Shadow Boxer Short Guide

Shadow Boxer by Chris Lynch

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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.

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Overview

Shadow Boxer is the story of two brothers, sons of a deceased heavyweight boxer. Fourteen-year-old George has always felt responsible for his younger brother, and when Monty begins to express an interest in boxing himself, George feels he must try to dissuade him. Boxing serves as both the book's subject matter and as a metaphor for the hardscrabble existence of two boys growing up in a rough, underprivileged community and learning to face life head-on.

About the Author

Aprolific author of unflinchingly realistic young adult novels, Chris Lynch was born July 2, 1962 in Boston, Massachusetts. His father, Edward, was a bus driver who died when Lynch was five; Dorothy Lynch supported her seven children by working as a receptionist. Growing up in the Jamaica Plains district of Boston, Lynch found his experiences in a Catholic grade school gratifying, but disliked the all-boys Catholic high school he later attended. Rebelling against a system that emphasized organized sports over the arts, he dropped out in his junior year.

Lynch began attending Boston University as a political science major, but a course in newswriting redirected his focus and he transferred to Suffolk University to study journalism. Although he knew he wanted to write, he did not admit—even to himself—that he was drawn to fiction writing. After graduating in 1983, he spent several years doing a variety of jobs, ranging from driving a moving van to house painting. He also worked as a proofreader of financial reports.

Still unwilling to declare an interest in creative writing, Lynch began considering a career in editing or publishing. He entered the master's program in writing and publishing at Emerson University in 1989.

After attempting to write adult fiction with little success, he took a workshop in writing for children and he found his voice as a writer. The course was led by Jack Gantos, author of the "Rotten Ralph" books and a memorable series of autobiographical novShadow Boxer 357 els that includes Heads or Tails and Jack's Black Book. Assigned to write five pages about a childhood incident, Lynch drew upon past experiences with his brother Marty and began a story that would later become Shadow Boxer, his first book. This gritty novel about boxing and brotherhood was highly praised by critics; the American Library Association cited it as a "Best Book for Young Adults" and a "Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers." Since then the married father of a son and daughter has taught writing at Emerson University and Vermont College while racking up a string of positive reviews and year-end awards for his constantly growing list of books. They include two series: the hardhitting "Blue Eyed Son" trilogy (Mick, Blood Relations, Dog Eat Dog) that examines the troubled relationship between a pair of IrishAmerican brothers, and, for younger readers, "The He-Man Woman Haters Club."

Chris Lynch has a particular talent for exploring the lives of the underprivileged, the disenfranchised, and those who do not fit society's norms. Sometimes this is done with humor, as in the hilarious story of Elvin's experiences at summer camp in Slot Machine, while other books, including Gypsy Davey and Whitechurch, feature devastating, even tragic, plots and characterizations.

An author still early in his career, Chris Lynch has already produced a significant body of young adult fiction; future books will almost surely continue to enhance his growing reputation.

Setting

The setting of Shadow Boxer is established subtlety and sparely. Though the story is set in or around Boston, the name of that city is never mentioned. Readers must piece together clues within the text to determine the novel's location—an interesting device that parallels the structure of this book in which readers are also required to piece together a variety of interrelated vignettes to gain an understanding of the entire plot.

The first clues can be found in chapter 1, "Groundwork," in which George and his young brother Monty visit Mount Calvary Cemetery. As George points out different sections of the cemetery, he mentions that playwright Eugene O'Neill and actor Ray Bolger are buried there. Both men are Massachusetts natives—O'Neill was born in Boston, Bolger in nearby Dorchester—so Boston seems a likely burial spot for them (though internet sources have Ray Bolger interred at Holy Cross Cemetery in Culver City, California.) There are several references to the boys being fans of the Bruins in the book as well—though, again, the word "Boston" is not mentioned in connection with the sports team. The most conspicuous reference to the book's location occurs when Chaz, a member of the Big Brother organization, arrives to take George and Monty on a Saturday outing. Their destination is the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, which Chaz says is "just around the corner" though it actually takes about a half an hour to get there from George and Monty's home. Although the location is not further specified, and there are certainly many Springfields across the United States, sports fans will be aware that the Basketball Hall of Fame in located in Springfield, Massachusetts.

The author uses a similar type of indirection in making the reader aware that the brothers attend a Catholic school. Although never specifically stated as such, the type of school they attend becomes clear through an accumulation of details. Early in the novel the boys get a day off school because it is designated by the Catholic Church as a holy day. As George explains, "our puny little school had the day off and the rest of the universe had to keep spinning as usual."

