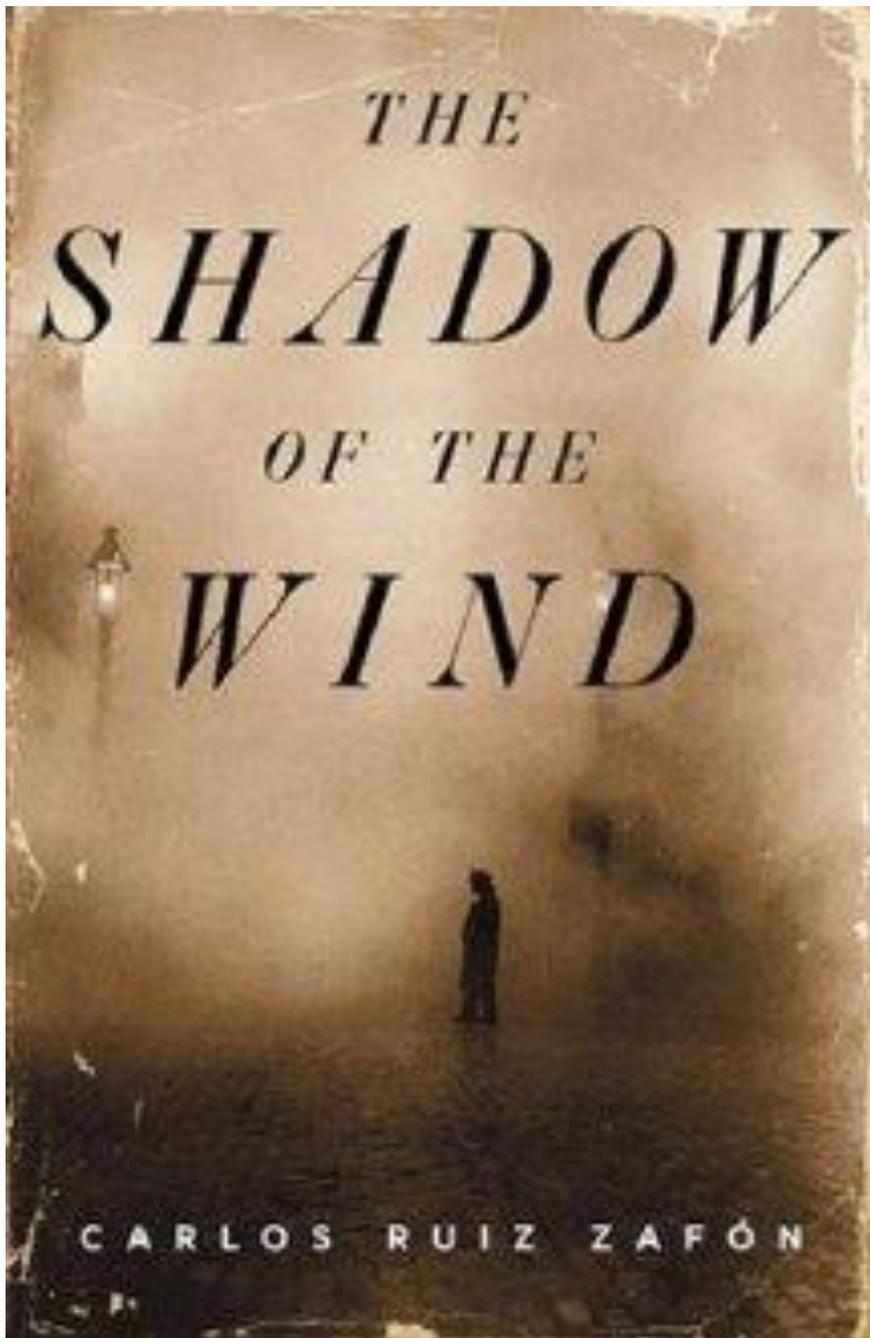


The Shadow of the Wind



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

*The Shadow of the Wind*. By Carlos Ruiz Zafón.

First published in 2001 in Barcelona as *La Sombra del Viento*.

Translated into English by Lucia Graves in 2004.

In June 1945 when he is aged nearly eleven, Daniel Sempere's widower father takes him to what is known as Barcelona's Cemetery of Forgotten Books. This could more accurately be described as a mausoleum because of its structure and size. It contains innumerable shelves full of all kinds of books on all types of topics, many of them esoteric or unknown. The rule is Daniel can choose one book to always keep and to treasure, "to keep it alive." This means that he can never give it away and must always keep it a secret.

