as they travel throughout the city. The creatures, rather than the abandoned landscape itself, threaten the existence of the children.

While the setting of the novel is convincing for the most part, the unnamed city is isolated and separate, leaving the reader to wonder about the rest of the world. Shade's *Children* seems to be set on Earth, but we only see the events of one city. Have the overlords destroyed every city? What has happened to the rest of humanity?

Social Sensitivity

The issues of identity and existence that are central to the novel have been discussed above. However, *Shade's Children* also obliquely addresses the role of children in society and the relationships between adults and children. The overlords treat the children as objects, as a commodity to be produced or a natural resource to be mined.

Nix's novel goes to the heart of current controversies about children's rights and their role in society.

Also, *Shade's Children* comments, again obliquely, on the beneficial role of parents in the development of a child's life. In this futuristic world we see what happens to children who grow up without adults. In the restored world at the end of the novel, the nuclear family is again central to the child's experience.

Literary Qualities

Nix uses multiple documents to construct the novel. Interspersed among chapters of straightforward narration are transcriptions of video and audio recordings and other documents. The latter include interviews with characters, training lessons, reports from other guerilla teams, overheard (i.e., bugged) conversations and comments, Shade's self-examination sessions, lists, and records of team activity. The effect of these documents is to call into question the accounts of the characters who are often only guessing or surmising circumstances or situations—or, in the case of Shade, deliberately deceiving the other characters.

The different typeface and related computer visuals of the interspersed documents contribute to the futuristic setting.

Nix is an accomplished storyteller. The plot of this novel is so action-packed and well paced that readers will have a hard time putting it down. The characters move from one adventure or crisis to another, always in danger. Yet the action is always clearly conveyed, stripped down to its essentials so that readers can easily see the events in the mind's eye. Nix builds the thematic content of the novel into the action and the brief bits of dialogue between the characters rather than in the voice of the narrator or the use of symbols or metaphorical imagery.



Themes and Characters

Though other guerilla teams composed of escaped children exist, we get to know the members of one team best. At nineteen, the leader Ella is, she believes, the oldest human being on the planet. The other young adults her age who managed to escape the Meat Factory have all died on guerilla missions ordered by Shade. As the oldest, Ella takes on the responsibility of keeping her team alive. However, there is nothing maternal about her. She is a hardened warrior who kills without regret or guilt. The younger members of the team are not yet so hardened.

Ella's Change Talent is the ability to create a physical object from an image in her mind. To effect such a change requires a great deal of energy, sometimes leaving Ella physically drained to the point of immobility. "It took three months of practice for me to build that picture into something real, a hard, sharp object to hold in my hand. Then one day, it wasn't just a thought.

It was there in my hand. Real. Sharp." The object Ella creates is a razor blade which she then uses to cut her wrist and remove the tracer capsule "from where it nestles between veins and bones." Ella also creates a grenade later in the story which, used at a climactic moment, rescues her teammates.

Drum is the next oldest member of the team, although we do not know his exact age because he quit counting his birthdays after he left the Training Grounds. Unlike most children, Drum was removed from the dorms to the Training Grounds when he was eight years old and fed a constant diet of steroids. The overlords intended to harvest his artificially enhanced muscles for use in their creatures. However, he strangles a guard and escapes the Training Ground just before his fourteenth birthday.

His escape does not undo the results of the steroid treatment, however. He is a large, muscular human, but the steroids have prevented any sexual maturity from taking place. Consequently, despite his imposing masculine physique, he has the high, unchanged voice and the genitals of a prepubescent boy—he is neither boy nor man. He can see no future for himself nor imagine a society in which he might live.

Responding to Shade in a videotaped interview, Drum remarks, "I don't expect any brave new world will have career openings for harem guards or gelded civil servants."

Drum's Change Talent is the mental version of his physical strength. He is able to move things by thinking about them. When he and Ella jump/fall from a bridge, Drum exerts his Talent to prevent them from hitting the water too forcefully: He'd never lifted anything heavier than a cat before, and the muscles in his arms strained as if he were trying to pull himself and Ella up a rope without using his feet, strained till they felt as if they would burst out of his skin, and his brain explode with them. . . .



But he did slow their fall, perhaps enough . . . and in the last few seconds he twisted both of them around, shielding Ella as his back smacked into the water with a tremendous force.

Ninde is a younger member of the team.

She is only about fifteen years old and is clearly more immature than Drum or Ella.

