



a novel

THE GIRL *in* HIS SHADOW

“An exquisitely detailed journey.”
—TRACEY ENERSON WOOD,
international bestselling author of *The Engineer’s Wife*

AUDREY BLAKE

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Though she's more qualified, Nora worries about being replaced by Daniel. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? What did you do about it?
2. Dr. Croft often resorts to disreputable methods of getting subjects, such as paying grave robbers or taking advantage of grieving family members. For him, the ends justify the means. Do you agree with him? To what extent?
3. Throughout the story, Nora conducts a series of experiments and independent studies. What was she hoping to learn?
4. We get to see nineteenth century medical techniques through Nora's eyes. Which treatments surprised you the most? Are there any techniques that carried over into modern medicine?
5. Nora is one of only a few women in a field dominated by men. Do you see any parallels between her situation in the nineteenth century and today?

6. Dr. Harry Trimble finds himself in a difficult situation when Dr. Silas Vickery blackmails him into speaking at the trial. Do you think Harry really had a choice in betraying Nora? What would you have done?
7. Compare Daniel's relationship with Mae and his relationship with Nora. How are they different? Are they similar in any way?
8. Daniel comes from an upper-class family while Nora and Harry come from the working class. How does socioeconomic background affect how they are treated by other people?
9. While Nora originally disliked Daniel, the two eventually grow to love each other. What brought them together, and why?
10. What did you think about Nora's decision to speak up for herself, though it results in public disgrace and punishment?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHORS

You did extensive research before writing this story. What were the most surprising details you uncovered in your research process? Was there anything you found particularly interesting that didn't make it into the final book?

R: We won't live long enough to be able to write every fascinating thing we came across. The most surprising thing for me—how attached I became to the cases I studied. It became an addiction to browse through medical journals that are almost two centuries old, hoping the patients would recover. Another interesting fact for me was how many times something had to be “discovered.” You would think once one doctor or scientist made a discovery, it would revolutionize the way doctors treated patients, but that is not at all how it worked. Information was slow and unreliable. There were language barriers and so many fraudulent cures and medical claims that it made the legitimate ones difficult to find or trust. For example, Ignaz Semmelweis discovered washing hands saved women from postpartum fevers and infection. He was so maligned for his theory (even though it worked!) that he died disgraced in an asylum!

J: So many innovators were reckless, unscrupulous cowboys! Some practices were absolutely hair-raising, and we ended up toning down the animal experiments in our book significantly.

I wish we could have worked in a detail from the life of Dr. John Hunter, who infected his own genitals using material from a sick patient in an attempt to determine if syphilis and gonorrhea are different diseases. Unfortunately for Hunter, the patient had both, so his conclusion that they were a single disease was wrong.

As coauthors, what does your brainstorming look like? Do you ever disagree on which direction to take?

R: We talk frequently, and sometimes exhaustively. Whenever we have a new idea, we walk through it on FaceTime so we can see each other's expressions and reactions. A few times, we seemed to have divergent opinions, but the longer we discussed, the more we realized we wanted the same thing. We have never had an argument about the direction of the story. We are both so in tune with the characters that we know when something is right for them and genuine to their personalities. Coauthoring is a high-level exercise in communication and cooperation.

J: When we are lucky enough to brainstorm in person, we tend to walk in the woods or sprawl out on the carpet, but most brainstorming and revising happens via FaceTime. It's rare for us to disagree. We both trust each other a lot—especially when either of us has a “Nope, don't like that” feeling. More often, I think we get a “Yes! And then—” feeling from each other's work.

What are some of your favorite books or authors? Do you have similar reading lists?

R: I think our reading list is actually pretty diverse, which is why we bring such different strengths to the table. I tend to be an extremely introspective reader. I love stories told in first person (*Jane Eyre*, *Moby Dick*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*) that delve into character more than plot. I am a huge fan of the classics. I usually read more nonfiction than fiction and am always working my way through a history book of one kind or another. David McCullough is a favorite of mine.

J: Our reading lists are actually pretty different. Regina is much more literary than me. I don't have the stamina to read *Moby Dick*, and I'm addicted to genre fiction, especially thrillers and comic romance. I have at least one going on my e-reader at any given time. One of my all-time favorite reads is Eva Ibbotson's *A Company of Swans*. Also, though it is not for the faint of heart, Dorothy Dunnett's plot-snarly Francis Lymond series. We both love reading history, and I'm especially drawn to the nineteenth century and the history of science.

Throughout Nora's journey, she juggles societal expectations of femininity while trying to build a career. Do you think this is still a conflict women face today?

R: I think it depends on the woman because situations vary widely. I believe there are women who shatter all ceilings and are celebrated for it. I also think there are women belittled and forced to conform to others' expectations. I have been fortunate enough in my life to never feel limited by my gender but empowered by it.

J: Yes, I do, though Nora reminds me that many groups have been and are unfairly disadvantaged by social power

brokers. Women continue to face challenges, but I am inspired by the hard-won successes of nineteenth and twentieth century women. Their victories can and should be models for further change.

What advice would you offer aspiring historical fiction writers?

R: Dive deep and be ready. Writing a historical fiction requires discipline and patience because you will be on a creative roll and have to stop because you don't know the correct term for the strap that goes around a horse's tail (it's a crupper) or who sculpted the statues on the facade of the basilica of San Petronio (it was the female Renaissance artist Properzia de' Rossi). Every time you try to write, you will find yourself researching. It is why it takes so much longer. It is why it is so satisfying.

J: Write about people you care about, because you'll spend a lot of time with these imaginary friends. Don't let your people and their problems become secondary to the history, even when it is tempting. Oh, and if you can, find a best friend to write with. You'll have way more fun.