



Shadows of Kalalau

Doug Walsh

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Shadows of Kalalau is a cinematic thriller that mixes noir sensibilities into a young woman's search to find herself.

In Doug Walsh's suspenseful thriller *Shadows of Kalalau*, a girl in lush Hawaii encounters deception and murder.

Malia is in high school in Hawaii. She's mourning the recent death of her free-spirited mother. When she receives a prestigious scholarship on the mainland, her overprotective adoptive father demands that she stay in Hawaii for her own good. Frustrated, Malia decides to sneak away to the Kalalau Valley, a verdant, rugged coastal area on near-untouched Kaua'i. At first, she hopes to befriend the hippie squatters who live off of the land, as her mother did before she was born. But as Malia becomes acquainted with the squatters—intimidating Inoke, mysterious and attractive Tiki, and nebbish Jordan—she learns that not all is as it seems in paradise.

Shadows of Kalalau is classic noir, but also a story of self-discovery. Much of the narrative is a flashback to how Malia ended up in the Kalalau Valley, building tension as the tale propels itself forward with suspense and surprises. It balances its tension with comprehensive but economical worldbuilding, from the delicious, realistic details of the Kalalau Valley and its issues with squatters, to scenes of Malia plucking “canary-tinted passionfruit” out from among the trees. Here, “hikers [cling] to a narrow ribbon of trail above the ocean,” and someone doing yoga on the beach is a “wisp of a figure, slender and flexible,” who moves with “graceful power.”

The craftsmanship of the worldbuilding is mirrored in the robust characterizations. The cast shows a range of emotions as they react to events in their lives. Malia is motivated by grief and love for her mother; is fearful but excited when it comes to running away; and is unsure when the ruggedness of the island doesn't match her idealistic expectations. The story establishes Inoke as a possible antagonist by placing him in scenes that reveal his entitlement and bombast. Even secondary characters, including Charles, Malia's father, and Skye, the woman who first finds Malia in the Kalalau Valley, are developed with a similar level of richness. People speak in snappy, natural ways that complement their development. All of these elements combined make the story enticing, but the book's real appeal is in its prose, which is jaunty and visual: “She chose to ignore the excuses zinging around her mind like confetti-colored bouncy balls.”

Shadows of Kalalau is a cinematic thriller that mixes noir sensibilities into a young woman's search to find herself in the untamed wild.

KATERIE PRIOR (September 17, 2021)

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