There are other references to the boys not attending public school, but only late in the book does a school scene feature a nun at the head of the class.

Although sparingly depicted, the neighborhood at the center of the novel is clearly lower class and underprivileged. There are only four rooms in the apartment where the boys live with their mother. George describes the building as being "full of people who don't have much money" so that "things break all the time." Behind the building is a dilapidated lot, covered with a mix of blacktop, gravel, and concrete chunks.

The apartment supervisor, whose only tools are a roll of duct tape and a hammer, is toothless and wears the same stained shirt every day. As the boys walk through their neighborhood, they know which store owners to avoid on the "badder" streets and they pick up odd jobs, such as moving furniture, for "people who can't take care of themselves." The boys live in a transient culture, where neighbors come and go, and people—even friends—drop out of their lives with no good-byes.

The novel is set in the present, although, just as the author has taken pains not to overemphasize the geographic location, he has also been careful to avoid too many contemporary references. The story is presented chronologically, but does not follow an established time line; this suits the overall episodic structure of the book.

Social Sensitivity

Many characters in the book are depicted in a grotesque manner; the story also happens to be set in a lower-class milieu. This may cause some concern for readers who make connections between the two elements and assume that the book is passing judgment on the underprivileged. To some extent, there may be some correlation between the setting and the characterizations.

It makes sense that less educated people will live in less expensive neighborhoods or that a grubby ex-convict could only find work in a cheap apartment house. But it would be a mistake for readers to think the author is looking down at these characters.

They may speak differently or look different from other people, but they are usually depicted here with compassion: Frank cheerfully endures his facial deformities, while Mary B. takes off her thick glasses "so she could be regular for a while." While it is true that George and Monty sometimes make some brutally sarcastic remarks—as when Monty mocks Nat's substandard English—their actions probably have less to do with cruelty toward the underprivileged than the fact that they are bright, funny kids mouthing off to people in similar circumstances. Their wisecracks can be compared to some of the smart-alecky characters in Paul Zindel's novels which are set in surburbia. In other words, this teenage behavior can cross all economic and social lines.

Two social issues of special interest to young people are tackled in Shadow Boxer.

Both brothers work outside the home. They each have paper routes and do odd jobs around the neighborhood. Although they are sometimes taken advantage of because of their youth, issues of child labor rights are not really a concern for the brothers.

Both regard work as a good thing and actively seek it out. A second social concern is presented as much more troubling. The boys have witnessed their neighbor Mr. Rafkin emotionally abuse his son, throwing Fred's straight A report card away because "no son of mine is going to be a fag bookworm." Fred's sister, Mary B., is called "Herbie" by her father. He tells her that if she were a boy "it wouldn't be so bad that you're so ugly. And you could have been the son I never had." Fred and Mary B. are later beaten by their father and their injuries are described with painful realism. It is equally painful for the reader that Mr. Rafkin is able to evade the authorities and leave the neighborhood with his children. The reader knows the abuse will continue.

Literary Qualities

Shadow Boxer has an unusual structure. It is a novel, with a single narrator, continuing characters, and a loose plot, yet the style remains somewhat disjointed. By themselves the chapters often read like individual short stories and in many cases could stand well on their own. The structure resembles a mosaic, with separate pieces coming together to produce a whole that may not be cohesively formed until the reader "fills in the blanks" between the various episodes.

George's first-person narrative is plainspoken as he relates the events in a frank voice.

Only one chapter, "Footsteps in the Dark," reveals events that occur when George is not present. He describes the scene, saying that Ma and Archie "shared this story with me"—a rather clumsy narrative device. In later novels such as Gypsy Davey and Whitechurch, Chris Lynch switches freely between the first- and third-person narration to more successful effect.

According to A Handbook to Literature by C. Hugh Holman, "whenever in modern fiction characters appear who are either physically or spiritually deformed and perform actions that are clearly intended by the author to be abnormal, the work can be called grotesque." Certainly that was Lynch's aim in creating minor characters who are presented in a grotesque fashion, and represent a gallery of society's disenfranchised.

With an unflinching gaze, the author examines characters that include Frank, a tough, cheerful man disfigured by disease; Nat, a slovenly ex-convict; and Fred and Mary B. Rafkin, two children horribly abused by their father. Even George's father, with his scars, bleeding wounds, missing teeth, and substandard language can be seen as a grotesque figure. These characters are sometimes used to satirical effect, but more often they contain an air of tragedy. The overall effect is unsettling, which is clearly Lynch's goal.

