

# Wolf of Shadows Short Guide

## Wolf of Shadows by Whitley Strieber

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# Contents

<a href="#">Wolf of Shadows Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>

## Overview

Anyone who has ever wondered how animals see the world, sensing smells, sound-tones, and weather signs which are largely ignored by people, will find this book fascinating. The storyline of wolf and human meeting warily, then learning to trust each other for mutual survival, adds another level of appeal.

Finally, the simple but eloquent style paints images of beauty, poignancy, and clarity which will give readers who love animals and the wilderness an extraordinary reading experience.

## About the Author

Whitley Strieber was born in San Antonio, Texas, on June 13, 1945.

As the son of a successful lawyer he grew up in the quiet suburb of Terrell Hills. From very early years he seems to have been aware of the darker and more alien side of the universe. Despite the security of his affluent home, he remembers that as a child he was frightened of visits from spacemen. His imaginative interest in outer space let him to turn himself into a "little green man" with the help of friends who daubed him with paint, and to send a frog ten miles up in an experimental backyard balloon. For Strieber these activities were the precursors of a lifelong interest in space, technology, the occult, extraterrestrial phenomena, and humanity's relationship to other creatures.

After receiving a B.A. degree from the University of Texas in 1968, he went to London. While there, he attended the London School of Economics and Political Science, and made two movies that were shown as underground films and have since disappeared into obscurity (even Strieber himself does not know if prints of them still exist). Returning to the U.S., he was employed by the Cunningham & Walsh Advertising agency from 1973 to 1978. Since that time he has been a fulltime writer, his ambition from the age of nine.

His writing has enabled him to explore at length those off-beat subject which have always attracted his interest. His first novel *The Wolfen* was a thoughtful werewolf novel, and his second *The Hunger* drew on vampire lore. Most of his subsequent books have been classified as horror novels, but they have involved subject matter as diverse as nuclear war, witchcraft, and history and politics. Almost all the rest of his writing has been published as adult fiction and nonfiction—which does not, of course, rules out its being read and enjoyed by younger readers as well.

His book *Communion* (1987) published as nonfiction, became something of a scandal. In it, Strieber describes being kidnapped by aliens resembling those in science-fiction movies, taken to their flying saucer-type headquarters, and examined closely. His regular publisher, Warner, had refused to publish it, saying it would ruin Strieber's reputation. This was a reasonable concern. When the book was published, critics and commentators questioned his sanity. Strieber, however, insisted that all the events described in it were true to the best of his knowledge, and that his wife and son could confirm many of them. He did qualify these statements by saying that memory can play tricks. He also never claimed that his abductors had to be from outer space. They could be manifestations from an alternate or spiritual plane, he says, admitting there is still much that he is unsure of about his experience. A second book about these events *Transformation* was published a year later.

His third book in the flying saucer category, *Majestic*, appeared in 1989. It was published as fiction and narrates a chain of events which the author could hardly have witnessed, because they occurred in the New Mexico desert in 1947.



As time has passed the furor about Strieber's sanity has ebbed. The three flying saucer books have been bestsellers and made a great deal of money; he even wrote the screenplay for a movie based on *Communion*, and he continues to function competently in the regular world (often the most significant test of one's mental health.) In a decade where some otherwise solid citizens see auras and others claim to be visited by angels, perhaps there is no need to worry about a successful author who believes that he has communed with alien beings.

## Setting

The story takes place in and around the forest and lake country of Minnesota. The time is an imagined near-future, just prior to and after a largescale nuclear exchange.

Although the author has set his story within a framework of familiar geography and culture, very little of the manmade world intrudes. Only the airplane which carries a woman and her two daughters to temporary safety in the wolves' territory, and a few later glimpses of obscenely charred and twisted cars and buildings, appear as relics of our technological society. In the third chapter, the surviving wolves and people come upon some barns and abandoned farmhouses, the reminders of a more basic way of human life. The rest of the setting and story takes place in deep wilderness, almost unmarked by human presence.

For while the opening pages sing with the secrets of nature, letting us run with the young Wolf of Shadows and share his joy in them, the very air and light suddenly turn wrong. Dark freezing rain and forest fires follow, and then the ground cover which was blossoming in June's warm sunlight wilts and becomes poisonous. Animals die. Human events, in which the creatures of the wilderness took no part, nevertheless destroy the natural balance which sustains their life. Such a contrast, of pristine wilderness and innocence set against the ruin wrought by man's hubris, (pride) is not unusual in fiction. But seldom has the change been so overwhelming, or been used to such powerful effect, as in the setting of this novel.

