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Alison McGhee

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Eleven-year-old Clara is struggling to find the truth about her missing father and grandfather and her dead twin sister, but her mother refuses to talk. When Clara begins interviewing Georg Kominsky--her elderly neighbor--she finds that he is equally reticent about his own concealed history. Precocious and imaginative, Clara invents versions of Mr. Kominsky's past, just as she invents lives for the people missing from her own shadowy history. Her journey of discovery is at the heart of this beautiful story about unlikely friendship and communion, about discovering what matters most in life, and about the search to find the missing pieces of ourselves.

Shadow Baby Details

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From Reader Review Shadow Baby for online ebook

Gretchen says

I didn't like this book. I finished out of respect to my book club and being able to have a conversation. I was happy to get closure out of the book and would have loved to have an alternate perspectives of Tamar and the old man in this book.

I honestly didn't see a purpose to this book as it felt like "a year in a life" of a child that struggled to separate truth and fiction.

Nicole Peoples says

#1. I suck at writing reviews of. . . anything and this is my first review of a book on here.

Shadow Baby is not long, but it took me longer to read than almost any book I've ever read. The book is narrated by Clara Winter, a girl of 11 or so. Frankly, it was hard reading a naive girls account of self exploration. She is an unreliable narrator and she knows it. It was hard for me to force my way through her multiple fictitious realities, her diatribes on why she likes certain words, and the crux for me was that the author took it upon herself to insert the definitions of some words in order to "enlighten" the reader. I never felt drawn to Clara's story and found myself intrigued by her mother, Tamar and the old man, Goerg Kominsky. The thing that most bothered me was that after 1/2 a book of her attempting to find out Georg's story for her "history project," I feel like I came no closer to understanding him than I did at his introduction. Mostly what we get of him are Clara's dislocated realities (fictious meanderings) of what she supposes has happened in his life and this goes for her mother and grandfather as well. I suppose in some ways the book had a realistic representation of a young girl. A girl uncertain of who she is and exploring her desire to fulfill gaps in an uncertain history, but I am uncertain that Alison McGhee does a good job creating a believable character to tell this story. Perhaps if the narrator had been a little older and a little wiser I would have enjoyed this one a little bit more.

Jennifer says

My daughter was required to read this book for her AP lit class, so we own it. I am currently waiting for a book at the library that I really want to read and I am first in line for the next copy, so I read this as a place holder. It was a really funny book, which was a surprise. It is written from the perspective/narration of an 11 year old girl, and her thought process is hysterical. It does deal with some adult topics toward the end. She was conceived in rape. It never says so explicitly, but it is implied. I think this is a YA book, so parents may want to know that before they let young kids read. Recommended.

Becca says

Well I just loved Clara. What a unique, flawed little character who lives in story and words. I could see her fully alive in the author's mind....funny, precocious and tragic.

The plot left some things to be desired and whoever came up with the title should be slapped, but as a character study / coming of age book, this is great. If I were a middle school English teacher, I'd add this to a reading list right quick.

Kristen says

Did I mention that I cried. I was reading it while waiting at the beauty salon and continued while sitting in the hairdresser's chair, all the time crying. I stopped reading, so my tear ducts had a chance to dry a little, but I couldn't wait long enough. The moment I started reading again, tears were just streaming down my face. The shampoo girl finally gave me another towel and I finished the book, covered with tears. So if you need a good cry and you are either in place where no one can see your tears or you don't mind a whole beauty salon pointing and laughing, read this book.

Sondra says

This may have been one of the worst books I've read. I felt like the author was trying too much. Trying to sound deep and descriptive, but ended up having a main character who was pretty annoying. The beginning had so little plot that I skipped ahead to see anything of substance happened. I found the middle interesting, so I trucked on ahead only to find the end mired down down in fake strokes and endless repetition of what happens to the old man again and again. I love reading but hate when books give me nothing.

CynthiaA says

Curious and precocious, eleven year old Clara forms an unlikely friendship with an old man who lives in a nearby trailer park. In doing so, she learns a little about him and his past and ultimately, a lot more about herself and her own story. Clara is a magnificent fictional character, full of spunk and so very bright. Her observations are a wonderful combination of 11-year-old naïveté and thoughtful inquisitiveness (bordering on meddlesome) about the people around her. Her fascination with words appealed to me. I too think a lot about the way a word sounds.

This is a charming, poignant and thoughtful book, sad in places but never depressing, thought-provoking and beautifully crafted. Themes of love, regret and forgiveness weave together in this easy-to-read tale. Highly recommended.

Koz says

Worst title ever. I am practically embarrassed to tell people the title. Every time I did, I'd have to give a disclaimer that it's way better than it sounds.

It's an excellent book. Very well written. I love Clara, the protagonist. Clara from this book and Oskar from "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" should get married. Clara is funny, sweet, heartbreaking and brilliant.

So well done.

Beth Anne says

i read this book in two sittings. it's very easy to read. and i'm not sure i really liked it. i mean, it was well written, the story was cute. characters pretty likable, i guess.

the main character, i know, i know, was supposed to be this 11 year old girl who admittedly "didn't talk like any other 11 year old." she's wise beyond her years, and all that crap. but i didn't really believe it. no 11 year old would, or could, for that matter, speak like she did. and it made the book a bit unbelievable.

i think the story was a good one...girl coming of age, learning about her family, coming to terms with death and isolation, etc...but the way that the main character spoke made the whole thing...just...wrong.

that's all i have to say about it.

