



Shadow

K.J. Parker

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A man wakes in the wilderness, amid scattered corpses and inquisitive crows. He has no memory of who he is or how he came to be there. The only clues to his former existence lie in his apparent skill with a sword and the fragmented dreams that permeate his sleep.

Alone in a hostile world he moves from village to village, masquerading as a god to obtain food and shelter. But the shadow of his past pursues him relentlessly. It whispers to him a riddle far more complex than he could ever have imagined - and a truth he may not wish to believe.

Shadow Details

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From Reader Review Shadow for online ebook

Karissa says

I ordered this book based on the other reviews I was seeing on Amazon. I have to admit the book is a very interesting concept and really keeps you guessing. Neat concept, very thought provoking. Definitely not what I would call a "candy" book (all good action, entertaining, but you never think twice about it after reading it).

Unfortunately I feel that it could have had more depth and more action. As you follow the character through the book you end up looking at everything very dispassionately. Which may be the way you would see things if you had lost your memory I suppose...but I feel you would still have very strong opinions and views. This approach to writing made it so I didn't really care what happened to any of the characters, I didn't like them, I didn't care about them. I believe these are very important things to make a book engrossing.

The other thing that was lacking was good pacing. The middle of the book plods along...vvveerrryy ssllowwly. I really didn't care what type of buttons the lead character, Poldarn, ended up selling, I mean who really cares. It had no benefit to the story except to show that Poldarn was lost and confused and I picked that up in the first half. If you had cut out about 100 pages and given the characters some passionate opinions then I would rate this book 4-5 stars.

All that being said I will probably read the 2nd book. If you had asked me if I was going to continue the series 3 chapters before the ending of this book I would have told you I am selling this book and shame on me for purchasing the next two in the series. But, the last few chapters were enough to re-spark the curiosity that the first part of the book generated. I am hoping the pace and depth of the characters picks up in the second book.

Anna Maria says

The Scavenger Trilogy is basically a mystery story in a fantasy setting, with a healthy dose of philosophy and lots of technical details about everything from swordfighting to blacksmithing. That sounds like an odd mix, but it works amazingly well. Only be prepared that you won't find many of the usual fantasy trademarks in these books - there is no magic or mystical creatures, and it turns the average fantasy heroes and plots upside-down.

The world is difficult to live in, the characters have to face everyday problems such as finding places to sleep and earning a living, and the main characters will often make mistakes, get used by others and made to feel embarrassed, stupid and in lots of pain. Parker tells his/her story in a mordant tone, sometimes cynical and often very funny. I recommend it highly, but would suggest reading the entire trilogy in succession, as there is a lot to keep track of. You will have to wait awhile before everything makes sense, but it's well worth it in the end.

Jeremy Jackson says

I was surprised to find in Shadow one of my favorite Parker novels yet, as it's one of his least popular. I can see the point of rancor, and others may be able to see the reason for my acclaim. As usual, it concerns a

difference of expectation. Look for a straightforward story from K.J. Parker (is it so little to ask that a mystery have a resolution?) and you'll walk away disappointed, even angry. Bow to his adept prose, his wit, his ingenious convolutions, and allow him to mess with your head, and you'll have a marvelous time.

We follow the travails of one Poldarn (a pseudonym and a reference to an obscure god of destruction and the end of the world), who has woken from a head injury in the midst of carnage, having no memory of who he is or why he was there. He is soon swept up in world affairs that seem to have everything to do with him, but every time he meets someone he knows, they either refuse to tell him who he is or they die precipitously. After the fourth such encounter, I laughed aloud; it grants you an absurd sort of freedom to know that there's nothing you can sort out, no hidden clue (of which there are many) that won't lead you to a dead-end (of which there are many). You're left to enjoy a fantastic story.

This theme runs its course throughout the book, and it's a Parkerian trademark. Don't fight it or try to outsmart him, and you'll fall in love.

