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Chamois Chui Yeuk Ling

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Mirrors, Merriment and My Favourite Novel: The Imaginings of Literature in Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind*

Chamois Chui Yeuk Ling, *The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

NOBODY HAD EXPECTED CARLOS RUIZ ZAFÓN to die. At least, nobody expected it so soon. In the spring of 2020, he was only 55, and had just finished his gargantuan story cycle *The Cemetery of Forgotten Books*. This four-book series wove a web of intrigue spanning forty years of Spanish history and brought a city long lost in the mists of time to life. It was a beautiful escape into the distant past, perfect for distressing times like a pandemic, and it felt like Ruiz Zafón had more to say in the coming years—then came the news that he had died of colorectal cancer in Los Angeles.¹ Perhaps because of this sudden event, I began to reread the first of the series, 2001's *The Shadow of the Wind*, despite not knowing a word of Spanish, nor having any interest in a city half a world away. Along the way, I realized not only *why* this was my favourite novel, but also the value behind this sentimental romance. For Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind* is not merely a raucous bildungsroman or a Gothic melodrama that uses Francoist Spain to weave its layers of intrigue, but it is also a book that reveals the pleasures of reading, the role of secrets in connecting with the reader, and the way a book imprints itself on its readers.

There is no doubt, of course, that a large part of the book's appeal comes down to its humorous yet absorbing retelling of a bildungsroman. Daniel Sempere's journey to adulthood and romance lies at the heart of *The Shadow of the Wind*, and this is a journey that is as packed with multiple plot twists as it is with intimate and funny moments. Crucial to engaging the reader is Daniel's narration, which is verbose and evocative. For example, he describes the aftermath of a home visit with the words "I carried the trace of her lips, of her breath on my skin through streets full of faceless people escaping from offices and shops."² This fleeting moment stays with Daniel as he walks through the streets of 1950s Barcelona, vividly describing his state of inner turmoil and creating a detailed perception of the physical and mental landscape surrounding him. With such intricate descriptions, Ruiz Zafón creates an immersive experience for readers, making us feel as if we were Daniel, giving us an opportunity to embrace the plot. This is actually quite difficult, for

there are many improbable coincidences and tragic events in the book, and Daniel's dark yet intimate words make his storytelling sound "like the jacket blurb of a Victorian novel."³ However, other critics such as writer Stephen King have asserted that this book is a "true Gothic novel" similar to those written two centuries ago.⁴ And therein lies the first key to this book's success—it is an escapist tale of darkness and intrigue that effectively captivates readers like me. Gothic novels are famously set in dangerous bygone periods, and with their promise of exploration and suspense, as well as their quasi-supernatural elements, they provide an alternative to the mundane realities of the real world. With Ruiz Zafón's novel, readers are thrust into times, places and events they can only imagine in reality. Combined with the rich and suspenseful prose, this becomes a dramatic adventure that allows them to take both delight and refuge in this alternative world.

Some critics frown upon the novel's tendency to rely on melodrama and imaginary construct: Glennis Byron notes that tourists are unlikely to see Barcelona as Daniel describes it, and decries its "fabricated imported tradition of Victorian gothic."⁵ Yet the ability to explore intense feelings of love and horror is precisely what has drawn in over fifteen million readers,⁶ and such a detailed depiction of an imaginary world, one that somewhat resembles the historical Barcelona we know yet still feels somewhat alien, makes this novel even more delightful. In the end, what draws readers in is simply Ruiz Zafón's ability to craft an entire world we do not know, yet can still explore safely.

