

# Caboodles Book Club Kits

## The Shadow of the Wind by Carlos Ruiz Zafón



### Reviews

**Publishers Weekly Review** Ruiz Zafón's novel, a bestseller in his native Spain, takes the satanic touches from Angel Heart and stirs them into a bookish intrigue à la Foucault's Pendulum. The time is the 1950s; the place, Barcelona. Daniel Sempere, the son of a widowed bookstore owner, is 10 when he discovers a novel, *The Shadow of the Wind*, by Julián Carax. The novel is rare, the author obscure, and rumors tell of a horribly disfigured man who has been burning every copy he can find of Carax's novels. The man calls himself Lain Coubert—the name of the devil in one of Carax's novels. As he grows up, Daniel's fascination with the mysterious Carax links him to a blind femme fatale with a "porcelain gaze," Clara Barceló; another fan, a leftist jack-of-all-trades, Fermín Romero de Torres; his best friend's sister, the delectable Beatriz Aguilar; and, as he begins investigating the life and death of Carax, a cast of characters with secrets to hide. Officially, Carax's dead body was dumped in an alley in 1936. But discrepancies in this story surface. Meanwhile, Daniel and Fermín are being harried by a sadistic policeman, Carax's childhood friend. As Daniel's quest continues, frightening parallels between his own life and Carax's begin to emerge. Ruiz Zafón strives for a literary tone, and no scene goes by without its complement of florid, cute and inexact similes and metaphors (snow is "God's dandruff"; servants obey orders with "the efficiency and submissiveness of a body of well-trained insects"). Yet the colorful cast of characters, the gothic turns and the straining for effect only give the book the feel of para-literature or the Hollywood version of a great 19th-century novel. (Apr. 12) Appealing packaging (a weathered, antique-look jacket), prepublication bookseller events and an eight-city author tour should give this an early boost, though momentum may flag down the stretch. --Staff (Reviewed February 16, 2004) (Publishers Weekly, vol 251, issue 7, p148)

**Kirkus Reviews** The histories of a mysterious book and its enigmatic author are painstakingly disentangled in this yeasty Dickensian romance: a first novel by a Spanish novelist now living in the US. We meet its engaging narrator Daniel Sempere in 1945, when he's an 11-year-old boy brought by his father, a Barcelona rare-book dealer, to a secret library known as the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. Enthralled, Daniel "chooses" an obscure novel, *The Shadow of the Wind*, a complex quest tale whose author, Julian Carax, reputedly fled Spain at the outbreak of its Civil War, and later died in Paris. Carax and his book obsess Daniel for a decade, as he grows to manhood, falls in and out of fascination, if not love with three beguiling women, and comes ever closer to understanding who Carax was and how he was connected to the family of tyrannical Don Ricardo Aldaya—and why a sinister, "faceless" stranger who identifies himself as Carax's fictional creation ("demonic") "Lain Coubert" has seemingly "got out of the pages of a book so that he could burn it." Daniel's investigations are aided, and sometimes impeded, by a lively gallery of vividly evoked supporting characters. Prominent among them are secretive translator Nuria Monfort (who knows more about Carax's Paris years than she initially reveals); Aldaya family maid Jacinta Coronada, consigned to a lunatic asylum to conceal what she knows; Daniel's ebullient Sancho Panza Fermin Romero de Torres, a wily vagrant working as "bibliographic detective" in the Sempere's bookstore; and vengeful police inspector Fumero, a Javert-like stalker whose refusal to believe Carax is dead precipitates the climax—at which Daniel realizes he's much more than just a reader of Carax's intricate, sorrowful story. *The Shadow of the Wind* will keep you up nights—and it'll be time well spent. Absolutely marvelous. (Kirkus Reviews, March 1, 2004)

*"The Shadow of the Wind." NovelList. Pima County Public Library, Tucson, Arizona. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=noh&tg=UI&an=122514&site=novelist-live>*

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### Author Biography

Carlos Ruiz Zafón was born on September 25, 1964 in Barcelona, Spain and grew up under the shadow of Gaudí's Sagrada Familia cathedral, just a block away from the family home. At the age of thirteen, he wrote a six-hundred-page science fiction novel; it was never published. After studying with the Jesuits of Sarria and attending university, he became one of Spain's most successful advertising writers.

Ruiz Zafón returned to his passion for writing novels in the early 1990s in the field of young adult literature. He debuted as a novelist with the publication of *The Edge of the Cloud* in 1993, a mystery that was awarded the *Primero Edebe* prize. Also published that year was *The Prince of Shadow*, about a diabolic prince who grants wishes at very high personal prices.