Jewel says

Mildly confusing, though it's amusing. The main char has no idea who he is, which makes it fun cause hes trying to figure out who the hell he is along with you. Its even more entertaining cause everyone he meets who seems to know him either ends up trying to kill him, or he kills. I'd imagine this is quite frustrating.

Peter says

This one doesn't appeal to me. I'm stopping after 100 plus pages.

Joseph says

Sooo . . . How's your tolerance for frustration? If not very high, then you might want to skip this one, although you'll be missing some good stuff. Our hero awakens in a mudpuddle in the middle of a battlefield; he has no idea who he is, although he soon discovers that he does have certain talents, both martial and otherwise. He begins by joining a woman driving a cart (she goes around to villages impersonating a priestess and needs someone to impersonate a god), although that doesn't last long. Throughout the book he has occasional dreams or flashes of memories that may or may not come from his former life; and he keeps running into people who recognize him but either flee or are killed before they can actually tell him who he is or what he's been doing. We do get some answers late in the book, but even then there's always a question as to whether the answers are truthful or not, given that the people giving the answers very much have their own agendas.

The book is written very much from a pawn's-eye view -- there are obviously big things happening in the world, but we discover them only insofar as they impinge on his travels, or the travels of another character who gets a few POV chapters.

Despite (or because of) all that, I really did enjoy the book. Parker has a very sardonic voice; and has a real gift for specificity of detail and terminology. Probably closer to a 3.75 than a 4, but quite good regardless.

Mark Redman says

Shadow by K.J.Parker, is the first book in the Scavenger trilogy. The premise is based around a central character who wakes up on a battlefield with total memory loss. At this point he meets Copis a lady who is only too willing to help him out. He takes the name Poldarn, which is from a god that heralds the end of the world. From this point onwards Poldarn tries to survive and find out any information about his past. The problem is why everyone recognises who he is and why they want him dead? Why does death and destruction follow in his wake?

This is a harsh world that Parker has created and it's very uncompromising, at times brutal. There are lots of flashbacks, which can be confusing, so you need to keep your wits about you. It's not an easy read, it takes time and plenty of concentration but it is very compelling all same.

There is a conclusion at the end and some of the questions raised are answered. However, for anyone who has read Parker, you'll know it's not that simple, there's plenty of twists and turns along the way, which leave you with questions of what will happen in volume 2.

Jason says

5 Stars

I feel as a lover of adult oriented, dark, intelligently written fantasy, that I am obligated to point out why this flawed book deserves full marks and it deserves a wider audience. This is a complicated and at times confusing story that centers on a man with no name. Our main protagonist wakes up in a river filled with dead soldiers. He is obviously suffering from a head wound as he cannot remember who he is, why he is there, and where he should be going. The adventure begins as our hero tries to make his way, he tries to unlock the mystery of his identity and comprehend why he has the skills that he does (He finds out accidentally that he is a master with a sword and equally adept as a killer).

Our hero joins up with a woman named Copis, and together they decide to travel the country with him pretending to be the "God on a Cart", Poldarn, and her, his priestess. Funny thing is that the man may actually be this god of destruction. Our hero learns more and more about this god called Poldarn, and he has one such conversation about him with a little girl:

"... 'nobody knows what he's called, and he goes around from village to village, and wherever he goes gets burned down or invaded and all the people die; but it's not his fault, it's bad men like the raiders who do the actual burning and invading. He just sort of goes in front. Oh yes,' she added, 'and there's a silly bit, too, but I don't believe it.'

'Tell me anyway,' Poldarn said.

The little girl pulled a face. 'Well, they say he doesn't actually know he's a god, he just thinks he's one of us, a person. And he starts off by climbing up out of a river, and he keeps on going till he meets himself coming in the opposite direction. And then that's the end of the world. Like I said,' she added disdainfully, 'it's really

silly, and I don't think anybody really believes it....”