## Social Sensitivity

No person of goodwill can quarrel with the novel's message that nuclear war is a danger to the natural world as well as the human, or that political leadership on all levels should be responsible rather than self-aggrandizing. A few of the events or images might be disturbing to younger children. These include the younger daughter's death from radiation poisoning, and the wolves' killing and eating some domestic dogs. But these are necessary for the story, and are not described vividly or used for shock effect.

It is possible that since the Cold War is over and the threat of nuclear war no longer grabs so much attention, *Wolf of Shadows* may seem irrelevant. Even if post-holocaust novels in general have lost some of their relevance, this one has other, important things to say about love and trust and the relationship of humans with animals. Parents and teachers may find this book a good, poignant resource for raising ecological questions and awareness of the natural world.



# Literary Qualities

The entire novel is written as a simple narrative which relates events through the point of view of Wolf of Shadows. Even the human characters' actions are described as the wolf understands them, except for their conversation. This is written in dialogue although Wolf of Shadows interprets it as "growling" tinged with various emotions. Including such human conversation is necessary to explain certain background facts in the story, such as why this particular woman and her daughters flee to the wilderness after the nuclear bombardment. At the same time, Wolf of Shadows' own perceptions shape most of the novel's imagery. The reader thus enters a world where scents, sounds and tones, textures, and the gradations of hot and cold, moist and dry, play as large a part as visual images.

Strieber uses this device well, enhancing the story's impact. Telling a story from an animal's viewpoint is not unique, of course. Many fairy tales have only animal characters, and modern fantasy literature boasts classics like *Watership Down*, which focuses on rabbits. However, it is basically a stirring adventure tale starring ingenious rabbits, while *Wolf of Shadows* deals so realistically with such terrible events that the term adventure seems inappropriate. But the books are similar in showing animals at the mercy of larger events initiated by humans, and in drawing universal lessons from the animal characters' efforts to survive.

The tone of *Wolf of Shadows* becomes increasingly darker as the book goes on. It opens on a nearly idyllic spring forest scene, where Wolf of Shadows' trouble fitting into the pack is the only real problem. As nuclear winter descends and most of the inhabitants die, the wilderness and climate become as much an enemy as a support system for life. At the same time the fragile social ties that Wolf of Shadows has built up, wolf-to-human and wolf-to-wolf, are sometimes the only thing that sustains the group. This dynamic symbolizes the fact that people and animals live in a complex web of social and ecological relationships. Neither individuals nor species can flourish if these are broken.

Despite its many tragedies, *Wolf of Shadows* is not a grim book. It ends with hope. Nor does it simply contrast good and innocent animal life with evil Wolf of Shadows 4337 human deeds. Rather it raises the question (as the author says in his Afterword): Should we assume that animals are lower beings because they cannot manipulate nature as we do? Through his narrative Strieber seems to answer "no"; certainly Wolf of Shadows understands his world as well, and experiences emotions and responsibilities as profoundly, as any human character.

Each chapter opens with a quotation from a Native American speaker; these each tell us that there is another way to look at the natural world and the animals, with respect that recognizes the touch of the sacred within their lives.

One other motif, though subtle, should be noted. Western literature has an archetype of the hero, whose life and deeds follow a pattern often seen in the biographies of political





and religious leaders. The hero is typically born with unusual physical or mental traits. In his youth he does not quite fit in to his society. He may even long for acceptance, but at the same time he stands somewhat apart from society and sees problems that need attention.

He then undertakes a long journey or quest, which takes him into unknown territory. During this quest he faces challenges and learns much about himself and the outside (or inner) world.

He returns to his society and, with the abilities he has honed on the quest, brings about social change or leads his people when facing a major crisis. *Wolf of Shadows* fits this pattern in several ways. The archetype seems to honor truths that apply to other social animals in general, wolves as well as human beings.



## Themes and Characters

Wolf of Shadows is not just about animals' struggles against human destructiveness. Of the few important characters in the book half are human and half are wolves. This fact echoes the thought with which Strieber opens the book: "This book is dedicated to the hope that children and wolves have a future."