In 1994, he moved to the United States to reside in Los Angeles, where he began work as a scriptwriter. His work on young adult novels continued, however. *The Lights of September*, which came out in 1995, focuses on a toy maker who lives in a haunted mansion alongside mechanical creatures and ghosts from the past.

*The Shadow of the Wind*, his first novel for adults, was published in 2001 in Spain and became an international bestseller, including stays at number 1 in both Spain and Germany. It is the first of his books to be translated into English; released in the United States in April, 2004, it reached number 22 on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

*The Shadow of the Wind* is actually the first of four novels about gothic Barcelona. Besides his novels and screenwriting, Ruiz Zafón also writes for the Spanish daily papers *El País* and *La Vanguardia*. He recently moved back to his apartment in Barcelona near the Gothic Quarter and the Portal de l'Angel, where the incarnation of the devil, Lain Coubert, first appears to Daniel in *The Shadow of the Wind*. He is working on his next novel, which is set in the city in the late nineteenth century.

Translator Lucia Graves is the author and translator of many works and has overseen Spanish-language editions of the poetry of her father, Robert Graves.

### Discussion Questions

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

#### 1. What genre would you use to describe this book?

Ruiz Zafón's intention is to blur the lines between genres. Certainly there are elements of gothic romance here in the tale of unfulfilled love between Julián and Penelope. However, Ruiz Zafón could have written that story without including the story of Daniel, so there is more here.

The book also contains elements of a mystery. Julián Carax has disappeared; where did he go? Who is destroying all copies of his books and why? What does the crooked policeman, Fumero, have to do with the story? And why are so many people turning up dead after all this time?

#### 2. There is a bit of fantasy in the novel as well. The Cemetery of Forgotten Books is used sparingly, but it invites the reader to believe in a whole world of possibilities. How does it exist as a world apart from Barcelona, a place no one can find unless first led there? What other books exist there, and what adventures have occurred in the lives of other people who have adopted books from it?

It would fair to call this a coming-of-age novel. Throughout the various subplots, Daniel is growing up, has his first love, and even meets the woman he will marry.

One last tradition that guides this novel is that of the literary thriller. Art thrillers such as *The Da Vinci Code* have gained enormous popularity recently, but the literary thriller has existed for a long time. This book, with its intrigue about the author and the destruction of his texts is a refreshing addition to that line.

This genre-mixing was really Ruiz Zafón's intent in writing the novel As he puts it,

I wanted a big saga with many characters and many elements. . . . My ambition was to pull off something that was at the same time a mystery, a romance, a saga, a comedy of manners, and a gothic novel, so that none of these things would collide. I think that reading a novel is like spending a holiday in the brain of the author. You have to say, "Welcome to the fun house, we have many tricks in here and I guarantee the ride will be intense." (<http://www.thebookseller.com/?pid=84&did=10336>)

No doubt Ruiz Zafón's experience as a screenwriter has also influenced this mixing of genres. Certainly, there is a bit of post-modern experimentation here, throwing out traditional boundaries and reinventing the genres at the same time. What the reader is left with is a sense of a big book, not so much in length as in scope. It is also a book that speaks to the deep, rich history of a Barcelona with mysterious back streets and families that have lived there for hundreds of years.

#### 3. What is Ruiz Zafón trying to say about books?

Certainly one thing to be gleaned from *The Shadow of the Wind* is an awe for the power of books to take the reader to all sorts of real and imagined places. Daniel's incredible adventure takes him from childhood to marriage.

## Discussion Questions

Ruiz Zafón also wants us to recognize that all books have some value, even if that has never been discovered. Julián Carax's books never sold more than a few copies, yet Daniel is captivated by one, as are all those who get a chance to read it. Poor sales are not necessarily an indicator of the quality of a book.

The Cemetery of Forgotten Books makes this point most clearly. Certainly, this book could have been written without this device, but Ruiz Zafón engages us in a fantasy that touches anyone who has ever loved a book that no one around them cared for. For some books, the Cemetery really is a final resting place; for others, however, there is still a chance that they will be adopted by the next Daniel who comes along.

The book is peppered with references to the power of books. Consider, for example, the words of Daniel's father on that first visit to the Cemetery:

Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eye down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens. . . . Every book you see here has been somebody's best friend. (pp. 5-6)

This, of course is exactly what happens over the course of the book. Daniel's interaction with the book makes its already colorful history that much more complex. It also ends the danger to the book when Carax declares that he is no longer interested in its destruction. How much more interesting does the book become as a result of Daniel's adventure with it?

