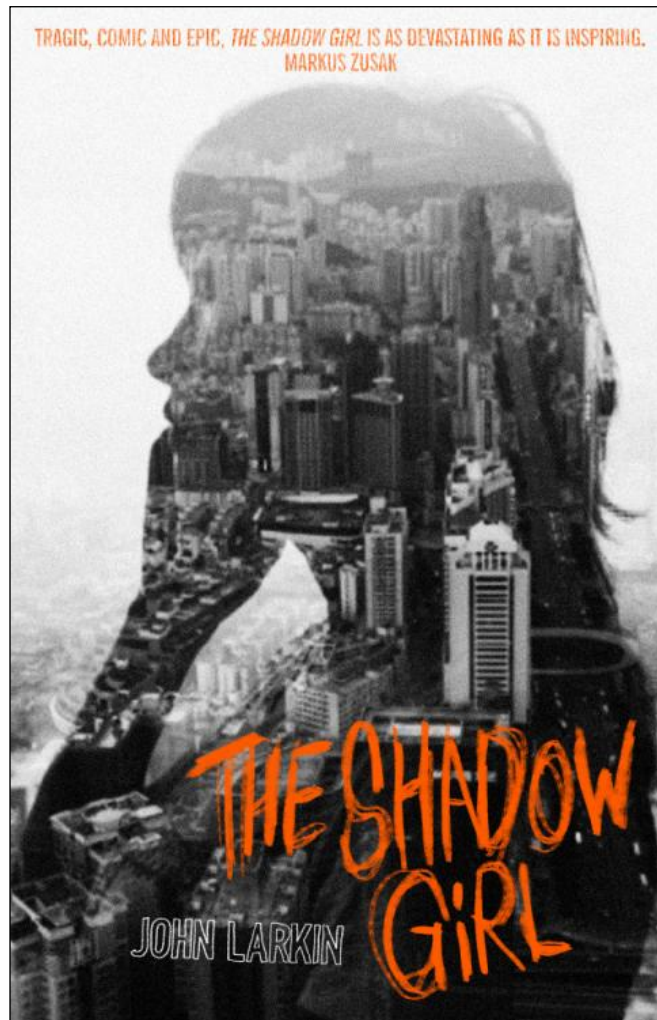


THE SHADOW GIRL

JOHN LARKIN



TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

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1. SYNOPSIS

In *The Shadow Girl*, a girl in her late teens tells a fictitious author how she came to be homeless. The story is told in two strands: the 'café' chapters are presented as transcripts of interviews between the girl and the author, whom she has sought out to help her tell her story; the interleaving chapters are the author's interpretation of her words, as he adapts her tale into a book.

The girl's home life is uneasy and often disturbed by her father's violence towards her mother. When the girl is nine, her mother stabs her father during an argument. The father's brother, Tony, and his wife, Serena, take the girl to their home, telling her that both her parents are going to hospital, and might have to move back to 'the old country'. That evening, the girl sees Tony and Serena loading two large bags into his car, and Tony drugs the girl and takes her to the forest. There Tony says he 'can't do it' and brings the girl home again. She buries the memory, convincing herself it was a dream and that the bags contained only money stolen from her parents' home.

The girl lives peacefully with Tony and Serena until she is thirteen and her uncle's attitude to her changes; the girl suspects he is grooming her for sexual abuse. She attempts to alert her teacher to her situation, but Tony charms the school officials. At home, Tony threatens her again and the girl admits to herself that Tony killed her mother and buried both her parents in the forest.

The girl runs away. After two nights sleeping rough, she waits for Tony and Serena to go out, then sneaks into their home to get money from her piggyback. While there, she discovers that Serena is having an affair. She also breaks into Tony's safe and steals a large sum of money and one of Serena's credit cards.

She finagles her way into a suburban hotel and school, but decides that she can't live in a hotel forever. After some failed attempts at finding shelter, she hits upon catching the last train of the night, evading the guard, and sleeping in the locked train in the rail yard.

Eventually the school principal realises that the girl is a runaway and she is handed over to the police, who in turn contact Tony. She escapes the police and returns to living on the trains. She also contacts her teacher at the school, Miss Taylor, who agrees to let the girl stay with her for a few days and sets about finding her a place in another school. After a few days the girl finds an abandoned house near Miss Taylor's flat, moves in and starts at the new school.