With little thought he chooses a novel, *The Shadow of the Wind* which is written by an author he has never heard of Julian Carax. Even his father, a bibliophile and bookseller specializing in old and rare books, has never heard of the novel or its author. Printed in Barcelona in June 1936, it was limited to a run of 2,500 copies by a little known publishing company that collapsed soon after. As Daniel (as much of a bibliophile as his father) reads it he becomes mesmerized by the novel's strange and vivid story and soon becomes obsessively curious about its author. So is somebody else, but for the opposite reason. While Daniel wants to read more of Carax's works, a sinister disfigured man seeks out every known copy so as to burn them. Obviously two such people with opposing motives can only lead to trouble. Odd and as dangerous as this sounds, it becomes more so when Daniel finds out this man's name, which is Lain Courbert, is the nom de guerre of the devil in Carax's novel. Adding to this tension is another searcher for Carax and his novels, Inspector Javier Fumero. Always a bizarrely sadistic serial killer, he has eventually risen to the top of Barcelona's dreaded police by calculatingly serving as a hit man for whichever political force becomes dominant in the city's politics. He crosses paths with Daniel and warns him off

the search at the risk of becoming yet another of his victims if he continues, but this has little effect.

Daniel strives to track down not only copies of Carax's books, but the story of his life. Starting as a puzzle, it becomes a virtual jigsaw as clues, leads, rumours and survivors who knew Carax are found by the resourceful, relentless boy over the years. Like a jigsaw the picture fills in slowly as the information accumulates and like pieces starts fitting together. It is 1955 before the last pieces fill in and the truth emerges.

Here is the framework for this suspenseful and frequently grotesque mystery. Those who love mysteries or detective stories, gothic stories or just Barcelona will find something to entrance. Yes, Barcelona, the setting for almost all of the novel has been added to the list of genres because it is a character as much as the people, a pervasive one so well described and yet not as one would expect. What the city is most famous for, Gaudi's architecture, Picasso, Dali, Art Nouveau, 1930s anarchism and Catalan nationalism are barely mentioned, if at all in this novel's 523 pages. On reflection that is no bad thing: all these aspects have gained attention elsewhere. Here is the Barcelona of the struggling booksellers, the hopeful migrants from the country who end up as nanny's and house servants, the scholarship boys in an elite school for the city's ruling class, the industrial magnates facing financial ruin and those who were once successful and stable, but who backed the losing side in the 1930s civil war and became street beggars.

Zafón has a Dickensian ability to depict the underside of a city's life, the desperation, squalidness and social repression all emerge. Like Dickens, he can also convincingly show that even in these circumstances humanity can be capable of courage, generosity and decency. Zafón gives his readers rounded characters; even Fumero has been shaped by his

environment. While the denouement has an almost miraculous salvation for Daniel, it almost has his death; he does die for sixty-four seconds and only survives by the merest chance. What looks like a storybook ending in 1955 is not as the last pages, set in 1966, reveal. Daniel with his prematurely graying hair, keeps running the Sempere bookshop despite steadily declining profits year after year. He is fighting a losing battle with the world of television. His father is losing his eyesight and can do no more than polish book covers. The luxurious gothic Aldaya mansion is no longer sinister – or atmospheric. It has been renovated into a bland business centre. Serene Clara who once entranced him in his teenage years so that he always yearned to see her, now bores him as she anxiously worries about her wrinkles. Reprinting Carax's works sells only 542 copies: a matador's biography released at the same time sells more. Even so Daniel is doing what he wants, has a happy marriage and a son to be proud of. All this makes for a believable essentially happy ending.

Carlos Ruiz Zafón reveals an extraordinary talent. Most readers describe this book as mesmerizing. If it comes across as having a cinematic quality this is because cinema was a big part of Zafón's life. He wrote screenplays and in this novel used cinematic images. Written in 2001 and translated into English in 2004 this novel and its subsequent prequels and sequels are becoming classics. By 2005 *The Shadow of the Wind* had been published in twenty-five countries, frequently making bestseller lists and staying on Spain's bestseller lists for years. Zafón lived to see that process of his work becoming literature unfolding, but died of cancer aged fifty-three.

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Carlos Ruiz Safon 1964-2020