



Shadows in Summerland

Adrian Van Young

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Boston, 1859. A nation on the brink of war.

Confidence men prowl the streets for fresh marks. Mediums swindle the newly bereaved. Into this world of illusion and intrigue comes William Mumler, a manipulating mastermind and criminal jeweler. Mumler hopes to make his fortune by photographing spirits for Boston's elite. The key to his venture: a shy girl named Hannah who sees and manifests the dead and washes up on Boston's harbor along with her strange, intense mother, Claudette.

As Mumler and Hannah's fame grows throughout Boston, everybody wants a piece: Bill Christian, a brothel tough; Algernon Child, a drunken rival; Fanny A. Conant, a sly suffragette; and William Guay, a religious fanatic. These rogues among a host of others, including the great spirit rapper Kate Fox, form powerful bonds with the spirit photographers, one of which will end in murder. Mumler's first and last mistake: the dead cannot be made to heel.

Roughly based on the real-life story of spirit photographer William H. Mumler and his clairvoyant wife, Hannah Mumler, *Shadows in Summerland* immerses the reader in a shifting world of light and shade where nothing is quite what it seems at first glance. A soaring and resplendently Gothic novel spanning three decades, it is as much an homage to the Golden Age ghost stories of Edith Wharton and Henry James as it is a companion to the revisionist historical epics of Peter Carey and Sarah Waters, with a little steampunk all its own.

The Man Who Noticed Everything, **Adrian Van Young's** first book of fiction, won Black Lawrence Press' 2011 St. Lawrence Book Award and was published in 2013.

Shadows in Summerland Details

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Author : Adrian Van Young

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From Reader Review Shadows in Summerland for online ebook

Keith says

It's been a few years since I read Adrian Van Young's *The Man Who Noticed Everything*, but upon cracking *Shadows in Summerland* the thing I was instantly reminded of is that VY builds worlds that are, to put it lightly, densely-constructed as fuck.

My friend Ben Segal told me once that he "doesn't want to be bothered to read a book unless it feels like the author has labored -- labored over every fucking word." I'm not totally sure of what books Ben has and hasn't read, but if I were in a position to recommend some books to him right this mo', I'd reco some Adrian Van Young.

Shadows in Summerland is a novel that's what you'd call "voiced," meaning that there's a main character with a distinctive speaking style that you've got to learn the rhythm of before you can really get ahold on what you're reading. VY does voices well -- his short stories feel like they're written by a freaking ventriloquist chameleon, a ventriloquist chameleon with prodigious historical knowledge and an intuitive sense of character, story, and place (which would be a pretty special ventriloquist chameleon, I tell you now). *SiS* goes hard on voices -- there are actually *four* voices here, four characters with entirely different narrative styles telling you the same story from four very different angles. None of them are entirely unreliable, but they're all fighting for their version of the story to be the most present.

And you are there right in the middle, you special chameleon, you.

SiS is easy to mistake for an actual Victorian novel -- if you're a fan of *The Alienist* or suchlike, but you want the research and the noir and the density turned up to 11 (or whatever numbers they used in the 1860s -- tuppence? Yeah, if you want things turned up to Tuppence), this is your fuckin' book. Four narrators, all sort of swindlery and/or spooky and/or loathsome, even though to be honest none of them *mean* to be these things, they just sort of *are*, with one protagonist just one of the most genuinely awful people despite him doing absolutely nothing genuinely awful for almost the entire book, you just *know*, you just *know* he is so goddamn terrible in his heart...

Anyway.

SiS is a story about Spiritualists, charlatans, and ghost-conjurers in 1860s Boston. 'Summerland' is the fictive world of the dead they sell to their clients, and the Shadows may or may not be actual spirits who've unknowingly been conjured. And it's a crime story, sort of like how *The Prestige* is a crime story -- crime dancing around the edges and running like a vein through the middle, though most of the book is about other things than. "I sit here before you unjustly accused," William Mumler begins, the 'spirit photographer' who provides one of the book's four voices. "I sit here at your mercy, reader." (Neither of which, of course, is strictly true.)