During this time the girl meets another homeless teenager, Cinderella. The older girl is sick, hurting emotionally and physically; in many ways she is exactly who the shadow girl wanted to avoid becoming. The shadow girl does her best to help her friend, but Cinderella has given up on her own life. Not long after this, the girl's neighbours call the police to the abandoned house and the girl is forced to flee once more. She returns to the hotel for a few nights, but by now Tony has tracked the girl down. He confronts her, blaming her for the abuse he committed. The girl escapes him, but goes to the house to warn Serena that Tony knows about her affair. By the time she has caught a train back to the house, Tony has driven home and Serena is dead. Tony reveals that he had dated the girl's mother and may even be her father. The girl argues with him and Tony shoots himself.

2. INSPIRATION FOR *THE SHADOW GIRL*

During a school talk/workshop session at a particularly tough western suburbs high school about five years ago I met an inspirational year eight girl whose story I simply had to tell.

The girl, whose name is not revealed in the novel, arrived to my workshop about half an hour late. She apologised profusely and then proceeded to join in with gusto. She was intelligent, articulate and clearly well read. She had a sparkle in her eyes and was eager to learn. The only thing that stood out about her was that she was quite small and looked, to me, more like a year four girl. The other girls seemed to keep a bit of a lookout for her; complementing her on her responses and just generally behaving in the manner of big sisters. I found this rather curious because all of the other girls were either of Middle Eastern or Islander background, while the girl appeared the quintessential blonde-haired, blue-eyed, middle class shopping mall girl.

During our first break (it was an all-day workshop for selected students) a couple of teachers approached me and apologised for the girl's lateness. Although clearly nervous, they seemed to want to talk about her so I asked why she'd been late. 'It's a sad story,' began one before launching into a brief bio of her life that still beggars belief.

The girl's father was an extremely violent man by all accounts and upon his release from jail he attempted to burn the family home down (even though it was rented), with a view to killing his wife and with apparently zero concern if his daughter was also killed. The girl's mother, a drug addict, fled with the girl to a woman's refuge. Soon afterwards, however, the girl started turning up late for school and with no jumper in the depths of winter. She also had no lunch or lunch money. The teachers started pitching in and making or buying lunches for her as well as making sure she was warm enough by obtaining a spare jumper from lost property. The girl, it turned out, had fled the refuge and her mother and was living on the trains – spending the night in Hornsby shunting yards. She made her way to school each day and did her homework by torchlight at night. There was an attempt to get her into foster care but this didn't work out and each time she found herself back on the trains where she felt safe.

Needless to say this story left me speechless. What inspired me about the girl is that she still had that sparkle in her eyes and thirst for knowledge. I've been into schools where some children have what could only be described as a 'death stare'.

I asked the teachers if I could give her a signed book to encourage her. They said that she would love that because she was an avid reader. So at the end of the workshop, I gathered all the students together and announced that I always give out a signed copy of one of my books at the end of each session as a prize to the student that I think has the most potential. When I announced the girl as the winner, she came running out the front and hugged and wouldn't let go.

I left the school with a lump in my throat and made a vow that one day I would write a story based on her circumstances. As with all good stories, though, I had to wait for the right moment and also let the story germinate. I felt that I had to do the tale justice. My writing voice has always been fairly light and humorous so in many respects I had to develop as a writer before I was prepared to tackle this story. Because of the seriousness of the story – homelessness, abuse, neglect and so on – I have had to pare back the humour in order to give a grittier story. I hope I have done her story justice.

3. STRUCTURE AND STYLE

The main story is told in first person present tense (the 'story chapters') and through transcripts (the 'café chapters'), which flick between present and past tense, as in everyday speech.

It is clear early that the 'story chapters' are not, however, the girl's direct speech, but the author's reworking of their conversations into a narrative form. (On p. 22 the girl says 'I didn't think you would write it in first person, but it works'.)

Amid these chapters are fantasy sequences, parables or short stories, essays, dreams and sequences from another character's imagined point of view (cf p. 199, in 'The Ghosts and Mrs Bennet' and p. 327, in 'From the Cradle to the Grave'.)

4. PRE-READING AND POST-READING ACTIVITIES

ANALYSING THE COVER

Before reading the book, students might like to spend a few minutes analysing the cover.

- What does the title '*The Shadow Girl*' make you think the story will be about? What does the cover image make you think the story might be about? Would a different image with the same title have suggested the same story?
- Read the back cover blurb. What do you imagine might have caused her parents to disappear? What might have made her run away from her uncle and aunt's home?

EPIGRAPHS: BEFORE READING

Consider that the book is divided into four acts, each with an epigraph:

Act One: Before

'Nothing exists but you. And you are but a thought – a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities.' – Mark Twain

Act Two: After

'Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were going to live for ever' – Mahatma Gandhi

Act Three: Last Train to Kathmandu

'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.' – Oscar Wilde

Act Four: Nullum Fatum Est

'What the mother sings to the cradle goes all the way down to the coffin.' – Henry Ward Beecher

What hints do these epigraphs give about the book as a whole? Had you heard any of these expressions before? Try rephrasing them in everyday speech.

