

Big Shadow

Marta Balcewicz

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In Marta Balcewicz's novel *Big Shadow*, a lonely teenager's lunge for freedom ends in disappointment and near disaster.

Seventeen-year-old Judy's friend Alex has given her an important job: watching the clouds for signs of the Big Shadow, an unspecified event that will take them—and Judy's cousin, Christopher—to a better place. After a fight with the boys, Judy leaps into the orbit of a middle-aged university professor who promises her an exciting future of artistic and personal freedom. But as the summer rolls on, Judy has to grow up enough to realize that no miraculous salvation is imminent: she and her imaginative friends have to find their own ways from adolescence to adulthood.

Judy is relatable in the most painful ways, insecure and moody as only a teenager can be. One moment, she prides herself on making an astute observation; the next, she decides it was all nonsense and wallows in her embarrassment. Lacking real-world experience, she often compares the situations she finds herself in to movies or books. Her youth and her longing for companionship make her an easy target for Maurice, a semi-famous poet who entices her with uplifting compliments and his arrogant, self-confident cynicism.

When Maurice invites Judy to New York City with the promise that she "belongs" there, Judy accepts, desperate to be helpful to the one supportive figure in her life. In between moments of exhilaration, she is left to ponder mounting evidence of Maurice's fickle, self-absorbed nature. To discover her true place in the world, she has to confront his faults—and her own—head-on rather than continuing to seek an escape.

Set in 1998, *Big Shadow* is a coming-of-age novel in which there are no easy ways to grow up—the only way out is through one's own mistakes and triumphs.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May / June 2023)

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