Frustration and confusion play major roles throughout this tale. Deception and ambiguity also color nearly every situation. Poldarn comes across many people that claim to know him, but no matter how he tries to get them to reveal to him his identity, things never work out his way.

““You know me,’ he said.

‘I thought I did,’ the stranger replied. ‘I mean, I’m used to you pulling some bloody stupid stunts but this is going too far, even by your standards. Have you got the faintest idea what they’ll do to me if we’re seen together? If you’ve got a death-wish, that’s absolutely fine. Just leave me out of it. I’m sick and tired of rescuing you every time you get it into your head to do something crazy.’

‘No, really,’ Poldarn said (and he felt like there was an enormous weight on his chest, so heavy he could hardly breathe). ‘You don’t understand.’”

Most times the people that he meets up with end up dead, with them trying to kill him, or with him just up and killing them.

Parker is a writer and narrator that paints in every detail down to the finest point. I absolutely loved her attention to every scene, the vistas and landscapes, and houses and buildings. The world building is top notch. There is even a large chapter that does nothing more than describe every piece of machinery and engineering technique about the manufacturing of buttons. Sure, this means that there are many times when things slow down, where the action is minimal, and at times the dialogue too. I adored the fighting and the action and the focus that was put on swords. Poldarn often speaks of his sword skills and internally refers to the circle, which we later learn about:

““Think,’ he told him, ‘about the circle you’ve just drawn in the air.’ (Was that Father Tutor talking, or the Junior Tutor that Monach had grown into, eighteen years later, the one who copied his former teacher’s words and mannerisms now that he was a teacher himself? The sword-point describes a circle—) ‘You can’t see it now,’ Father Tutor went on. ‘You’d better learn to see it, because it’s the circle of life and death—your life, your death, and the lives and deaths of others, possibly dozens or hundreds of them. So long as you’re alone in the circle, you’re safe, and so is your enemy. He can’t reach you, and you can’t reach him. As soon as either of you steps into the other’s circle—and of course when you enter his circle, he enters yours—both of you are in terrible danger, both of you are a single moment away from success, from victory. The circle of life and death—there’s a grand, magical-sounding name for you, but that’s precisely what it is. Alone in your circle, you’re safe and you can achieve nothing. Once your circle meshes with someone else’s, you carry with you victory and defeat, both at the same time, success and failure, life and death.””

Like I said before this is a complicated read as we the reader are often treated to the same things that Poldarn is. Parker uses repetition throughout this book , adding layers to the mystery, to the prophecy, and to our confusion as well. There is repetition in nearly everything, from conversations already had, battles previously fought, and dreams that already came and went. The novel is bravely centered on repetition and confusion, and to me it worked. Parker adds the icing to this amazing cake by giving us the antagonist Monach. He is a sword-monk, that like Poldarn is surrounded by confusion and death. He confesses that he was the best swordsman in years and we get to see it in action many times. His story line parallels Poldarns even while Monach is actually trying to find him to kill him. I will not spoil anything but I believe that there is more of a connection between these two men that I hope to find the answers to in the later books.

This is not a fast read by any means. It is a lot of work at times to make it through it, but I feel that in the end, this is adult fantasy at its best. I would compare K.J.Parker to that of China Mieville in that his writing often demands a great deal out of his reader. I highly recommend this book and look forward to book number

two.

“...Of course it's all just a load of old rubbish. But you know what they say: opportunities and mushrooms.' Opportunities and mushrooms what?' 'Grow up out of horseshit,' she explained.”

