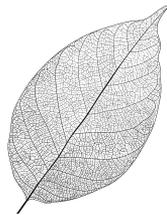


the
shadow year
HANNAH
RICHELL

READING GROUP NOTES



A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK



The Shadow Year tells two stories, intricately intertwined, each with a tragedy at its heart.

Five friends – Kat, Simon, Carla, Ben and Mac – are about to graduate from university, but their future seems bleak. It's 1980, and the newspapers are full of doom and gloom. In a last-ditch attempt at escape, they take off on a summer's day to the Peak District where they stumble upon an abandoned cottage on the shores of a shimmering lake, hidden deep in the heart of the countryside. Isolated and run-down, it offers a retreat, somewhere they can escape from the real world. It's a chance to live the dream, doing exactly as they please, with lazy summer days by the lake and cosy winter evenings around the fire. They decide to stay, convinced they can survive on their own and determined to stick it out no matter what the cost. But as the seasons change, tensions begin to rise, and when Kat's sister, beautiful art student Freya, appears at the door, their idyllic life is turned upside down – with devastating consequences.

Lila and Tom are a young London couple, reeling after the sudden loss of their first baby and struggling to hold their marriage together. Lila lost the baby in a fall but can't remember how it happened, and the memories of that day are coming back to her only slowly, piece by painful piece. When she inherits a remote Peak District cottage from a mystery benefactor, she flees there to spend time alone, away from

her husband. Renovating the tumbledown house gives her a renewed sense of purpose, but as she sifts through the evidence left behind thirty years ago by the five young drop-outs, she becomes curious. Why did they leave in such a hurry, with their belongings still strewn about the place? Who are the figures in the mural scrawled on an upstairs wall? And why is there a bullet hole in one of the timber beams in the kitchen? Most disturbing of all, why can't she shake the feeling that someone might be watching her?

As the story of the five young friends unfolds it starts to overlap with Lila's own and, in a harrowing climax on the shores of the lake, secrets that have haunted her family for years are finally exposed. But will all the secrets of that one shadowy year come to light, or will one remain hidden beneath the cool, clear water, never to surface?

AUTHOR INTERVIEW



The Shadow Year is your second novel – was writing it a very different experience from writing your first, *Secrets of the Tides*? Were you more confident the second time around, or did you find yourself facing a whole new series of challenges?

I know it's a cliché but writing this second novel was like being strapped into a rollercoaster. Some days I felt buoyed by the knowledge I had 'done it' before and confident that I could write another novel (receiving kind comments from generous readers and reviewers of *Secrets of the Tides* was especially heartening), but most days I felt cowed by the weight of expectation and the looming publication deadline. I also didn't make things easy for myself. I stumbled upon the story for *The Shadow Year* while bogged down in the first draft of a very different novel. I was 100,000 words in when the lake and the cottage and the character of a broken young woman (who would eventually become Lila) jumped into my head. I tried to push the ideas away so that I could focus on my work-in-progress but they wouldn't leave me alone. I agonised for a few weeks about ditching the other draft to concentrate on what would become *The Shadow Year*, but eventually I knew in my gut that it was the right thing to do. And just like that – I didn't have time for anxiety and self-doubt – I had to write the story and get it done. The clock was ticking.

Your character Lila shares something with you: she grew up in Buckinghamshire in England, and in a similar period. Did this shared background make it easier for you to ‘get into her head’ and imagine how she would think, feel and react in different circumstances?

No, Lila grew with me as I wrote the novel. She was very much a ‘Londoner’ in my head, which added to her fish-out-of-water feelings on arrival in the Peak District. It was only as I began to delve into her early childhood and the life her parents had given her that I decided to base her family home in Buckinghamshire, a place I knew well from my own childhood. The fact that we are of the same generation was perhaps the greatest help to me in trying to get inside her head.

As in your first novel, the setting plays a pivotal role in *The Shadow Year*. Is the beautiful lake in England’s Peak District based on a real-life place you know well? What came first – the setting or the story?

The very first thing that came to me about this story was the lake and the abandoned cottage, and the idea of a broken young woman taking solace in the remote surroundings. I didn’t know who the woman was or where the lake was for a long time but I knew I had to find an actual area of England that could offer such an extreme sense of detachment. I thought about the Lake District for a while, but eventually settled on the Peak District. I was attracted to the area’s diversity – the uplands and escarpments, the rolling hills and farmland as well as the barren moors. The more I researched the landscape and the shifting seasons, the potential for foraging and living off the land, as well as the hazards and pitfalls of such remote living, the more the plot began to fall into place. The story, in many ways, grew quite organically from the setting.

