

# Shadow of a Bull Short Guide

## Shadow of a Bull by Maia Wojciechowska

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## Overview

Shadow of a Bull traces the story of a young man, Manolo, who defies everyone's expectations that he will become a great bull-fighter in the image of his dead father. Wojciechowska effectively conveys Manolo's dread that the villagers, who expect him to be as brave and heroic as his father, will discover his self-perceived cowardice and low self-esteem. Because of his fear, Manolo resists confronting the bull.

Wojciechowska uses her knowledge and love of Spain to write lucid descriptions of its people and culture. Her portrayal of bullfighting is clear and accurate: the mothers resignedly give their sons over to this futile pursuit, the village men revel in the excitement and grandeur of it, and while some young men love it, some, such as Manolo, feel the despair of failing at the sport.

Manolo finds the courage to proclaim that he does not choose to be a bullfighter, announcing that he wants to be a doctor like the one he saw treat "El Magnifico," a young boy who fought bravely but was gored. In making this choice, Manolo sets himself free. There are all kinds of bravery, the story reveals, but to be true to oneself is the most courageous act of all.

## About the Author

Maria Wojciechowska was born on August 7, 1927, in Warsaw, Poland. She came to the United States in 1942 with her parents and two brothers when her father received an assignment as air attache to the Polish Embassy. Wojciechowska attended schools in Poland, France, and England, graduated from Sacred Heart Academy in 1945, and attended Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles from 1945 to 1946. After moving from Los Angeles to New York, she met author Selden Rodman, who encouraged her in the craft of writing. They married in 1950 and spent time in Haiti, where she wrote her first published book for young readers, *Market Day for 'Ti Andre*. She and Rodman divorced in 1957, and Wojciechowska married Richard Larkin, a poet and antique dealer, in 1970. Their marriage ended in 1981.

In 1960 and 1961, while Wojciechowska operated her own literary agency and was publicity manager of Hawthorn Books, she began writing in earnest. *Shadow of a Bull*, the result of this concentration, was a New York Herald Tribune Children's Spring Book Festival Awards honor book in 1964 and won both the Newbery Medal in 1965 and the Deutscher Jugendbuchpreis in 1968. This success made it possible for Wojciechowska to devote all her time to writing and traveling. She has published adult fiction and poetry as well as drama for television. In addition to her native Polish, Wojciechowska speaks several other languages—French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and English—and has translated books from Polish to English. When she is not traveling, she resides in Sante Fe, New Mexico.

## Setting

The story takes place in the province of Andalusia, southern Spain, which is characterized by "majestic mountains, lacey olive groves, the round symmetry of the bullrings, and the pointed church steeples." Arcangel, the village, bordered on three sides by olive groves and on one side by the Guadalquivir River, is isolated and so small that all of the villagers know each other. Although an exact date for the story's action is never given, the activities and attitudes of the people suggest modern times.

# Social Sensitivity

The theme of the book is socially sensitive because adolescents confront fears in many different ways. Manolo tries to hide his fear that he is a coward, but as the plot unfolds, he changes and faces his situation with courage. Manolo's plight of having to conform to others' expectations provides the means by which he matures, and should initiate a good discussion of social conformity. The violence of bullfighting is described but not excessively, although some readers will inevitably raise the issue of cruelty to animals. The killing of bulls is inherent to the action of the novel and is therefore unavoidable, but it is not too graphic. Even the description of tending the wounded "El Magnifico" is more clinical than gory.



## Literary Qualities

Wojciechowska's descriptive style, which vividly portrays the beauty of the Andalusian country, has been compared to Ernest Hemingway's in its construction and simplicity of language, as well as in its depiction of bullfighting.

Wojciechowska, who has resided in both Spain and Mexico and even fought a bull once herself, draws on her experiences to depict Andalusia and the customs of its people. A valuable glossary of bullfighting terminology is included. The author's use of short sentences and of conversation that is direct and to the point moves the story along swiftly. The climax's gripping suspense encourages empathy for the protagonist, helping the reader to experience Manolo's sense of danger and to care about his safety and his future.

# Themes and Characters

The main character, Manolo Olivar, is the son of Juan Olivar, a famous bullfighter whose statue adorns the town square. Because Manolo looks like his father—dark, thin, with a long nose (considered a mark of bravery) and sad, brooding eyes—everyone expects Manolo to behave just like his father. But Manolo refuses to make himself into the bullfighting hero that the townspeople of Arcangel envision.

Manolo struggles to follow his personal ambitions and desires but faces pressure from a community deeply entrenched in the rituals surrounding bullfighting. For example, six men, dedicated bullfighting fans called aficionados, share one determination: to prepare Manolo for his destiny as a bullfighter. One of them, the seventy-year-old Count de la Casa, lives in France but comes to Spain once a year to see his olive groves and observe the testing of the young bulls and heifers. Respected by the citizens of Arcangel, the Count sees Manolo each year, and it is he who decides that Manolo will begin his bullfighting career at age eleven, instead of at age twelve as his father did.

Jaime Garcia is Manolo's best friend.