She has fantasies of becoming a doctor or a movie star after the overlords have been defeated. She is fascinated by films from "the old days" which she has seen repeatedly via videotape, and they influence her behavior because they are her only conception of adults. She often speaks before she thinks. She is impatient, less committed to the cause of overthrowing the overlords, and more willing to break the rules Shade has established; unlike Drum and Ella who have had to take on adult responsibility for so many years that they have become adultlike.

Ninde's Change Talent is her ability to know what people and creatures are thinking. In an odd, almost psychic connection she chews on the knuckle of her forefinger and is able to concentrate and hear what creatures are thinking. She finds hearing the thoughts of the creatures easier than those of human beings.

The youngest member of the team is Gold-Eye whose name comes from his unusual eyes: "They weren't normal human eyes at all, blue or brown or green irises against the white. His pupils and irises were gold, bright gold." As the book opens, he is escaping from creatures when Ella, Drum, and Ninde rescue him. He had escaped from the dorms with his brother Petar several years earlier and had been hiding from the creatures since then. His years of living on his own have turned him into a kind of primitive. He can hardly speak in complete sentences, and he does not really understand how to behave around other human beings.

Gold-Eye's Change Talent is an ability to see into the immediate future, what he calls the "soon-to-be-now." Unlike the other members of the team, Gold-Eye cannot control his talent. It simply comes over him, immobilizing him until the vision passes.

The children have been formed into a community by Shade. Shade's existence is one of the most interesting elements of the novel, for his character distills many of the identity conflicts of the team members. His explanation to Gold-Eye of his existence suggests his character as well: What I am, Gold-Eye, is a human personality stored in a computer's memory. I have the memories of that real person. I think like a real person. But no flesh, save the holographic appearance you have seen—which I must confess is partly based on a twentieth-century actor—so I look rather better than I did in the flesh. A conceit that possibly shows my continuing humanity. . . .

Ironically, it is in his existence as a goodlooking, suave gentleman that Shade is most deceptive, to the children and to himself.

He sends various teams out on suicide missions in order to gain information that will help him attain a more physical level of existence. He is able to download himself (or



parts of himself, that is, enough consciousness to spy) into mechanical objects, which are, significantly, mechanical rats and a mechanical spider, in order to achieve his ends. At the climax of the book, when he is a mechanical spider, he betrays the team to the overlords in hopes of exchanging them for information that might allow him to create a more humanlike body in which he might reside. Despite the fact that the overlords eventually destroy the mechanical object (The Thinker) that contains the computer that holds Shade's personality, he is able to download aspects of himself into various devices. After the destruction of The Thinker, Shade takes responsibility for the deaths he has caused and returns to Ella and Drum as a holographic image of his original self—Robert Ingman. In that identity he provides Ella and Drum with the necessary information to destroy the mechanical devices which allow the overlords to control the world.

Given the centrality of character in this novel, it is no surprise that issues of identity are prominent themes in the novel. The rather straightforward adolescent psychological quest of discovering an identity is made a physical fact in this novel. The individual Change Talents highlight the uniqueness of the individual and provide a role for that individual within the guerilla teams. However, the novel also emphasizes that the team members must work together in order to survive, thereby emphasizing the social nature of identity. Each Change Talent makes the individual vulnerable for a period of time, thereby requiring the team to protect the individual in order to take advantage of the talent. Furthermore, the novel makes it clear that no one person can accomplish what the team is able to do together.

Nix does not avoid the complications and difficulties of interpersonal relationships. Being a friend is often dangerous, as events in the novel show. Gold-Eye reports to Shade that Petar, his brother, sacrificed his life so that Gold-Eye could escape the dormitories. Ninde, Ella, and Gold-Eye risk their lives to rescue Drum from the Meat Factory against Shade's wishes. Even within the relatively safe community that Shade has established for the children, close friendship is heart-wrenching and painful. When Ella reflects on her first sexual experiences, she focuses on the loss of loved ones: "sex only made her closer to people, made it easier to love them, made it so much harder to bear when they were lost." Despite these difficulties, Nix is able to present characters who do create a family with surrogate (unconventional) parents; who do learn to work together, despite their differences; and who do grow to love one another in ways that can be expressed sexually (between GoldEye and Ninde) and in ways that are platonic (between Ella and Drum).