Walden is an American classic, describing Henry David Thoreau's two-year experiment in simple living in a cabin in the woods in Concord, Massachusetts, in the 1850s. You've chosen a quote from Thoreau's book as your epigraph, and one of your characters, Simon, reads his work in the course of your story. Was *Walden* an important reference for you as you wrote *The Shadow Year*? Do you believe that in seeking to understand nature we can understand ourselves?

I read American Studies at Nottingham University and was already acquainted with Thoreau's writing before I started on this novel but as I began to play around with the story, *Walden* came back to me, very clearly. It was so obvious, really: the idea of detachment and escape, of separating yourself from the everyday to understand who you truly are or to make sense of your current life. These are themes Thoreau explores in his writing and themes that are, of course, embedded in *The Shadow Year*. When I began to notice the parallels it seemed clear to me that Simon *had* to be reading *Walden* at the cottage, and then, when I revisited the quote about a lake being 'Earth's eye' I also knew it would make a perfect epigraph. The idea of the lake as an 'eye' is something I have borrowed from Thoreau at the very start of the book, and there is also a scene where Kat studies herself in the lake and ruminates on her own dark nature.

Since completing *The Shadow Year*, I've noticed that both this book and *Secrets of the Tides* contain a strong sense of the power of nature embedded within them – both in terms of its capacity to nurture and heal, as well as to wreak havoc and destroy. On a personal level, I find nature immensely inspiring in my writing. When I am stuck, I'll often take myself outside for a walk. I never feel more free or at peace than when I'm tramping across the English countryside in muddy boots . . . or trekking through shadowy gum trees in the Australian bush . . . or walking along a coastal path, listening to the rise and fall of the ocean. It's a curious thing, isn't

it, that act of taking yourself *out* into the world to assist with the more introspective process of creativity or self-discovery?

The structure you've chosen for *The Shadow Year* is interesting: you almost give away the answer to the final mystery in your prologue, but then you manage to keep the reader guessing all the way to the very end. Was it difficult gauging which piece of information to give away when? When you're writing and editing your work, how do you keep track of what the reader already knows and what is yet to be revealed?

I really hope I can keep most readers guessing to the end . . . fingers crossed! It's tricky withholding information from the reader, but it's also a great way to build tension. For me it's one of the best bits of writing – I love playing around with the structure of a story. It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle, but the more I write, the harder it is to see all the pieces clearly. My earliest readers – my sister, my husband, my agent and editor – were vital in helping me to ensure the flow of information was happening at the right time. The prologue was the last passage I wrote. For a while the novel didn't have a prologue at all, but my editor and I kept coming back to the idea. We discussed it a couple of times and in the end I wrote something which I hope is a bit of a tease of what's to come and also sets the scene of the lake and the cottage clearly in the reader's mind.

There are twin tragedies at the heart of this story, and a single character is ultimately responsible for both of them – yet you clearly don't regard the question of blame as a simple one. What draws you to this question of blame, and why did you want to explore it?

Guilt and regret are powerful emotions and I seem to be drawn to writing about characters who suffer deeply from both. It's probably because my stories pivot on dramatic moments and you can't have characters doing extreme or questionable things without the

inevitable ruminations over right and wrong. As a writer I like to explore the journey that has led a person to take dramatic action. It's that whole idea of walking around in another person's shoes in order to see the true picture of their life, more so than believing in a simplistic black-and-white version of right and wrong or good and bad. The grey areas of a person's character are far more intriguing, don't you think? It's these areas that can bring that tremor of recognition and make us question our own values and beliefs: what would I do in this situation? Am I capable of such extreme behaviour?

SUGGESTED POINTS FOR DISCUSSION



- What is the significance of the title *The Shadow Year*? Does it have more than one possible interpretation? What are the shadows it refers to?
- Hannah Richell starts her story with a quote from Thoreau: ‘A lake is the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the Earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature.’ Thoreau believed that it is only by understanding nature that we can understand ourselves. Do you agree?
- The cottage and the lake are so important in *The Shadow Year* that they could almost be considered characters in their own right. Can you imagine this story taking place anywhere else (in Australia, New Zealand or Canada, for example), or could it only have been set in this particular landscape?
- Tom comments to Lila about the cottage’s eerie atmosphere: ‘There are just some places that feel ... that feel as though something has happened there. I think this cottage might be one of them.’ Do you agree with Tom? Can places hold the echoes of the events that have taken place there?
- The story is told from two different perspectives and takes place in two different periods in time. Why might the author have

chosen to present the story in this way? How does this create interest, and what challenges might it pose for the writer?