But intensity is not the sole requirement for a good novel, and *The Shadow of the Wind* adds to its emotional resonance by adding thoughtful moments of levity. Although the book has no shortage of dark moments, these are balanced out by Ruiz Zafón's raucous humour. Much of this comes from the exquisitely named Fermín Romero de Torres, who offers both ribald wisecracks and affecting wisdom—yet it is Daniel who offers the funniest stories about Fermín. For instance, no sooner has the latter condemned the cinema's "way of feeding the mindless and making them even more stupid"⁷ than it is undercut in the very next sentence by the revelation that his opinions "changed radically the day he discovered Carole Lombard."⁸ This becomes even more ironic when Daniel quotes him loudly praising Lombard's breasts, which utterly destroys the effect of his previous moralistic diatribe. Fermín is an extremely self-righteous character who makes pronouncements promptly undermined by Daniel's words, a frequent reversal that leads to much hilarity. But at the same time Fermín does not arouse feelings of derision from the reader, who might in other novels distance themselves from such an incorrigible

character. Instead, Ruiz Zafón portrays his humorous side as an example of human fallibility, something that we readers are just as susceptible to and therefore deserving of our sympathies. In Daniel's first encounter with Fermín, he recognises that the latter "longed for lighthearted conversation almost as much as he longed for a hot bath,"⁹ a desire that any reader who has experienced loneliness or neglect can surely relate to. Fermín may be self-contradictory and brash, but he reveals humanity's tendency to speak its mind and be at times hypocritical, and so we welcome the universality and humanity he represents. Ruiz Zafón does not portray his characters as stereotypes to be mocked, for all but a few have backstories, wise insights, and above all their own witty comments. Instead, we gain through his characters a composite picture of humanity, of the funny things people are capable of saying and the struggles that lie behind such witticisms. Humour, then, serves a dual purpose in *The Shadow of the Wind*: not only does it make reading hugely enjoyable, but it also pokes fun at our weaknesses as a species while assuring us that such weaknesses prove our humanity, rather than detracting from it. This paradoxical acceptance of flaws therefore encourages us to reflect on the ways characters can resemble ourselves.

Thus have we established *The Shadow of the Wind*'s status as entertainment. But what of its literary and artistic merit? Hidden deep within this apparently frivolous novel, it is also possible to detect traces of a philosophy of reading at work. This stems once again from our enjoyment of the novel, where the book's ability to resonate with readers comes from its almost preposterous melodrama. This long-lasting attachment, however, mostly stems from the way Ruiz Zafón actively encourages interpretation and exposure of the book's secrets. The first words spoken in the novel already foretell the constant barrage of secrets within the novel, when Daniel's father tells his son "you mustn't tell anyone what you're about to see today [. . .] not even your friend."¹⁰ The novel hinges on the promise of this portentous line, but it only serves to reveal another layer of intrigue, and each subsequent disclosure only reveals even more secrets for the reader. The central mystery, the identity of "antagonist" Laín Coubert, continues to elude us until the final pages, shifting and challenging our preconceptions as we read. In this constant shapeshifting, *The Shadow of the Wind* reveals how secrets operate within a novel: although the definite form of the central secret may remain unclear till the final pages, this only emboldens readers to form their own interpretations, using the many "clues" provided in the story to guess what it is. The more a text seeks to preserve a secret or tease its readers with it, the more the latter wants to completely understand and form meanings within the text.

This constant reinterpretation inevitably creates unpredictable and varied results, as the endless hypotheses to Coubert's identity within the pages of the novel parallel those of the reader's, showing just how capable textual secrets are of being interpreted. In a sense, this supports Kermode's claim that in a novel, "the world is endlessly capable of being redescribed" because narratives "must always have their secrets."¹¹ To discover the world and the central mystery that holds the story together, readers delve into these secrets, which rather than forbidding interpretation with their unknowability instead encourages an array of possible interpretations. The text may be opaque in such unknowability, but the imagined secret within continually compels the reader to look further. As a result, the lack of a definite form for the secret is in fact liberating, allowing the reader to continue imagining the infinite possibilities hinted by the text, and involving us further in the story. But what is special about *The Shadow of the Wind* is that not only does it fully exhibit the process through which a text's secrets give readers pleasure, it also allows us to actually see this process in action. The book at the centre of the novel is also named "The Shadow of the Wind" (hereafter in quotation marks for ease of differentiation), so the line between narrative layers is blurred and difficult to distinguish. As a result, Daniel's heartfelt comments about how he slowly "let the spell of the story and its world take [him] over" could also describe our own amazed reaction to the book we ourselves hold.¹² This hint of metafiction, fitting into a book that tells of the joys of reading, heightens the awareness readers have of their reading practices, and gives us even more reason to lose ourselves in Ruiz Zafón's prose. As such, *The Shadow of the Wind* is a book which accurately reflects and spells out the joys of reading.