### 4. What roles does Fermín play in the story?

Truthfully, the plot of the book could easily have moved along without the introduction of Fermín Romero de Torres, the beggar who becomes the assistant in the bookshop. Fermín, however, accomplishes several things that enrich the story.

First, Fermín brings to light the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War. His story is that of a man caught up in a tragedy not of his own making. The marks of torture on his back and hands remind us that the events taking place during parts of the book are far wider-reaching than the tale of one author or one boy's coming-of-age. Fermín, then, provides context.

He is also the source of our introduction to Francisco Javier Fumero, the evil policeman. Though we must wait until late in the book to find out everything about Fumero, Fermín has enough of the story to help define this important character.

In some ways, Fermín is the classic sidekick, a person whose main purpose is to say and do things to move the plot along. Fermín does just that. When Daniel needs someone who can go places he cannot, Fermín is on hand to do the dirty work. His mysterious past simply makes him all the more perfect for the task. He has underworld contacts. He learns things about people that would never be discussed in decent company. He can even be the muscle when necessary, though time has taken its toll in this regard.

One must also acknowledge the way in which Fermín is used as the jester. It is Fermín who can make fun of Daniel's sex life, or lack thereof. Fermín also has no fear of appearing foolish himself, as when chasing after Bernarda, the housekeeper for the Barcelos. He is, in many ways, fearless. He will say what he thinks no matter what. At times, this will lead to tragedy. At other times, he provides humor to break the tension.

### Discussion Questions

Finally, Fermín is the author's alter-ego, ready to make comments about books or anything else Ruiz Zafón wishes. Look at this passage about television:

Television, my dear Daniel, is the Antichrist, and I can assure you that after only three or four generations, people will no longer even know how to fart on their own and humans will return to living in caves, to medieval savagery, and to the general state of imbecility that slugs overcame back in the Pleistocene era. Our world will not die as a result of the bomb, as the papers say, it will die of laughter, of banality, of making a joke of everything and a lousy joke at that. (pp. 106-107)

Strictly speaking, the exchange that produces this comment is completely unnecessary to the plot of the book. It is, however, a telling point to make, given that Ruiz Zafón spent years as a scriptwriter in Los Angeles.

#### 5. What roles do Daniel's parents play in this story?

The book opens with Daniel lamenting to his father that he cannot remember his mother's face. It is this loss that prompts Daniel's father to take Daniel to the Cemetery of Lost Books. The reader is given no reason for this action as a response. Is Daniel's father attempting to distract his son? Fill the void? We are left to decide for ourselves. What is clear is that the elder Sempere knows the magical power of books to transport one to other worlds.

Indeed, Daniel's choice is telling; *The Shadow of the Wind* is about a man seeking a lost parent, just as Daniel does. One could argue that Daniel's whole quest for Julián Carax is really nothing more than his search for the childhood lost with his mother. Daniel's journey through Carax's story leads him back to the beginning of his own story. His mother finally comes back to him as he lies dying from a gunshot wound:

It was then, almost without realizing, that I remembered my mother's face, a face I had lost so many years before, as if an old cutting had suddenly fallen out of the pages of a book. Her light was all that came with me as I descended. (p. 466)

If the book Daniel chooses is about a man's search to recover lost youth, then so perhaps is Daniel's quest for its author.

Daniel's father, on the other hand, is the quintessential good man. Not uncaring, he knows he has to let his son make some mistakes and to be there for Daniel when needed. Though they have some fights during Daniel's adolescence, there is never a question of either one of them withdrawing from the relationship.

#### 6. Why does the author set the story in the midst of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath?

Clearly, Ruiz Zafón addresses the subject of war throughout the story. The success that a despot such as Fumero has as a result of the war is but one indication of this. Fumero manages to play on both sides, is allowed to commit heinous acts, and in the end, gains more power as a police officer.

On the other hand, a good man like Fermín is reduced to traitorous acts, as indicated by this description of being tortured by Fumero:

I held up for an hour under the torch, or perhaps it was just one minute. I don't know. But I ended up giving them the first names, surnames, and even the shirt sizes of all my superiors and even of those who were not.

### Discussion Questions

... When I was able to get up and go out to the street, I learned that all my superiors had been arrested and executed just hours after I had informed on them. (p. 321)

Even though the war is largely backdrop for the story, Ruiz Zafón obviously cannot leave it alone without commenting on the ways in which wars reward the unjust and make good men commit terrible acts. In a just world, Fumero would be behind bars, and Fermín would be released from his nightmares. Instead, even after the war, Fumero has the ability to torment Fermín.