Sharon says

It was hard to decide about 4 or 5 stars for this book. The story is deftly written from the viewpoint of an 11 and 12-year-old girl. While there is melancholy to it, there is also quiet joy in a new friend and learning new things. The girl likes words and language and invents stories for the people in her life she doesn't know and that her mother won't tell her about, like her grandfather. Her new friend, Georg, an immigrant, is a metal worker and this plucky, unusual child needs someone to be with while her mother is a choir practice each week. And Georg gently teaches her a different way of thinking that stays with her for life.

It's the story of a clip in time in their lives, where the girl wants to know about her family -- her twin that was lost, the father and grandfather she doesn't know. Her mother won't talk about it. At age 11-12, we all had a little world all our own and so does this child. I love the way the author made this voice so authentic.

I understand the book was up for a Pulitzer Prize and the author has won other accolades for her writing.

Miss Grace says

The author doesn't really understand chicken behavior, but that is a relatively minor plot point.

Marvin says

This beautiful novel (highly recommended by my wife) is narrated by a precocious 11-year-old girl, a lover of words, stories, and books who lives with her single mother in upstate New York, near Utica. She befriends an "old man," an illiterate immigrant metalworker who lives in a trailer court. He is in nearly every way her opposite: illiterate, a man of few words, but a keen observer of the beautiful and practical. She comes to admire him and sees herself as his apprentice in understanding the world. She herself understands her world

through stories, and when she doesn't understand something, she makes up a story to make sense of it. Her mother refuses to tell her anything about her father, her grandfather (who was driving her mother to the hospital for her birth when they got caught in a blizzard and turned over the truck in a ditch), or the twin sister who was stillborn at the time. She is obsessed with all of that and creates stories that she comes to see as the truth. I'm pretty sure that there's much more here than I was able to discern, but it's a work of beauty.

Chris says

A beautifully told, somewhat meandering story of a young teen coming to grips with the loss and grief that surrounds her. Clara has a wonderfully-developed, distinctive narrative voice that brims with personality.

A brief digression to reference an article from the *New York Times*, The Stories That Bind Us.

What is the secret sauce that holds a family together? What are the ingredients that make some families effective, resilient, happy? . . .

The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative. . . .

The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness. . . .

Clara has no family narrative. She has a mother. A taciturn mother who refuses to speak about the past, about Clara's unknown father, estranged grandfather, or twin who died in childbirth. She knows only that they existed. Her solution has always been to invent stories of her own. About everything. Her missing family, the people she encounters, objects. She creates fake books for her school book reports. She lives in stories, so much so she sometimes gets fuzzy about what is real and what she has invented.

And that, I think, is all I should say about Clara's tale. It's the way she would want things. Instead, I'll let some of her own words say more.

Let me tell you that a girl of eleven is capable of far more than is dreamt of in most universes.

Tamar took a cursory look. How I love that word. There may not be anyone in the world who loves the word *cursory* as much as I do. That's how I am about certain words.

Books? Books are sacred. Books are to me what the host is to the priest, the oasis to the desert wanderer, the arrival of winged seraphim to a dying man. That's the main reason why I can't write a book report. I can't stand what a book report does, boils a book down to a few sentences about plot. What about the words that make each book unique, an island unto itself, words like *cursory* and *ingenuous* and *immerse*? What about the *heart and soul*?

Plot? Who cares?

The chives were the first things up in the spring. You could see them poking their narrow green stalks up before the snow melted, like miniature quills from the olden days. Chives thrive in the cold. They are not intimidated by lingering snow and ice. They are indomitable.

Exclamation marks kept stabbing out into the air after the words that I didn't want to let out. Stab and stab and stab, words and more hurtful words pushing against each other inside me, dying to get out.

I couldn't answer him. I was already into my train of thought. Words had piled themselves up in my brain and they could not be stopped. They had to emerge in the order I had already given them.

"Stories? What about stories?"

"I told him that stories are the way you look at the world. That stories are your salvation."

krdito says

I read this many years ago when it first came out and just re-read it this weekend. I love coming-of-age stories told from a child's point of view, and this book was no exception. Clara is kind of an oddball with lots of repetitive thoughts, so I wonder if she is mildly autistic or just quite precocious. She makes up stories to fill in gaps for missing details in her life and befriends an elderly man. I found the writing lyrical and authentic for this young girl. Will look for more books from Alison McGhee!

Liv Kirk says

Shadow Baby is one of the worst books I ever remember reading, and if I had to describe it in one word it would be "tedious." For me it was a completely dismal story that tells you the end in the beginning. It's so unbearably repetitive that there's perhaps 100 pages too many. Literally the same sentences appear over & over. I found myself wondering if we are supposed to glean that the narrator Clara is autistic or she is simply an odd child as repeatedly stated. The relationship with the old man is sweet, the father's "origin" is predictable, the mother figure/relationship too remote to be believable. I read this book while on a boat and sincerely considered throwing the pages one by one in the sea so no others need be subjected to such tedious misery, but couldn't bring myself to soil the sea however artfully. One passage spoken by the mother

triumphs, all else disappoints.