D.D. Price says

This novel has one of the most awesome beginnings I've yet seen. It starts off with the narrator waking up in a battlefield surrounded by dead bodies and he can't remember who he is or how he got there. It is a highly symbolic scene in which his mind appears to be split into two halves, the two halves arguing with each other. Ever since I first sampled this book I'd been wanting to read this series based on that opening alone so I'm very glad that I've finally gotten around to reading it. It really does set up an interesting premise for the rest of the novel. This book is about the narrator's search for his identity, with possibilities of who the narrator is dangled in front of the reader's face over the course of the novel, the reader strung along and left wondering the entire way. But I think we're going to have to wait until the end of the trilogy to find out who the narrator really is. Otherwise, what would be the point of making it a trilogy in the first place? It is insinuated that the narrator could be a prince, a monk, or even a god named Poldarn – who he is referred to for most of the book – but it is not straightforward and with the amount of guesswork the author makes the reader do anything could be possible. It is also likely that the narrator was a person who was not someone who was nice or well liked and that is something he has anxiety about throughout. There are characters who claim to have known who the narrator was and some who say that he was a bad and awful person, but despite this there is much contradictory information and so the reader doesn't have a clear idea of who he was, and some of the characters who knew the narrator from his past flat out refuse to tell him who he was. K.J. Parker is a writer who likes to mess with his reader so be prepared for contradictory information, and for a story that is rooted in the characters interpretation of events, rather than the way things actually are. For this the reader really has to look critically at the information that other characters tell the narrator and not take any of it too seriously, as much of this information proves false. The characters in this novel have agendas that greatly inform their interpretations of events and the result is that the reader is easily mislead along with the narrator. I love how K.J. Parker is an author who likes to sprinkle clues together here and there and it's the reader's job to put the pieces of the puzzle together and see how it all fits.

This is the most unabashedly symbolic book I've read in a long time. When I say it's unabashedly symbolic I mean the kind of symbolism that is thrown in your face, the kind of symbolism where the symbols are easily identifiable and where because of their presence at the forefront the reader has an easy time discerning their meanings. So if you're the kind of reader who enjoys a more subtle form of symbolism that sits in the background and lets the story shine and speak for itself then this may not be your cup of tea. I don't usually care for this type of symbolism myself but for some reason it didn't bother me too much here. The main problem I had with it is that the authors use of symbolism and of certain meaningful phrases or songs or whatever are extremely repetitive. The author makes it too obvious what the meaning is by drawing attention to these symbolic patterns, such as crows, which is one of the main symbols used throughout the story. These symbols seem fresh early in the book but start to seem stale and old the further you go along. For this reason my enjoyment started to decay, especially later in the book. What started off as initial excitement with sparks flying in my mind took a downturn. But towards the very end the book started to climb back up and ended on a strong note. Many of these symbols also appear in dreams, at least what appear to be dreams. There are so many dreams in this novel that I'm unsure you can separate dreams from reality. In fact, this whole entire

novel could be a dream for all the reader knows. I've heard writing advice that you're not supposed to use dreams too much, and I do think K.J. Parker could use that advice, although the dreams seem to serve a purpose which is to give possibilities for the narrator's identity. Indeed, these dreams are supposed to be glimpses into the narrator's past or possibilities of the narrator's past, but in these dreams the narrator is actually taking on the roles of other characters whom he knew in his past life and who we meet later in the book. Thus, when we meet the characters whom the narrator dreamt himself to be we can scratch that possibility off the list of possibilities. The narrator dreaming himself as other characters strengthens the possibility that he may be a god, which is something that is covered in great detail in this book and for a long stretch seems like the most logical possibility.

It is a long book so as can be expected there is a lot of material that can be cut or made more concise. I wouldn't say that the book is longwinded per say but that the plot tends to run in circles. The story moves along – sometimes at an average pace and sometimes slow – but it isn't obvious that it's going anywhere. I've read reviews of the third book to try and get a sense if moving on and finishing is even worth it. In those reviews people say that this is the most cyclical series they've read. That doesn't surprise me as the entire premise for the plot is very cyclical. I usually like cyclical as opposed to linear plots so hopefully I'll end up really liking the series in the end. This series definitely seems like one where you need to step back from it after you're done to truly get a grasp on what it all means. There are some scenes that I'd question if they even happened or if they happened the way the narrator tells it because there are contradictions and places where the narrator's dreams and reality seem mixed up. Consider that he has lost his memory so how can you trust him to remember things perfectly? You can't because he's an unreliable narrator and there are things he should remember throughout the story that he forgets or periods where he tries to remember something and his memory is foggy. Literally, he forgets stuff a moment after being told it. The narrator in this novel is probably one of the most unabashedly unreliable that I have ever seen. So like with the symbolism the narrator's unreliability is very much in the reader's face as well. So if you want a more subtly unreliable narrator then this isn't for you.

