

A woman in a red hat, a light-colored blazer, and a red skirt is walking away from the viewer down a dirt path. She is carrying a black bag and a dark coat. The path is flanked by grass and trees in the background.

"A riveting tale about a town
and its people that officially never
existed...beautifully written
and captivating!"

—Kim Michele Richardson

THE WOMAN WITH TWO SHADOWS

• A NOVEL OF WWII •

Sarah James

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. In the early days of Eleanor's relationship with Max, Lillian is extremely irritated with her. How does she justify this frustration?
2. Describe Lillian's relationship to femininity. If all expectations for women to look, dress, and think a certain way were gone, do you think she would behave differently?
3. What does Lillian gain from lying about Eleanor's rescheduled audition? What would you have done in her position?
4. Why didn't Andrew have Lillian immediately escorted from Oak Ridge after realizing who she was?
5. How does pretending to be Eleanor change Lillian's habits and ideas? Do you think she'll maintain any of Eleanor's traits when she's back to living as herself full time?

6. Andrew is comfortable with being a “bad person,” but Lillian insists he’s good, at least in some ways. Whom do you agree with? Does that change the way you think about Andrew’s fate?
7. Due to his scientific expertise, Andrew is protected from the consequences of his actions. How can we stop letting talent excuse dangerous behavior?
8. What causes the difference between Andrew’s and Lillian’s reaction to the Los Alamos test? If you witnessed that historic explosion, how would you feel?
9. Throughout the book, Lillian makes decisions thinking that the outcome will justify her choices, but when Emmy says something similar about claiming self-defense, she hesitates. Why?
10. The true goal of the many branches of the Manhattan Project was a carefully guarded secret, even from the people who were helping achieve it. How do you think history would be different if everyone—from the calutron girls to the scientists perfecting fusion reactions—knew what they were developing?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was your inspiration for *The Woman with Two Shadows*?

When I was in college, I read Richard Feynman's lecture about working on the Manhattan Project as a young man just at the start of his career. The day of the Trinity Test, he describes how everyone was celebrating except for one person, who seemed acutely aware of the terrible thing they had made. He reflects that everyone got so excited and so wrapped up in the project, in solving this unsolvable thing, that they'd stopped thinking about what it is they were actually doing.

I thought that was fascinating, that this group of people who were supposedly the smartest people in our country, people whose profession requires them to question everything and never accept a hypothesis without evidence, could still so easily "stop thinking" when it suited them. That's what I wanted to explore.

How much planning do you do before you start writing? Do you prefer to know the end of your story right away?

At one point in this book, Andrew says, "You might as well try

running first. Save you a whole lot of walking if it works out.” Regrettably, this is also my approach to writing.

When I was working on the first draft of this story in my MFA class at USC, the professor, Mark Shepherd, told me I should write down the entire solution to the mystery and how it all happened. That way, I would know everything, even if I decided later to not let the audience in on all the details. It was great advice that I completely ignored. I wish I hadn’t.

How did you navigate the difference between Lillian’s idealized role as Eleanor’s caretaker and her often detrimental interference in Eleanor’s life?

I think Lillian’s role as her sister’s caretaker became folded up in Lillian’s narrative about herself. It started as a principle, a standard to follow: “I want to protect my sister.” But it warped into “I’m the kind of person who wants to protect my sister, therefore every decision I make must be to protect my sister.” She stopped using the idea of protecting Eleanor to *guide* her decision-making and started using it to *justify* her decision-making.

Andrew Ennis meets a very dark but avoidable end. Was it challenging to get into his headspace in his final moments?

No, because his last moments are his most honest.

Despite the army's best efforts to keep the secret, Andrew is quick to connect his own work in Oak Ridge to the development of the nuclear bomb. If you were in his position, would you continue working on its development?

I think this question is asking if I would continue working on my own projects while being paid to do an office job I thought was boring, and my answer is: no comment.