There is quite a bit of symbolism in the novel. Lines like "those old wounds could weep for hours" has a literal meaning in the story, but its symbolism is also apparent.

The novel's theme of transformation is depicted symbolically. When Monty emerges from the closet he has changed into a sweat suit, just as a superhero might emerge from a phone booth in costume. He even has a friend he refers to as a "sidekick." Transformation is symbolized again when George wraps Monty in a rug and Monty escapes by collapsing his body and "slithering" out, leaving the rug "empty but still all rolled up." This second scene of emergence and transformation brings to mind a butterfly emerging from a cocoon—beginning a new life as something entirely new. For Monty, that "something new" is becoming a boxer.

Because the setting is only minimally established, cultural references are sparse in this novel. However, there are a few references to the film version of The Wizard of Oz, beginning with the comment about Ray Bolger who played the Scarecrow and including George's statement after fighting with a bully that "I felt like I'd dropped a house on a

witch." Whether these are just fun, coincidental allusions to the movie or whether the reader is supposed to follow through with the metaphor (with Monty's viewing of his father's video perhaps representing the first time the "man behind the curtain" is revealed in Oz) is worth considering.

As in most sports novels, the central subject is presented literally, but can also be seen as a metaphor for life. This is a particular apt metaphor for boxing. Like boxers, the brothers must learn when to fight, when to walk away, and how to roll with the punches. In other words, they are learning how to live their lives and become adults.

Growing up in the shadow of their deceased father, they must learn to become men on their own. George has taken the lessons he has learned from his father and must try to pass them on to his younger brother. In the prologue, George's father tells his son that boxing "made me unafraid . . . . That feelin' helps a man to take care of his family, to get up and leave the house on those days when he feels like he's all alone and don't understand nothin'" Later in the book, when George feels most alone, he states that he "didn't understand nothin'"—a skillful repetition that helps keep the character of George's father a presence throughout the novel.

Themes and Characters

Although fourteen-year-old George narrates the novel, he and his eleven-year-old brother Monty are equally important to the story line. The reader sees the world through George's eyes, but Monty is the catalyst for most of the important scenes. Through these two characters, the book explores themes of responsibility, loss and resiliency, avoidance and acceptance, transformation, and the importance of family ties.

It is interesting to note the change in George from the prologue, in which he follows his father with childlike adoration, to the first chapter. Set five years later, the opening chapter shows George as an almost preternaturally adult teenager, dressed in a suit and leaving the house to take care of some family business. When his younger brother, a hyperactive sixth-grader, begs to come along, Monty's actions are reminiscent of George's behavior in the prologue, as George followed his father on a training run. This scene is the first evidence that the loss of his father has caused George to grow up earlier than most kids. When George recalls his mother telling him "you're the man" and letting him pick out his father's monument marker, the author is reinforcing the theme of responsibility as well.

There are several other scenes in the novel that show the responsibility that this young man bears. Sometimes it is foisted on him by his mother, as when she asks him to attend a tenants' meeting in her place. Other times he acts on his own, lecturing and even grounding Monty. The theme of responsibility is well handled. Many books concern young adults who become overwhelmed with responsibility, or chafe at having to take care of younger siblings. In this novel, George seems to enjoy being responsible and becomes most concerned when he thinks he may lose some of his control to Chaz, an older man visiting the kids as part of the Big Brother program. He plays up his maturity in front of Chaz, drinking coffee and saying things like, "I'm a very busy man." At the same time, George is mature enough to realize when a problem is too big for him to handle. When Monty gets drunk with Nat, the building superintendent, George disciplines Monty, then takes the larger problem—what to do about Nat—to his mother. This awareness of his limitations is also, in its own way, a sign of responsibility.

Loss is another pervasive theme in the novel. Clearly the loss of their father affects both George, increasing his maturity and sense of responsibility, and Monty, who is drawn into the boxing world where his father spent most of his life. On another level, the boys deal with personal loss repeatedly throughout the story. Time and again characters are introduced—including Chaz; Frank, a disfigured man; Fred and Mary B., neighboring children; and Nat, the landlord—only to quickly disappear. Part of this may be due to the episodic nature of the plot, in which scenes are often presented as individual pieces, rather than as part of a completely woven fabric. But more than that, these sudden, smaller casualties mirror the large loss at the center of the novel. And in all cases they showcase the resiliency of both boys as they go on with their lives after every loss.