EPIGRAPHS: AFTER READING

After reading the book, look at the epigraphs again. Do they still have the same meaning to you or the same relevance to the story that you expected them to? If you were to match the themes listed below with the epigraphs, which would go together?

5. THEMES

- **'Nullum fatum est'**
- **Abuse**
- **Religion and belief**
- **Power and corruption**
- **Self-motivation and self-pity**
- **The supernatural**
- **Fact, fiction and storytelling**
- **Revenge**
- **Family stories**
- **Chance connections**

6. DISCUSSING THE THEMES

Nullum fatum est: There is no fate

- Do you agree with this statement? Why?
- Why might people believe in 'fate'? Would being fatalistic make life easier in the short term? And in the long term?
- Are destiny, luck, chance or fortune the same as fate? Find and compare some passages featuring these words – what distinctions does the shadow girl draw between them?
- Cinderella believed that she was destined to die before she was twenty. Do you think this became a self-fulfilling prophecy, was it coincidence, or a little bit of both? Give reasons for your answer.

Abuse

- On p. 93, the shadow girl says: 'I'm not being abused. Yet.' Do you agree? Do you think it's common for people who are being abused to recognise from the start that it is abuse?
- On p. 50 the girl lists some of the excuses she thinks Tony might give for his behaviour. Does he ever use these kinds of excuses?
- Do you think many people your own age are aware of 'grooming'? With that in mind, what do you think of the role of education in protecting young or vulnerable people? Why do you think some adults might have doubts about discussing sexual or physical abuse with young people?
- Do you think the shadow girl would have been safer had her parents lived? Why?
- The shadow girl and Cinderella have experienced different degrees and types of abuse and react to it very differently. What did you think of Cinderella in the chapter 'My Emo Fairy Godmother'? Do you think her actions are reasonable? How would you compare Tony's justifications for his actions and Cinderella's justifications for hers?

Religion and belief

- Consider your answers to the earlier questions about fate, and read the passage on pages 16-18 (Miracle in South-Central America). Do you think 'God's will' is a similar idea to 'fate'?
- The shadow girl prefers not to call herself atheist or agnostic. What did you think of her definitions of the two? Do you think it's important to label one's beliefs?
- What did you think of the closing chapter – did you think the girl had 'found religion'? Did you think her attitude towards religion had changed at all? (You could compare the final chapter to other passages in the book, such as pp 19–20 and pp 116–119.)

Power and corruption

- Which characters would you say are in positions of power? Are these the characters who hold the most power? Why? How do they demonstrate it? (To answer this, you might like to come up with a list of different types of power.)
- Does the book take a firm line on the concept of corruption or are there nuances? You might like to consider Dr Chen, Marco Rossini and Miss Taylor – do you think they are 'good' people? Do they always do what they are supposed to do?
- Consider the first descriptions of Father Kelliher: did his depiction change as the book progressed? Does he emerge as a better or worse person than you expected? How does this fit in with the way the girl talks about religion?

The supernatural

- The shadow girl refers to ghosts frequently. Find and compare some of those passages. How do you think she conceives of ghosts? Do you believe in ghosts – and in what form?
- Cinderella visited a fortune-teller. Do you think the fortune-teller told her the truth? If the fortune-teller was a fake, why do you think she told Cinderella what she did?

Fact, fiction and storytelling

- Why do you think John Larkin chose the different narrative styles for this novel? What effect does it have on how you interpret the story? Would the book have been as interesting if it were all told in first person present? Or in the transcript style?
- Did you read the 'story chapters' as if the girl herself were narrating to you, rather than those chapters being the author character's work?
- Did you ever doubt the girl's story? Were you shocked when she returned to tell the author a revised version of her final encounter with 'Creepo'? (p. 388 'The stuff at the hotel didn't happen like that.')
- Does *The Shadow Girl* use an 'unreliable narrator'? In what way/s? Can you describe how this narrative is different from others with an unreliable narrator? (Examples of unreliable narratives that you may have read include *Liar* by

Justine Larbalestier, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.)

- Does the novel tell us specifically whether the author character's book is going to be fiction or non-fiction? Are there clues about this?
- To what degree do you think the author character's version of the girl differs from who she might be? Can you find any quotes from the text to support this? Can you find examples of the girl 'editing' herself when she speaks to the author?

Revenge

- Can you list examples of characters seeking or enacting revenge? What were they seeking revenge for?
- How sympathetic are you to the different characters and their reasons for wanting revenge, or the forms of revenge they take?