- The answer to this story's final mystery is hidden in the prologue, though the reader doesn't know it until the last chapter. As you read on, did you think back to the young woman in her nightgown stumbling down to the lake, and did you speculate about who she might be?
- We are nearly halfway through the book before we learn who Lila's father was, and we don't learn who her mother was until the end of the book. Did you start to put this together for yourself before it was revealed? Why do you think the author held this information back, and how did this shape your experience of the story and your feelings about the characters?
- When they first move to the cottage and throw themselves into the hard work of daily survival, Kat feels satisfied and happy, and looks back with regret on 'all those wasted hours spent in lecture theatres ... pondering the abstract ideas and philosophies of the world'. Is education ever wasted? How well did Kat's education prepare her for the practical, ethical and moral dilemmas she soon faces?
- After the night of the magic mushrooms, Kat writes in her diary: 'Of course we were all off our heads but still – some would say that's when we become our true selves, let our real instincts take over.' Do you agree with Kat? How responsible were any of them for the events of that night? Was anyone acting on their true instincts or were they all lost in the moment and blameless in light of their drug-taking?
- At a point within the novel, Kat considers her group of friends to be like 'one unconventional, chaotic family'. Do you agree? If so, what familial roles do they each assume?
- As she is growing up, Simon tells Lila that she should 'never trust a man who doesn't read books'. Do you think this is good advice? Why or why not?
- Lila says she has always loved the pace and the buzz of London, but when she returns from the cottage she compares it unfavourably

with the tranquillity of the lake, and thinks of the simple life William and Evelyn lead on their farm. She starts to wonder if her life on the lake is 'real', and London's frenzy no more than an illusion. Is it easier to lead a virtuous or moral life in the countryside than in the city? Does a simple life build moral strength? If so, what went wrong with Simon's experiment at the cottage?

- When she first comes home to London, for Christmas, Lila promises Tom that she won't return to the cottage until things are better between them, but then she breaks that promise. Was she right to do so?
- For a time, Lila suspects that Tom may have been with her when she had her accident and lost their baby, and is keeping this fact hidden from her. Did you ever suspect him? Why or why not?
- Do you believe Kat is the only one to blame for the dual tragedies within the story? Is anyone else culpable? Is it possible – or appropriate – to apportion blame?
- Kat and Freya suffered tragic neglect as children. What effect did this have on their adult lives? Can Kat be held responsible for her mistakes, when her past is taken into account?
- Do you think Kat got the life she deserved?
- There are many animals in *The Shadow Year*, in particular a piglet who trots along behind Freya like a puppy and a lamb on William's farm that is fed by Lila. What symbolism do some of the animals hold in the story? What ideas is the author exploring through them?
- At the end of their time at the cottage, Kat, Simon, Carla and Ben learn that they have never been in any danger of eviction. Does this knowledge change the value of their experiment? And if so, how? Was it wrong of Mac to withhold this information? Does this make him in any way responsible for the tragic events that follow?
- By the end of the story, Lila is pregnant again. Could it have ended satisfactorily if she was not?

- There are twin tragedies at the heart of this story, and a single character – Kat – is ultimately responsible for both of them. She asks for forgiveness for one, but her part in the other remains a secret. Does Kat deserve forgiveness when she is not ready to confess all of her sins?
- Themes of grief, blame and forgiveness are central to Hannah Richell's first novel, *Secrets of the Tides*, and are also central to *The Shadow Year*. Do you think it is possible ever to exhaust these themes? Why or why not?
- What do the motifs of shadows and honesty, woven throughout the book, lend to the story?

FURTHER READING



The Poison Tree – Erin Kelly

My Lover's Lover – Maggie O'Farrell

Gone Girl – Gillian Flynn

Walden – Henry David Thoreau

The Secret History – Donna Tartt

Secrets of the Tides – Hannah Richell



If you would like to find out more about Hachette Australia, our authors, upcoming events and new releases you can visit our website or follow us on Twitter.

www.hachette.com.au

www.twitter.com/HachetteAus

Discover more about Hannah by visiting her website (www.hannahrichell.com), her Facebook page (www.facebook.com/hannahrichellauthor) or by following her on Twitter (@hannahrichell)