

Janielle Rollins
Ames IA

Dear Mr. Shusterman,

I am writing to you in regards to your book, The Shadow Club. I read this book in the fifth grade and might not have been greatly affected by it except that it gave me the first of many answers to questions I didn't even know I was asking. Anyone who I am close to knows that I am very analytical. I often wonder about why people act the way they do, and especially why good people lose integrity—even me.

For me, the fifth grade was when I really started to ask for answers to human behavior (don't worry—I still ask). It was around that time that I stopped seeing my parents as giants and started seeing them as people. I stopped looking at myself as always right and did “experiments” in my head where I would try to justify someone's differing viewpoint. I would briefly change my thinking to see the effect, but my inquisitiveness wasn't burning.

But I was curious. However, questions on human behavior are hard to ask, especially to adults. Psychology, which is now my favorite class, isn't taught in elementary schools. I was at the threshold of critical thinking regarding human behavior and needed the final push. Your book gave that to me.

Today (I'm a tenth grader now, by the way) I believe that everyone is in some way selfish, but that we can overcome our selfishness. I also believe that there is human choice, but we are not always aware of making those choices. For the younger me, it was simple: bad people did bad things, good people did good things, and children made mistakes. I now realize that those borders I put on human behavior were inadequate, like trying to keep air within a wire fence: there are too many holes for it to succeed!

Jared's journey and that of the other shadow club members, as they transform from ideal children into a gang, is mesmerizing, understandable, and terrifying all in the same instant. While reading it, I began to understand the faults of humanity in general and applied it to events in human history that we like to say are flukes of some sort, when in fact those events show what happens when people have power and don't consider the consequences. The holocaust, slavery, gang fights, bullying—how are societies created and sustained where these are accepted? What prejudices and cognitive dissonance must occur for genocide to happen based on religion? Based on “race”? How great must the need be to belong, and the need be for justice, for a gang to be born? Why, in a normal classroom setting, do most students ignore the bullying of a fellow student? This book made me question my life choices and the choices of those around me.

The most memorable change I think Jared goes through is when he chooses to believe Ralphy Sherman when all of the evidence is against him, just so that Jared can keep seeing Tyson in a bad light. This twisted moment opened my eyes more than their abuse of Tyson, because with Ryson their biases escalated. With Ralphy, they went against

logic to justify hate. This made me wonder how many truths a society would sacrifice to be right.

If my mind and imagination could be contained in a room, the room would be full of closets. These closets would represent all the books I've ever read, and will read. They would be all shapes and sizes, and made out of every material possible. In them there would be things of a fantastic nature, and some of a simple nature. In some there would be gold, in others trash, in another something sad—maybe a poem. Perhaps in some closets there would be nothing at all. The Shadow Club would be a closet I opened young. But when I opened it, I didn't see treasure or trash, as I was expecting. Instead, I opened that closet door to a hallway. If there was an end to that hallway, I didn't see it, and still can't. In this hallway there are doors to more rooms, creating a maze of possible paths. Perhaps my life would have been easier if I had just stayed in the room full of closets. Maybe I would have been happier. However, I chose to leave that room, and get lost in the maze, and now I couldn't find the door that would take me back to that room if I tried. I remember it, but I can't go back after having seen the hallway. I think to go back would leave me empty. As Robert Frost once wrote:

“I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Your book did not end a war. It did not stop prejudice, or stop world hunger. However, your book has influenced my life greatly by helping change the way I see the world. For me, that has made all the difference.

Sincerely,
Your student, Janielle Rollins

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