K.J. Parker is a very descriptive writer and this is another reason for the long length of the book. He writes with precision and strong attention to technical detail which works sometimes but when you're in the middle of an action scene it can bog down the pace. I'm not sure that it's necessary to describe the precise position and all of the movements of the characters as they sword fight. Now the author may be a detailed writer but at the same time he also writes in concise prose that are to the point and not overly flowery. So the style is rather plain and straightforward and so doesn't add much to the difficulty of the book. If it's difficult it's difficult because of the author's use of obfuscation and advanced use of plot techniques. In other words the style is easy to read and doesn't distract from the story.

Some people in the reviews on this site described the part where the author is discussing the narrator's work in the button trade as being a major slow down. This is true. It is a slow down but at the same time there are some parts of this that are highly insightful and relevant to the story such as when it describes people working to polish buttons and operating the machines that make the buttons. In this scene you can see the exploitation of labor and the explicit lack of humanity when the owner of the button business acts completely unconcerned for one of his workers who was injured by one of the machines. In fact, he acts more concerned for the damage done to the machine than he does for the worker's welfare. You can also see that this bothers the narrator and his partners; what this scenes show is that the need for greater profit can mess up a person's morality and turn them into monsters. You can also see other hints of the exploitation of labor and resources that is part of the capitalist system of economics throughout this series. One other example of this happens early in the book when they are looking at a scene of cleared forest and the resultant environment degradation that follows the pillaging and exploitation of the earth's resources. You can see this part of this scene here:

"She hadn't mentioned that before, not that it mattered. It was an interesting thought that this desert of couch grass and bog had once been a great forest. Interesting that even the landscape could lose its memory so completely, could go from being so full to so empty. For some reason, he almost found it comforting.

'Anyway,' he said, 'the town's just ahead, is it?'

'Should be,' she replied. 'Pretty soon we'll start seeing the smoke.'

'Smoke?'

'There's still a foundry there,' Copis explained. 'Only reason for having a town out in the town in the middle of all this. I think they make a living from scavenging bits of stuff from old wored-out mines, bits the original miners missed or couldn't be bothered to go after. They burn peat now, since they can't use charcoal.'

That was an interesting thought, too; having used up everything that grew in it, they were using up the ground itself. It hadn't occurred to him that iron was so destructive.

The further they went, the drearier the landscape became. Here and there he saw big briar tangles, which he took to be overgrown loppings, such as Copis had described earlier, and a fair sprinkling of derelict buildings – sheds and stores, built low out of rough-cut stone blocks, with broken-backed slate roofs drowning in creepers and nettles. A very predatory kind of place, he decided, where the people ate up the ground and the ground swallowed up the buildings, killers and carrion-feeders making up a cycle.

This is an excellent passage that is illustrative of the kinds of themes that make this book up. Considering that the narrator has lost his memory and has been unable to get it back you can see parallels between him and the land which has lost its memory too. In fact, there are a lot of references to memory throughout this book. The author messes with memory in interesting ways, which isn't something you see very often, but I wish more authors did this. Also in this passage you can see the novels cyclical nature with people eating up the earth's resources and then the building that man made with these resources being swallowed up by the creepers and nettles that grew in the forests place. It is really a striking passage that is one of my favorites in the book.