The Wolf of Shadows is a great black wolf. From his earliest days he differed from other wolves because of his large size, his color, and pale eyes. As he comes to maturity he leaves his home pack, which does not want to accept a wolf who appears so different from the rest of them. Since wolves are social animals, this is hard for him. While growing to maturity, he hangs around on the edge of their circle, observing, lonely, sometimes being challenged but unwilling either to fight seriously for his place among them or to abandon their company. As time goes on he wanders farther afield. He even ventures far beyond their range, to the edge of the lake country where people live in "strange dens" behind "walls of hard air." But he always returns to the pack's home territory, whether they accept him or not.

The obvious main theme of Wolf of Wolf of Shadows 4335 Shadows is the senseless tragedy of nuclear war. By building empathy with Wolf of Shadows from the beginning of the book, and telling the story through his perceptions, the author clarifies the dangers of a nuclear winter in a unique way.

But there is another important theme, too, in which the title character plays a central part. When the strange weather and light-effects begin, Wolf of Shadows, watching the sky, is the only wolf to realize these signs foreshadow disaster. He has remained solitary precisely because he does not want to have to fight the pack's present alpha male and become its leader; he only wants the warm comfort of being with other wolves. But he now realizes that he has no choice. Although it takes him some time to confront the alpha male, and even longer to nudge and harass the pack members into following him in search of safer territory, he ultimately succeeds. Further, the gray wolf who was the former leader, becomes Wolf of Shadows' most reliable lieutenant. He in turn takes care to look out for the pack's safety.

This theme of leadership and responsibility is no less powerful for being told from the wolf's perspective rather than a human's. In fact, it makes a strong statement by its very contrast with the human political leaders, invisible in the story, who obviously have failed in their responsibility toward their own "packs."

The other major character is a woman who comes to the lake where Wolf of Shadows keeps his vigil, a few hours after the first warning-signs darken the air. She arrives in a noisy "bird-thing" (airplane) and brings with her two younger humans, her daughters. We never learn her name. To Wolf of Shadows she is only "the woman," and to her daughters she is "Mother," but we learn other important things about her. She is a wildlife scientist who had visited the lake country the past summer and spent days watching and learning, much as Wolf of Shadows has, although of course with the



different senses and perceptions humans have. One day that summer she and Wolf of Shadows even shared a wary but well-meaning exchange of gazes and growls. This prior knowledge of the wilderness region is presumably what enables her to flee there when nuclear war occurs.

In the woman's character and actions we see some other themes brought out.

Like Wolf of Shadows himself, she has been a keen and patient observer of nature; this stands her in good stead when facing an almost impossible survival challenge. It leads her to trust the wolf she already knows rather than try to kill him as the hunters who wander onto the scene try to do. Wolf of Shadows can sense her goodwill along with her fear. In turn he begins to trust her, even understanding her sorrow when her younger daughter, sickened by fallout, dies. This trust becomes the basis for a partnership which gives both wolf and human their only chance to survive and seek a less-ruined place to live.

Even her lack of a name in the story is meaningful. Although in her past life she had one, and presumably other status-markers such as an academic or scientific title, when the world is ruined they become unimportant. What remains is only her love and responsibility toward her daughters, her worry about her husband (who never manages to join them), and her human intelligence which complements the wolf's own knowledge.

There are only a few additional characters. Sharon and Carol, her two daughters, come to the lake country with her. A group of hunters appears soon after their arrival. The hunters try to shoot the wolves and, when the woman argues with them, they steal her plane. Almost immediately, they crash it in the lake. This episode underlines the book's overall message—that purposeless aggression and violence can only result in tragedy.

The other wolves in the pack are also part of the story. We see them sleeping, curled up together against the dark rain and oblivious to the nuclear danger it brings; on the chase of a remaining deer; struggling through the ruined countryside on the long trek to find a place where they can survive. The instincts and essence of wolfhood come through clearly as we watch them, but only the gray, the pack's former leader, and his mate are clearly defined as individuals. At the end only these two, along with Wolf of Shadows and the woman and girl, manage to reach a valley where the air is warm and green plants may support life.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Two groups of humans try to shoot the wolves in this book, and both are driven away. We get the definite impression that, although these men may be scared and incapable of thinking clearly, they are not good people either. Yet the wolves similarly kill deer and dogs and a cow without any qualms. Is there a moral difference between the two kinds of killing? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the book paints too grim a picture of what would happen after a nuclear war? Too hopeful a picture? Are there other threats in our world that could similarly destroy the climate and the balance of nature? Discuss what you know about any of them.
3. What do you think would have happened to the wolves and people if Wolf of Shadows had not fought for the right to lead the pack? Can you name other fictional characters, or real people, who similarly became leaders when they did not want to? What motivated them?
4. Have you ever had an experience like Wolf of Shadows did when the bombs exploded, where things that were happening felt "wrong" although you couldn't explain why? What did you do?
5. Even though he does not understand words, Wolf of Shadows understands the woman's sorrow, fear, and good intentions. How can he do this?