Nix heightens this theme when Shade sacrifices Ella's team to bargain with the overlords. Though Shade appears to be a loyal paternal figure, throughout the novel Nix lays clues that Shade should not be trusted. When he finally leads the children into the trap, his completely self-serving nature becomes evident. Shade's disloyalty to the children is parallel to the children's recognition late in the novel that the overlords are human. Ninde cries in despair at this discovery, but Drum points out to her that "What they've done has made them something else. Not human . . . not people . . . overlords." To be human, in this novel, is not to have a human shape, but to treat others humanely.



These issues are further complicated by issues of existence. What is a human being?

Is Shade/Robert Ingman a human being? Is a Myrmidon or Tracker a human being because it has a human brain implanted in its body? Is an overlord a human being?

The novel asks readers to consider these questions carefully. If they are human beings, should they be expected to behave according to human standards of decency and compassion? If they are not human beings, can there be expectations regarding their behavior? Do the Change Talents make the children no longer human? Gold-Eye has been mistaken for a creature because of his golden eyes, and he is quick to remind Shade that he is not a creature. Nix handles these questions and issues deftly, neither philosophizing nor discoursing about these ideas, which would impede the brisk rate of the narrative.



Topics for Discussion

1. How is technology portrayed in the novel? Do you think that Shade's ability to download himself into various computers is a way of keeping him alive? The advanced technology of the overlords allows them to create dangerous creatures. Do you think that this technology is out of control?
2. Is Shade human? Is the Winger who has Brat's brain human? What characteristics determine whether one is a human being?
3. Ninde and Gold-Eye are parents at the end of the novel. But they have not grown up in families with parents, so they may not know how to act like parents. Do you think that they will be good parents? Why or why not? What advice would you give to them about being parents?
4. What are the differences between the character of Shade and the character of Robert Ingman? Where do you discover those differences? How do those differences help to explain his involvement in the destruction of vital overlord technology?
5. What kind of information do we gain from the documents included in the narrative? How do those documents help us to understand the story, the characters, and their motivations?
6. The overlords view the battles of the creatures as games. They do not take seriously the amount of destruction that they cause. Are there ways in which we play "games" with the natural world or creatures who are less powerful than us? To what degree do we destroy to support our habits of living?
7. Do you think that the Change Talents the characters have make them more human or less? What do you think of someone who is very different from everyone else? What does it mean to be an individual or to fit in with the crowd?
8. Do you think Shade was wrong to send the children on difficult missions? Consider the fact that, although some died, he did protect them and eventually they were able to overthrow the overlords.
9. Why must Drum and Ella die at the end of the novel?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How do holographs work? 2. What is Artificial Intelligence? How does it work? Can computers think like human beings?

3. How do prostheses or artificial limbs work?

4. What are the effects of steroid use? 5. If young adults from the future only had American movies of the 1990s to understand adult behavior, what would society be like? What kinds of behaviors would they assume are normal?

Discuss several titles and the ways in which they portray adults.

6. How do weather patterns work? What technology would we need in order to create storms or fog as the overlords are able to do in the novel?

7. Research the history of orphanages and/or changing social policy regarding children whose parents have died or who have been abandoned.

8. What is the history of the technology of spying?

9. How has technology affected human relationships in today's society?

For Further Reference

Gross, Melissa. "The Giver and Shade's Children: Future Views of Child Abandonment and Murder." *Children's Literature in Education* 30 (1999): 103-117. Discussion of the ways in which *Shade's Children* departs from the normal pattern of child abandonment in literature.

Jones, J. Sydney. "Garth Nix." *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, vol. 27. Detroit: Gale, 1999. Provides background information and summarizes reviews of *Shade's Children*.

Something about the Author, vol. 97. Detroit: Gale, 1998. Brief biographical sketch and a short paragraph discussing *Shade's Children*.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Though no film adaptation has been developed for *Shade's Children*, a number of other books do address similar themes and issues. Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Nancy Farmer's *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm*, and Peter Dickinson's *Eva* are novels for young adults that depict future societies in which technology has reshaped human relationships.

For a related title on out-of-control computers, you need look no farther than the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Related Web Sites

"Garth Nix." [http://members.ozemail.com.au/~garthnix/December 2001](http://members.ozemail.com.au/~garthnix/December%202001). Garth Nix's homepage. It includes book covers, descriptions of each of his novels, an interview, a brief biographical note, photographs and drawings of Nix, as well as a great site about his writing process, including scanned images of pages of his handwritten notebooks. Nix has also included at the site an interactive text adventure called "Down to the Scum Quarter" that might be appropriate for older students.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996