When George's father tells him "Now I'm gonna teach you how not to be a fighter, how to walk away," he does not mean that his son should avoid conflict or pain, but should

learn how to confront issues without resorting to physical violence. A theme of avoidance and acceptance runs through the book. During their visit to the cemetery, George pulls Monty toward their father's grave. After Monty runs away from Frank, a disfigured man who resembles the Elephant Man, George tells his brother, "You're never going to run again. You won't be afraid of anything or anybody" then takes him back to Frank's neighborhood and literally grabs his shoulders and points him in the direction of Frank's house. During a confrontation with the boys' mother, their uncle Archie covers his face with his hand— but he later forces Monty to watch a video of their father being beaten in a boxing match. One of the most intriguing scenes involving avoidance does not lead to acceptance, but rather confrontation. After the neighbors, Fred and Mary B. Rafkin, are beaten by their father, Monty wants to assault Mr. Rafkin, but George tells him to "Let Ma handle it" by calling the authorities. However, even George comes to realizes this is one of those times when they do need to fight— although their planned attack on Mr. Rafkin is ultimately thwarted.

There is a connection between the theme of avoidance and the theme of transformation. Monty likes to sit in his closet when he needs private thinking time. When George is worried about having his role as older brother/father figure supplanted by a member of the Big Brother organization, he yells, "This job was left to me, nobody else" and takes Monty by the arm and places him back in the closet. But in this case, avoiding reality does not work. Instead, Monty emerges from the closet transformed— dressed in a sweat suit and ready to leave the house and do some boxing. When he returns he is missing a tooth.

The importance of family ties is another dominant theme in the book. George and Monty are not the only set of brothers in the book. There is also Uncle Archie and Dad, and, symbolically, Big Brother Chaz and his relationship with the boys. Although George sees himself as a parental figure for Monty, the boys do have a strong maternal presence in the home. Their overworked mother is an authoritative and caring figure. Though Dad is deceased, this boxer casts a long shadow over the book. George still follows Dad's advice, while Monty emulates his boxing. At the gym, Monty seeks out the sons of any boxers who might have known his dad.

Topics for Discussion

1. Is the prologue necessary? Why did the author include it, instead of beginning with the first chapter, set five years later?

2. George's father calls the pointers he gives his son "rocks." What rocks does he provide in his brief appearance? What rocks does George give Monty?

3. How might the personalities of George and Monty be different if their father had lived?

4. Before this book was published, one earlier title being considered was Chin Music. Which title, Shadow Boxer or Chin Music, is more effective? What meanings are there in each of these titles?

5. In an early interview, Chris Lynch stated, "I don't aim to write in a particular era. I don't want my stuff to become dated." Was he successful at that goal in writing Shadow Boxer? What aspects of the novel may make it seem dated eventually?

6. A "coping mechanism" is a mode of behavior or an action that one uses in order to face a problem or issue. What coping mechanisms have Mary B. and Fred developed in order to survive their father's abuse? Does their treatment at home seem to be reflected in their behavior outside the home?

7. George and Monty storm the Rafkin house only to discover the family has left. What might have happened if Mr. Rafkin had been there? Would their actions have helped or hurt the situation?

8. The boys' mother describes a tale her husband used to tell: "I never heard a more romantic story in my life." Later she finds "the story was not romantic or heroic anymore." What happened to change her perspective?

9. The fight sequence between the brothers in chapter 12, "Every Man for Himself," has an almost comical tone. What specific elements make this scene humorous while other fights are portrayed dramatically?

10. What clues in Monty's behavior help Ma figure out that he is developing an interest in boxing?

11. Uncle Archie quotes a line from the Simon and Garfunkel song "The Boxer." If you were to "score" this novel with musical selections, which songs fit the themes, spirit, and rhythms of Shadow Boxer?

12. Compare and contrast the ways so many of the characters—including Frank, Nat, Chaz, and the Rafkins—disappear from the story without a trace.

13. The setting of Shadow Boxer is described sparingly, yet the reader is able to determine that George and Monty live in a lower-class community. What clues help us understand the setting?

14. Chapter 15, "Footsteps in the Dark," is different than the other chapters in the book. What makes it different? Would the scene have been stronger if George had actually been there to describe the events?

15. What is the significance of the novel's last line?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Boxing remains a popular sport in the United States. What is its history and who are some of the notable figures who have achieved fame in this field?

Shadow Boxer 363 2. Television sportscaster Howard Cosell was known as a boxing commentator, but toward the end of his career he spoke out against boxing as a sport.