The ancient playwright Aeschylus wrote, "In war, truth is the first casualty." This describes the author's use of the war quite well; it is a backdrop in which lying is allowed to become the norm. Julián Carax's story from his birth forward is riddled with lies, starting with who his father is. He spends his life in Paris because his best friend lies about Penelope. His death in a duel is a lie, as is his subsequent death in Barcelona. Nothing about his life has been the truth. What better period in time is there to set the story in than in the midst of the Spanish Civil War?

It is up to Daniel to sort through the secrets and lies in post-war times. Indeed, for Julián, the war continues in his quest to destroy all of the copies of his books, at least until Daniel has uncovered the real story of Julián's life.

#### **7. Carax takes for himself the name of Lain Coubert, a character in his book who represents the devil. Is the comparison appropriate?**

That Julián Carax has suffered a great tragedy not of his own making is certain. Still, Carax acts in ways that many men would have not chosen were they in his position.

The book presents a form of all-encompassing love typical of a gothic romance. As the victim (or beneficiary) of that love, Carax can never hope for another or that he will ever be free to pursue new loves. Realistically, we know that is not the only possibility. Many people do recover from tragic losses and go on to new relationships. This does not diminish the love present in the earlier relationship. One could say, therefore, that Carax chooses to languish in that place of loss. Certainly, the destruction of his novels because he wrote them while living a lie is a severe overreaction, just as waiting so many years for Penelope to come to Paris seems excessive.

Carax leaves the world of tragic figure, however, when he commits murder. The book never says he murdered Nuria's boss, but it would be difficult to draw any other conclusion; certainly, you are expected to think he did, just as Nuria herself obviously thinks. The way Julián lives outside of any conventional sense of morality give credence to the idea of seeing him as the devil.

In the end, though, despite his disfigured face, Carax comes across more as the Count of Monte Cristo than the Phantom of the Opera. The Count, of course, is a figure thought to be long dead who comes back to seek vengeance on those he believes have wronged him, whereas The Phantom, at least as he was written in Gaston Leroux's novel, is an obsessive madman. Like the Count, Julián Carax is calculating; he has consciously chosen to become the devil. This is clear because the book also has its moments of redemption. In the end, Carax takes the Victor Hugo pen and promises to write again. The lust for vengeance has not overtaken him completely, though he may have been lost in his darkness for a time.

## Discussion Questions

### 8. What is the relationship between Daniel and Julián Carax?

The most obvious connection between the two is that they live parallel lives, especially in the latter half of the book, after Daniel has become romantically involved with Bea. Just as Carax was friends with Penelope's brother Jorge, Daniel is friends with Tomás, Bea's brother. The relationships with the brothers go badly when the romantic involvements are discovered, and the two fathers grow quite angry when the young women get pregnant. Clearly, one goal for Carax is to keep Daniel's romance from suffering the same fate as his.

However, Carax took an interest in Daniel long before Bea was in the picture. At first, it was merely because Daniel's questions in the city brought the existence of a copy of the book to Carax's attention. However, Nuria's posthumous notes make it clear that Carax saw something more in Daniel. Though Daniel struggles and ultimately fails in his attempts to become a writer, he still has the sensitivity to books that once belonged to Carax. The man does not see what he has become in Daniel, but he does see what he might have become, had things turned out differently.

Daniel struggles his way through adolescence much as most boys do, except he has the charge to take care of Carax's book. It is his dedication to that charge that awakens something in Carax; Nuria writes, "Because you refused to sell the book at any price and tried to rescue Carax from the recesses of the past, you awoke a strange sympathy in him, and even respect" (p. 443). Ultimately, Carax sees Daniel as his salvation. Nuria continues:

He wanted to believe that your innocence would save him from himself. He had stopped chasing his books, stopped wanting to destroy them. He was learning to see the world again through your eyes, to recover the boy he had once been, in you. (pp. 444-445)

Daniel, then, represents an opportunity to do over the mistakes of his own life, especially his failure to demand to see Penelope.

For Daniel, Julián Carax has become an obsession. What started out as the curiosity of childhood becomes much more, largely because so many people refuse to let the story stay buried in the past. Why, for example, does Fumero threaten Daniel's life just for looking into this story? With each roadblock, act of violence, and veiled discovery, Daniel's need to know becomes more urgent.

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Source: Matthews, Kevin. "The Shadow of the Wind by Carlos Ruiz Zafón translated by Lucia Graves (New York: Penguin Group, Inc. 2004)." *Novelist*. 2009. EBSCO Industries, Inc., 2006. Web. <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=noh&itg=Ul&an=414675&site=novelist-live>>.