What may seem like a glaring flaw in this book is that despite having lost all of his memories Poldarn clearly understands language, can hold a conversation, and rationalize. Although this last point is debatable, as he has trouble making decisions throughout the book, you would think that someone who had lost all of their memories wouldn't be able to function at all but Poldarn clearly can function. Now if I were to criticize the novel with this premise in mind it would be to clearly miss the whole point of the read. I say this because it is clear that K.J. Parker isn't going for realism. Now I'm not at all familiar with K.J. Parker's work as Tom Holt but from what I understand he writes ridiculous satire, so given this background it isn't surprising that as K.J. Parker he should aim for the absurd.

As you would expect since the narrator's memories have been lost he knows nothing about the world he lives in. Therefore, the reader only knows what is told to him by others and through the secondary character (there is a second PoV in this book). So it is perfectly plausible for the narrator to ask the most rudimentary question about the world such as what a certain place or how close certain places are. The reader is just as clueless as the narrator is. It is fun to discover and wonder about this world as the narrator is discovering it as well. It helps involve the reader and gives the world a greater sense of mystery. There was a reviewer who mentioned that the narrator describes things and move through the world rather detached which is true and perfectly plausible for the story, but that didn't hurt the enjoyment of the work for me as I think it is interesting to see the effect that detachment as on the reader.

Now this review may have seemed negative but I gave it four stars right? This means I enjoyed it right? Yes, I've been critical but I enjoyed the book. K.J. is a good writer. I'm just skeptical that the story is going anywhere. This is the kind of thing I can see derailing and getting away from the author real fast. So I sure

hope K.J. Parker proves me wrong in subsequent books and lays my fear to rest. Either way based on what I've read of this I can't recommend it to a person who is new to K.J. Parker, as it is highly anti-mainstream. I would have to recommend the *Folding Knife* for that, which is an excellent standalone fantasy novel and was the first book by K.J. Parker that I read.

Marion Hill says

DNF. Reached page 322 out of 572. This novel has an intriguing premise and readable prose. But, the mysterious nature of the main character did not connect with me and I went as far as I could. Interesting thoughts on religion and philosophy included in the narrative though.

Jenne says

If you are one of those people who is always bugging the creators of *Lost* to "please, please give us some answers!" then **THIS BOOK IS NOT FOR YOU**. Go away.

If you are like me, and would prefer there just to be questions on top of mysteries on top of WTFs, then this book **IS** for you. Welcome! Prepare to be totally confused.

Don't read any other reviews, don't read the back of the book, just start reading it and get ready to have your brains tied in a knot.

Duncan says

Entertainingly complicated story about identity and memory that requires extensive flipping back and forth to put the pieces together--and there are lots of loose ends even when it's done; this is the first of a trilogy, and much remains to be resolved. The central gimmick is that the protagonist doesn't remember who he is, but many of the people he meets recognize him and have very strong reactions to him. Grim, mostly--the protagonist finds himself in the middle of a civil war of sorts--but shot through with bone-dry humor and wry observations.

Joey Cruz says

I picked this book up because the premise sounded like a fantasy version of the *Bourne Identity*, and that appealed to me. What I got, though, was a subtle, meticulous, surprisingly funny, and infuriatingly evasive mystery with a main character who may be a great hero, or the worst villain on earth, or maybe the god of destruction.

As reads go, it's not the most action packed, nor is it traditionally plotted (it knows it's the first book in a trilogy, so while you get some answers in the end, the BIG answers are reserved for later volumes). What it is, is SMART. You will smile as you pick up little throw-away clues Parker litters throughout the narrative. It is also very well written; confident voice, solid grasp on character. It's just a damn good book, if somewhat

unconventional.

Liviu says

Just another great book from KJ Parker; barely waiting to continue with the next one which I started first but stopped to wait for this one once I got hooked.

David says

Although I was a little annoyed at the lengths to which the author goes to keep us from knowing the real identity of the main character (until the very end... though I suspect what is revealed is only part of the answer), I found this a compelling study in identity, politics, and religion. I really hope the protagonist (in addition to what we've learned) turns out to be the god of destruction that he suspects he might be... moving on to book #2.