How did he come to oppose to this sport? Is it a safe activity? Weigh the risks and benefits of professional boxing.

3. George and Monty are always looking for ways to earn extra money. Are contemporary child labor laws beneficial to young people? Compare first-person accounts of young workers from the nineteenth- and twenty-first centuries.

4. Chaz is a member of the Big Brothers and Sisters organization. What is the history of this group? What other organizations provide mentoring or companionship for young people?

5. Fred and Mary B. Rafkin are physically and emotionally abused by their father.

What kind of help is out there for abused children? What role are friends, neighbors, and teachers expected to play if child abuse is suspected?

6. A videotape helps Monty see his father in a different light. Videos are a comparatively recent technological innovation; if the novel had been set a generation earlier, this conclusion would not have been feasible. How might the book have ended if it were set in the 1950s?

How has the everyday use of videotapes affected modern culture?

7. What distinguishes a novel from a short story? Could individual chapters of this book be considered short stories? Why or why not?

For Further Reference

"Chris Lynch." In Authors & Artists for Young Adults, vol. 19. Detroit: Gale, 1996. An overview of Lynch's life and professional career which cites his goals as a writer.

"Chris Lynch." In The Seventh Junior Book of Authors and Illustrators. New York: Wilson, 1996. A brief autobiographical sketch in which Lynch describes how he came to be a writer.

364 Shadow Boxer Comerford, Lynda Brill. "Flying Starts: First Time Authors and Illustrators Share the Stories Behind Their Notable Fall Debuts."

Publishers Weekly (December 20, 1993): 29. This biographical profile relates information about Lynch at the very beginning of his career.

Fleming, Chad. "Chris Lynch." English Journal (March 1997): 78-80. Both biographical and critical information is related in a profile that calls the author "one of the hot new prospects in young adult literature."

Hearn, Patrick Harris. Review of Shadow Boxer, Iceman, and Gypsy Davey. The Washington Post Book World (January 1, 1995): 11. This overview of Lynch's first three novels praises the author's "authentic, distinctive voice."

Hurlburt, Tom S. Review of Shadow Boxer.

School Library Journal (September 1993): 252. A positive critique that calls the volume "a gritty streetwise novel that is much more than a sports story."

Jones, Patrick S. Review of Shadow Boxer.

Kliatt (September 1995): 12. The paperback edition of this novel is criticized for its cover, but the story itself is highly praised for its dialogue and pace.

Lord, John R. Review of Shadow Boxer. Voice of Youth Advocates 16 (1993): 295. Though fairly favorable, this review is somewhat dismissive of the book's strengths.

Lynch, Chris. "Today's YA Writers: Pulling No Punches." School Library Journal (January 1994): 37-8. Lynch examines attitudes toward young adult literature and envisions a time "when everyone recognizes the powerful, meaningful world of the genre."

"Lynch, Chris." In Something about the Author, vol. 95. Detroit: Gale, 1998, pp.

115-21. Same essay as in Authors & Artists for Young Adults with a few brief additions regarding book titles and awards received.

Sieruta, Peter D. Review of Shadow Boxer.

Horn Book 69 (1993): 745â□□46. A generally positive review notes the somewhat disjointed structure of the plot, but praises the quality of the individual episodes.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Chris Lynch has written other novels that deal with similar themes and issues. A pair of brothers are featured in Iceman,a sports-themed story set in the world of hockey. The relationship between two teenage brothers is examined in the hard-hitting "Blue Eyed Son" trilogy, composed of Mick, Blood Relations, and Dog Eat Dog; the Boston setting is integral to this series of books.

A landmark young adult novel, The Contender by Robert Lipsyte, also deals with the subject of boxing, as African-American teenager Alfred sees the sport as a way of escaping his underprivileged background.

A similar situation is explored within a historical setting in The Boxer by Kathleen Karr, as an Irish-American teenager supports his family with money he makes in the ring. In both books the protagonists become disenchanted with the sport and begin to concentrate on furthering their education rather than boxing. Liam prepares for a boxing match in a city divided by political turmoil in Patricia McMahon's One Belfast Boy. This photo-essay will be of special interest to those who prefer "real life" stories to fiction.

Readers who enjoy sports stories of all types may be interested in Carl Deuker's Night Hoops. Though the focus is on basketball, this novel also features a pair of brothers who have differing opinions on the subject of athletics. Other contemporary authors who write strong books with sports themes include Bruce Brooks, David Klass, Randy Powell, Rich Wallace and Will Weaver.

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