Family stories

- Look for passages in the book that describe the lives of the girl's parents and relatives. Whose voice are these passages in? Which style of chapter are they in – 1st person chapters or transcript chapters?
- Why do you think this might be? Do you think you could describe your parents' or relatives' thoughts, hopes or disappointments? Can your parents or relatives tell stories about their own families?
- Why do you think John Larkin has included these passages in the novel? Do they change how you view the girl's relatives? Do these passages make her relatives more sympathetic characters or their actions more reasonable or forgivable?
- Do you think it's possible that the girl's descriptions of her family might be distorted – deliberately or unconsciously, or to make them seem better or worse? Why?
- Have you noticed stories that your family tells about itself? Do families invent their own embellished histories? Why? What function do you think telling and re-telling a family story might serve?

Chance connections

- List the chance connections with people the shadow girl makes in the book. Do these people help or hinder her? What role do these people take in her life? (For example, friend, guardian, enemy, confidant, counsellor, advisor.)
- Does she help any of her connections herself?
- As a class or group, discuss what do you think of the epigraph to 'Act One: Before' in light of this.

7. ACTIVITIES

DEBATE TOPICS

- Is 'Fate' an empowering concept?
- 'Ignorance is bliss' or 'forewarned is forearmed': does education protect vulnerable people?
- Who is in control of a story: the storyteller or the reader?
- Do all first-person texts have an 'unreliable narrator'?

READING TASK

- You may have read *Matilda* when you were younger and have memories of what it was about. Try reading it again now and consider what you take away from the story and contrast your interpretations. (If you haven't read *Matilda*, choose another book that you remember well from when you were about eight or nine years old.)
- The shadow girl refers to many other books she has read. Had you read any of them before reading *The Shadow Girl*? If so, do you think that added to or affected the way you read *The Shadow Girl*?
- You may have discussed the concept of intertextuality in relation to another text/s at school. To what degree is *The Shadow Girl* intertextual? Consider not just the books the girl refers to, but also the narrative style used in the novel.
- *Girl Next Door* by Alyssa Brugman also features an Australian teenager who becomes homeless. How different are their stories? Do either of these girls match your image of a 'typical' homeless person?

WRITING & DISCUSSION TASK

- Choose a passage from the book and rewrite it in a different narrative style. For example, you could take the events of one of the café chapters and write it in the girl's first person present voice, or vice versa. OR Choose a passage in one of the first-person, present-tense chapters and rewrite it in third-person, past tense.
- As a group or class, all read one of these rewritten passages and discuss what effects the different techniques create.

RESEARCH

- **Homelessness**

Alone or in a small group, research homelessness in Australia. You could look up statistics online, newspaper articles that document statistics or individual cases or contact welfare organisations. You could consider the rates of homelessness in the population depending on age, gender, socioeconomic background, family history, medical history. How does this compare to how the shadow girl became homeless? You could also consider the length of time spent homeless, or what resources are available and used by different homeless people. Did you have a pre-conceived image of who a 'typical' homeless person might be

before you read *The Shadow Girl* or began your research? Has this image changed?

- **Squatting**

The shadow girl uses the Gardner house as a squat. Have you heard this term before? You could look at the history of squatting in Australia or your own city. Is it common – now or at a particular time? Is squatting most associated with a particular era or political ideology? In what other countries is it a common practice? Why do you think squatting might be illegal or discouraged? Imagine you are a member of a local council: would you be for or against squatting? Can you draft some rules either to minimise squatting or make it viable both for the squatters and the owners of empty premises?

- **Youth resources**

The back of *The Shadow Girl* includes these websites and phone numbers for some national resources available to young people who are at risk or just need someone to speak to.

www.kidshelp.com.au or 1800 551 800

www.lifeline.org.au or 13 11 14

Go online, look in the phonebook, or look at flyers next time you're near a community noticeboard, at a doctor's surgery, in a youth centre, sport centre or PCYC: what other resources are available to young people at risk? (Your teachers may have suggestions to add to the list.) Discuss with your teachers why these services exist, who might run them and which ones are anonymous and why.

8. THE SHADOW GIRL'S READING LIST

Pride and Prejudice – Jane Austen

Bleak House – Charles Dickens

The Godfather – Mario Puzo

Matilda – Roald Dahl

Oliver Twist – Charles Dickens

Jane Eyre – Charlotte Brontë

The Old Man and the Sea – Ernest Hemingway

Animal Farm – George Orwell

Fly Away Peter – David Malouf

Somme Mud: Young Readers' Edition – Edward Lynch and Will Davies

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly – Jean-Dominique Bauby