



Shadowshine: An Animal Adventure

Johnny Armstrong

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Shadowshine is a rollicking adventure in which a poetic possum undertakes a quest for self-knowledge in his fantastical world of talking animals.

In Johnny Armstrong's eccentric novel *Shadowshine*, a talking possum adventures in a primitive world that's inhabited by talking animals and bothersome humans.

The book's quirky characters chatter in obscure dialects, meet for wedding ceremonies, undertake quests, and sometimes eat one another. Most citizens of the forest get along. However, in a distant region, trouble is brewing: a tribe of deranged humans is setting fires in the forest. The tribe suffers under a dictator, Mungo, who believes that killing and eating children will gain him access to the spirit world.

Zak—a possum who doesn't know that he is a possum, and who prefers to think of himself as a poet—volunteers to travel to the north and investigate the tribe of "sans-pelages," or animals without fur coats. Zak gets lost; as he wanders northward, his true, existential journey begins.

Some of the book's animals have obnoxious personalities and annoying mannerisms; others are cute and cartoon-like. Their perspectives of humans result in hilarity: the animals pity the sans-pelages for having a "vertical crack" on their hindquarters, while a wise owl expresses gratitude that he isn't from a species with a strong flocking instinct, saying "one never knows who will pop up to lead. It could be just any old fool." Species-specific philosophies emerge in the animals' many conversations.

The book's language is descriptive to the extreme. Lush colors, scents, and textures assail the senses, and the story unfolds through this verdant swamp of words. Some conversations are funny and clever; however, like Zak, many wander with no clear destination. All of the speaking parts go to the animals; the humans don't yet have a language.

The book's short chapters advance the plot in fits and starts. Whole chapters are devoted to Zak's encounters with amusing animal characters whom he never sees again. Zak navigates a river in the antlers of a caribou with an inferiority complex. Several chapters cover a self-contained side story about rescuing a mastodon trapped with his son in a cave.

Most of the story is concerned with Zak; however, the point of view often shifts between characters, sometimes within the same paragraph. Although he never speaks, Mungo's point of view as he torments other humans is unpleasant and contrasts with the animals' humor and charm in disturbing ways.

The structure of this primitive Earth is hazy; emphasis on the all-important balance between the animal world and the spirit world comes late in the story. One spirit entity from “the inside” seems to delight in upsetting the balance, manifesting as a bizarre eel-like flying creature that terrorizes birds. Another spirit appears in the form of a panther, and an account of his role as a restorer of balance leads to confusion. By the time Mungo meets his fate, the story has run out of energy.

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CAROL BOOTON (May 21, 2020)

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