And it's a cinematic sort of book, once it gets rolling. I saw shades of Jude Law's Harlen Maquire from *Road to Perdition*, leering through his camera, as we follow the strange doings of Mumler, a man we never really trust, even though he doesn't quite do much that's really wrong. There is just a wrongness *in* him, and in his ilk. Mumler is surrounded by people who are all driven by principles they may or may not truly believe in -- equality, God, family, art. The principles that they all insist they have may be the story's truest ghosts.

SiS is a story about unpleasant people made more unpleasant by living in an unpleasant time. It's got a smart understanding of how race and gender and class worked in the 19th century, from angles I'd never really

considered before. It's the kind of book more than willing to give you a lesson in early American property law, within pages of a tangent about an ectoplasmic ghost-birth. It's the kind of historical fiction that makes you feel like you're walking through a tightly-cobbled town, untucking corners grown over with time.

It feels fucking *labored*, is what I'm saying. When Adrian Van Young writes a book, he writes goddamn *hard*. One thing I *won't* say is that it's friendly -- there is the distinct sensation, despite *SiS* having a short and plainly-spoken preface, that this book is sailing on a black and silent river, and you are on the shore. Whether or not you can get on board is entirely up to you, and this book is not even going to blink at the fact that it plans to drag you through the muck before it lets you on.

Another thing Ben Segal likes to say about stories is that it's important to know whether or not they stick the landing. "This one starts strong and the language keeps the pace," he'll say, "But you gotta make sure you stick the landing."

I was on the last paragraph of the last page and I was like, "Shit man, Adrian stuck the fucking landing."

The thing is that I've met Adrian Van Young before. He's always seemed like a surprisingly normal guy to me. He is not, as far as I can tell, a speeding boat threatening to drop you behind it on a black and silent river.

But this book. This book fucking is.

ken says

Stylistically, not my thing.

Julia says

This book is a phenomenal piece of work. Sprawling, cinematic, and fascinating. I love Adrian's gift for language so much - engulfingly Victorian, often devastating prose, but I think it's his characters that got under my skin the most. Most are deeply flawed, many are wronged, but they were all somehow endeared to me and I love that sort of thing.

It's a ghost story and it's a period piece, yeah, and it's also just a gorgeous study of a bunch of people trying to figure shit out. I felt like it transcended your ushe ghost story in so many ways - I was never terribly scared or grossed out, but the book gave me legit chills many times. Stunning.

Important aside: This was the first book I read on a new kindle, and I left myself notes as I read, which means I've trained the kindle's suggested text to be stuff like: "<3," "RAD," "LOVE," and "AMAZING" in all caps. Because that's what I kept writing.

You should probably read this.

Superstition Review says

Adrian Van Young creates a vivid and complex narrative in this new gothic tale, *Shadows in Summerland*, with an introduction that sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Three people stand accused of murder and fraud who are adamant about their innocence.

Shadows in Summerland gives insight into 19th century spiritualism while also providing readers with a mysterious thriller that will keep them on their toes. Through the use of imagery, Van Young maintains a chilling atmosphere throughout his novel while remaining poetic in his language.

A highlight for me came from sentences whose prose read like poetry: “It was replaced by something strange and yet something I felt I knew, a sort of half-remembered fear whose ghost flitted across her eyes like a swimmer in moonlight traversing a pond but not without ripples disturbing the dark, fanning to the farther shores.”

Review by Dennise Garcia

Ryan Bradford says

Fantastic novel. Read my review over at Electric Literature.

Adrian Young says

Yeah, I rated my own book. What? WHAT?!

Brice says

I really wanted to love this book. From the subject matter to the characters, everything is in van Young's novel to make it a stellar outing, but despite what seems to be a great premise and a well-crafted cast, something's missing in SHADOWS IN SUMMERLAND.

Van Young does do a great job of capturing the era through both dialogue and prose, but that may be a drawback, too. The book reads like a heavy tome, slogging through some passages and requiring some paragraphs to be reread more than once for their entire meaning to be grasped.

The back and forth between characters can also be somewhat jarring at times, drawing the reader out of the story, rather than immersing themselves in the tale.
