

## Shadow Life

**Michael Decter**

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*A hopeless man sets out on a genealogical quest in the empowering novel Shadow Life.*

A man's efforts at self-discovery reveal family secrets and a new way of approaching the world in Micheal Decter's allegorical novel *Shadow Life*.

Matt, an aging public servant, is already disillusioned with contemporary life when he is called to jury duty. The case's outcome and its consequences devastate him further. Hoping to lick his psychological wounds, he retreats to his remote cottage on Georgian Bay—his “Fortress of Solitude.” He considers spending the winter there, far from the troubles of a world that he no longer recognizes or wants to be part of.

Georgian Bay is vivified as a desolate, sometimes dangerous place. Even with friends around him to talk and drink with, Matt feels as moody and isolated as the lake is. He drives his boat across its waters and hoards supplies in anticipation of global catastrophe. His opportunity to relax among beauty becomes a haunting, claustrophobic prison of his own making; his darkest thoughts and fears are given free rein. His solitude is further shattered by the discovery that his parents were not the people whom he thought they were. Soon, he's traveling the world in search of the truth, his family members, and inner peace.

The prose is sometimes bland, rendering passages about Matt's boating misadventures flat and unmoving. The story picks up once Matt, through circumstances no one could have predicted, finds out about his true ancestry. This sets him on a quest to reconstruct the life of his spirited, courageous birth mother, whose existence he was never before made aware of. His personal discoveries also spark an interest in the larger historical events that influenced his mother's life. But his discoveries don't promise to be a cure to his troubled circumstances.

Throughout the book, a few people distinguish themselves through strong emotional reactions and their devotions to people and places; some secondary characters, including Matt's friends at the lake, evade these memorable qualities. There are stiff conversations, too, that hinder people's development. And minor inconsistencies, such as the length of time that Matt's father has been dead, are present throughout.

For Matt, it takes a second calamity and one final discovery to reach a resolution. There's fitting symmetry to the story's conclusion, which, in some ways, ends where it began—if with a clearer sense of hope for its hero. *Shadow Life* is an empowering novel in which a troubled, hopeless man decides what's worth fighting for.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (October 3, 2022)

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