Only when he is with Jaime can Manolo forget about bullfighting and enjoy going to movies, fishing, climbing roofs, and setting carrier-pigeons loose. Jaime tells Manolo about his bull-fighter brother, Juan, who goes to the pastures in the dark to cape the bulls because he is too poor to have the bulls readied for him.

Manolo and Juan meet, and as the time approaches when Manolo must fight his first bull, Juan coaches him. Juan also takes Manolo to visit "El Magnifico," a boy who has been gored by a bull, and while they are there, a doctor arrives to attend to the wounded boy. Manolo assists the doctor, and while doing so decides, "This is what a man should do with his life: cure the wounded, bring health back to the sick, save the dying."

Manolo's mother, Senora Olivar, a strong, proud, quiet woman, allows her son to make his own decisions. She tells him about the private side of his famous father, confiding that this renowned bull-fighter enjoyed the winters and being sick because these things provided respites from the usual training and fighting. She says he died honorably, in the ring. Through her understanding and support, Manolo's mother helps to free him from his fear of not living up to expectations.

Alfonso Castillo, a famous bull-fighter critic, also educates Manolo about his father. He shows Manolo a portrait of his father, Juan Olivar, the famous matador, and "Patatero," the bull who pierced Juan Olivar's heart when Manolo was only three. Castillo tells Manolo that before a boy becomes a man he has to make some choices: "to do the right thing or the wrong thing, to please himself or to please others; to be true to his own self, or untrue to it." He also helps to free Manolo from fear. Manolo looks at the picture of his father and vows that he, too, will become a daring man.





The theme of a young boy reaching maturity is the thrust of *Shadow of a Bull*. Manolo prepares himself as best he can to fight the bull. His dilemma of choosing between loyalty to his heritage and loyalty to himself, combined with his longing for understanding, creates a powerful conflict in the story. Manolo wrestles with the fear of being labeled a coward, but he manages to conquer this fear when he realizes that honor and nobility can be achieved in many ways.



## Topics for Discussion

1. If you were expected to follow your father's vocation, would you conform or rebel? What would you do if you were expected to follow your mother's vocation? How would you resolve these situations?
2. What conflicts between traditional and modern ways exist in Andalusia as portrayed in *Shadow of the Bull*?
3. What do you think Manolo would have done if Juan had refused to fight his bull?
4. Do you recognize people who resemble Manolo's mother or the six aficionados in your world?
5. What are some of the ways that Manolo tries to conquer his fear? How do you deal with your own fears?
6. What are the various interpretations suggested by the title?
7. Does the book have a satisfying ending? Did you suspect what would happen ahead of time? Would you have ended the book differently if you were the author?
8. Is Manolo too young to decide his vocation? Why?
9. When does Manolo begin to have self-doubts? Is he responding to his own expectations or to the expectations that others have for him?
10. Manolo and Jaime's friendship is very important to each of them. Why?
11. How will Manolo use his skills as a doctor in Andalusia? Do you think he will remain in Andalusia?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a report about the kind of career you want to have and your reasons for this selection.
2. *Shadow of a Bull* was first written as a short story. Do you think it would work as well in a shorter format? Write a paper about which parts of the narrative you think the author lengthened to turn it into a novel.
3. Think of another book you have read in which the hero grows up. Compare the two books, and show how each treats the problems of familial or community expectations.
4. Bullfighting is a violent sport. Do any of the characters in the novel display moral objections to the nature of the sport? Do you have any objections to bullfighting? Why or why not?
5. Write about the importance of expressing feelings of fear. Cite examples from the book.

## For Further Reference

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Dagliesh, Alice. "Spring Brings the Winners." *Saturday Review* (March 27, 1965): 32. Review of *Shadow of A Bull De Montreville*, Doris, and Donna Hill, eds. *Third Book of Junior Authors*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1972. Provides an autobiographical sketch of Wojciechowska and a list of her other works. Related articles about the author are also cited.

Gillespie, John, and Diana Lembo.

*Juniorplots: A Book Talk for Teachers and Librarians*. New York: R. R. Bowker, 1967. Contains an evaluation of the novel and a list of related readings.

Moritz, Charles, ed. *Current Biography Yearbook*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1976. Contains a brief but comprehensive discussion of Wojciechowska's life and works.

Norton, Donna E. *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature*. Columbus: Charles Merrill, 1983. Norton analyzes emotional maturity and the ways it is achieved in *Shadow of a Bull*; she also discusses how self-esteem and stereotypical behaviors are portrayed in realistic fiction.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

The theme of ascertaining independence is also examined in Wojciechowska's *Hollywood Kid*, in which Bryan, a troubled, lonely boy, is torn between concern for his mother and a secret need to break free of her and be on his own. Another of Wojciechowska's works that addresses some of the same themes as *Shadow of a Bull* is *A Single Light*. Set in Spain, it is the empathetic story of a hearing impaired Andalusian girl's love for a priceless statue of the Christ child, and of how this leads to violence and tragedy in her village.

Another influential work, *Tuned Out*, examines the use of drugs by adolescents.

It is Wojciechowska's most controversial book and in 1981 was made into a movie entitled *Stoned: An Anti-Drug Film*, starring Scott Baio.

# Copyright Information

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