She also understands him without using what we call "language." How do you do this with your pets? Do you think you could do it with a wild animal as well?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read another book or story which is told from an animal's point of view.

Write a report comparing it to *Wolf of Shadows*. Some of the things you might look at are: how the animal characters perceive the world, their relationships with humans, whether they are social animals (living as part of a group) or solitary, and what these mean for their lives. Try to explain how each author, who naturally cannot know the animal's life and feelings from personal experience, is able to imagine them and put them into words.

2. Write a brief report explaining how *Wolf of Shadows* uses facts from recent scientific studies in showing wolf behavior within the pack, and wolf-human interaction.

3. Draw a series of pictures showing events and terrain on the journey taken by the wolves and the woman and her daughter. Try to put something in each picture that ties into what the characters are feeling.

4. American Indians had a much different attitude toward animals and the Earth than that shown by the hunters in this story. Pick a group of Native American people and read about their nature and animal lore. Retell one of their stories showing a relationship between humans and animals, or write one of your own based on what you have learned from your study.

5. Most scientists today believe that domestic dogs are descended from wolves. If you have a dog, write a paper describing its habits and body language that are similar to the wolves' behavior. Include the ways you "talk" to each other without words.

6. There are many novels about a future world in the aftermath of a nuclear war. Read another one, and write a report comparing it to that of *Wolf of Shadows*. Does the other book show any different consequences? Do the secondary themes differ? Does it use the wide-spread destruction as a jumpingoff place to show how a new society might be built? Is this realistic? What do you think post-nuclear holocaust novels should tell about?

## For Further Reference

Conroy, Ed. *Report on Communion: An Independent Investigation of and Commentary on Whitley Strieber's Communion*. New York: William Morrow, 1989. A book that examines the Communion controversy in considerable detail. Conroy has interviewed Strieber at length, as well as his mother and many of his associates, in an attempt to make sense of the events related in his best-seller.

Many fascinating and unusual experiences from Strieber's life are related here.

Lopez, Barry. *Of Wolves and Men*. New York: Scribner, 1978. A hefty compendium of scientific observations, folklore, history, and reflections on wolves. The opening chapters give details of wolf-pack social structure and other behavior traits that are evident in *Wolf of Shadows*. Lopez, like Strieber, views wolves as complex beings who can never be fully understood by human science.

Paterson, Katherine. "Wolf of Shadows."

New York Times Book Review (December 1, 1985): 39. An admiring review and plot summary by a writer who has won several awards for her own children's books. She recommends that readers of this book "share their anxieties with wise and caring adults" because of its tragic subject, grim tone, and uncertain ending. The review's labelling of *Wolf of Shadows* as for "ages 5-9" is almost certainly an error, probably meant to read "grades 5-9."

"Whitley Strieber." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*. Vol. 12.

Detroit: Gale, 1984: 466-469. This long article gives basic information on Strieber's life, writing interests and other pursuits, and publications to date. It includes a long interview in which he describes how his focus in writing has changed from entertainment to more serious concerns.

The interview and entry are dated; readers will need to look elsewhere, for instance in Conroy's book, for recent information on the author.

## Related Titles

The author says he was motivated to write *Wolf of Shadows* after receiving many responses from children to his adult novel about nuclear war, *Warday* (1984). Many of the children asked "What will happen to the animals?"

His first published novel, *The Wolfen* (1978), reveals his interest in wolves.

Strictly speaking, it is a horror novel, but it contains thought-provoking comparisons between the wolf and human societies. It is about a group of werewolves who have evolved to a nearhuman level of intelligence, and who live in hiding in the Bronx, where human beings serve as their main prey.



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