

The Shadow Knows Short Guide

The Shadow Knows by Diane Johnson

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Characters

N. Hexam (she never reveals her first name) is the principal character and first-person narrator of the novel, which takes place over a period of eight days, Wednesday, January 1, to Wednesday, January 8. During this period, N. also looks back over her life with Gavin, her former husband; her affair with Andrew Mason; Osella's entrance into their lives; Evalin's marriage to Clyde Wilson, her estranged husband; and other significant events of the past. She does this as part of her attempt to sort out what is happening to her now. Her feeling that someone is trying to kill her or Evalin or all of them increases as the threats increase, including the harassing phone calls from Osella and the "phantom caller," who is never identified. In fact, Evalin does die, ostensibly the result of chronic pancreatitis aggravated by New Year's Eve celebrating, but possibly accelerated by the beating she receives in the laundry room two nights later.

Ev's death brings out both the best and the worst in N. — her genuine love for the handsome black woman and her inability to cope with her problems effectively enough to forestall disaster.

For all of her sensitivity, intelligence, and education (she is earning an M.A.

in linguistics), N. emerges as something of a klutz when it comes to dealing with the practical side of life as well as her own personal relationships.

What redeems her, apart from a wry sense of humor, is her relentless search to find reality and truth.

Gavin, or Gavvy, N.'s husband, is a mean-spirited, regressive man whom N. helped put through law school but who sees no need to finance her further education after their divorce. N. learns to despise him, with cause. Her lover, Andrew Mason, whom she adores, turns into the kind of philanderer her friend, Bess Harvill, describes — the kind that never leaves his wife after all. He cruelly ends the affair with N. with an abrupt note, then soon afterwards calls her, promising to take up with her again, but never shows up.

Nor are the other men in the novel shown to be much better. Evalin's husband is a good-for-nothing whom she is well rid of, although he keeps coming around; A. J., her lover, is brutal at times and unreliable, but Ev loves him and keeps going back to him; Inspector Dice of the Police Department is patronizing and finally impatient when N. tries to convince him that a crime has been committed (Ev's death) and that danger still lurks.

Women emerge as being not much better. N.'s best friend, Bess, turns out to be someone who envies and hates N.; Osella is a constant threat and helps drive the Hexams apart; Cookie Mason is a stereotyped middle-class house-proud wife desperately trying to hang on to her husband. Only Evalin appears as a woman fully

deserving N.'s (or anyone's) love and devotion, and she herself is careless and ineffectual when it comes to her own wellbeing.



Social Concerns/Themes

Set in northern California, in the suburbs of Sacramento, *The Shadow Knows* deals with such universal themes and social concerns as race relations, especially between whites and blacks; relations between household help and the people who employ them; and the eternal triangle of husband-wife-mistress. Without pushing any special feminist agenda, Johnson is particularly concerned in this novel with the efforts of a divorced woman trying to look after her small children, earn an advanced degree, hang on to her lover, and keep her sanity.

Race relations come into focus through the relations between household help and their employers: Both social concerns are intertwined. Mrs. N. Hexam first employs Osella Barnes to help clean and cook and look after her four small children. Recently widowed, Osella is an enormous black woman still in her forties who had been Gavin Hexam's mammy long ago.

Osella takes a dislike to N., apparently goes mad, and is dismissed. Evalin Wilson, another black woman, but shy and handsome, replaces her. She is genuinely devoted to N. and her children, and looks after everyone well but herself. N.'s concern for Ev is also real and they become still closer after N.'s marriage to Gavvy breaks up and she moves with Ev and the children into a small unit in a housing development on the outskirts of Sacramento. Their relationship demonstrates that whites and blacks can overcome racial antagonisms, although Ev's lover, A. J. Harper, seems menacing and mean not only to Ev, whom he physically abuses, but to N. as well.

The affair that N. has with her husband's colleague, Andrew Mason, seems to awaken in Andrew a sense of passion and sexual intensity he did not know he possessed after years of marriage to his wife, Cookie. N.'s husband finally suspects something and leaves when N. refuses to end the affair.

When, on Christmas Eve, Andrew sends N. a note ending the affair, she is nearly crushed, but this is not the main, or at least the only, cause of her emotional state a week later when strange events begin to occur, such as the front door of her unit being slashed, a dead cat thrown on her doorstep, and shadowy figures apparently lurking about the place. The conflict between appearance and reality, or reality taking ambiguous form as shadowy presences, is really the main theme of the novel. It transcends the feminist concern, which is also evident, of a single, not affluent, mostly isolated woman trying to make a life amidst a dreary set of experiences.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The Shadow Knows aptly takes its title from the old radio mystery play that used to begin with a frightening voice saying, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows." The foregoing analysis suggests that there is plenty of evil in everyone's heart, even N.'s, but the vehicle Johnson uses for its presentation is a mixture of the detective novel, the Gothic romance, and the surreal fiction of Franz Kafka (whose best known protagonists are named "K.").

As one reviewer described the novel, it is like "Charlotte Bronte filtered through Kafka, or like a strange dream in which Agatha Christie is transformed into a feverish metaphysician."

Johnson uses many different devices to develop her fiction, chief among them the withholding of details after they have first been mentioned. For example, N. mentions Andrew's letter twice before revealing the actual contents sometime later. Similarly, she mentions that Gavvy — like everyone else, one of her suspects — once hurt Ev, but only later does she say how or when.

This is standard detective novel procedure, which Johnson uses along with other devices that build suspense. She even consciously parodies the genre by introducing "The Famous Inspector," a character who appears only in N.'s mind, as she tries to imagine what he will do and, near the end, attempts to impersonate him herself by tracking down Ev's "murderer." The strange sounds that N. hears as the door to her unit in the housing complex is attacked recall the sounds Jane Eyre hears, and N.'s meditations share the qualities of both K.'s and Jane's broodings on events.

Except for the fact that the principal character and narrator is a woman, and it is her life the novel is mainly concerned with, The Shadow Knows is not otherwise a feminist novel, for Johnson does not try to develop N. as a kind of exemplary heroine, and she is as much concerned with the nature of reality and perception as she is with her protagonist.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994