Just as important as the recognition of the pleasures of the narrative, however, is the recognition of the readers themselves within the pages of the novel. As the proxy of the reader, Daniel Sempere himself reflects the journey of introspection that takes place when we read books like *Shadow*. A character with secrets is of course designed to invite curiosity, and from there on further reading. But though the humanity of the characters is a basis for the reader's imaginings, the relationship could also work in the opposite way. As multiple characters say in the novel, "books are mirrors: you only see in them what you already have inside you."¹³ In other words, besides instilling values and thoughts into the reader, books tease out what is latent in them, allowing them to discover previously unknown facets of themselves. One of the most important and accessible ways readers achieve this is through relatable characters, who in reading find themselves mirrored in the characters within the novel.

This effect is particularly noticeable if the characters are placed in an unfamiliar fantasy environment like that of *The Shadow of the Wind*. Roland Barthes asks regarding his fascination with the “daily life” of a character, “is it not the fantasy itself which invokes the ‘detail,’ the tiny private scene, in which I can easily take my place?”¹⁴ Of course, it is far-fetched to imagine ourselves as the characters in this particular novel, as few of us will ever look for disappeared authors or discover an endless library of forgotten books. But within this Gothicised world, we cling to characters who feel like normal unassuming people and bear at least some resemblance to the average reader, which in turn leads on to the reader consciously comparing themselves to the character.

This active drawing of parallels is an effect exemplified by this novel itself, which shows readers what it is like to turn inward upon reading a book, and to wonder if they too can be as fascinating. Characters in Ruiz Zafón’s novel talk about how the author of “Shadow,” Julian Carax, speaks to “the recesses of [their] soul,”¹⁵ and how they feel like they have some new understanding upon reading his novel. There is a prospect of interchangeability present within narratives, and it follows that readers might also wonder if they have their own latent secrets, ones that can compare to the characters in the novel. It is not enough for us to see the secrets of the world through Daniel Sempere’s eyes. We also want to experience the same feelings, and in doing so to be able to have a long introspective look at our developing selves like he does. Just as infinite secrets can be found within different characters, we as readers wonder at the infinite possibilities within us. Cortese and Cortese argue that this novel shows how human experience is “a circular re-enactment of old stories, of either foil mirrors or echoes that inform and invest our own stories with meaning and purpose.”¹⁶ As a bildungsroman, *The Shadow of the Wind* tackles the agonies and raptures of growing up while informing its readers of the mysterious familiarity of our lives. It tells us that our lives are constantly being disrupted, that every day we learn new things about ourselves, new flaws and capabilities. In reading the stories of characters like Daniel Sempere, then, we wonder if we might be able to see ourselves in their actions, and be one step closer to finally knowing ourselves.

This also leads us to the final reason why *The Shadow of the Wind* is my favourite novel: its ability to promise a never-ending adventure. A hallmark of a good book has always been its ability to stay with the reader long after they have read the final page, and *The Shadow of the Wind* succeeds in this task. The ending of the book closely mirrors its beginning, with language almost identical to that on the first page as

Daniel takes his son Julian to the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. Ruiz Zafón ends with the words “father and son disappear into the crowd of the Ramblas, their steps lost forever in the shadow of the wind.”¹⁷ With a callback to the reason we are all here, the title of the book, a cycle is created. Although the tale ends there, it seems as if another adventure has begun, featuring a new generation of characters, and we continue to guess what happens to Daniel and Julian after they melt into the streets of Barcelona. This cyclical ending promising a new adventure is important, for it leads to the imagining of potential adventure, which in a reader’s mind is perhaps the ultimate happiness they can experience. The strong emotions of enjoyment that we obtain after reading is something that we would like to prolong, but unfortunately feelings of pleasure—or, more accurately, “bliss,” since this is more about the onset of the state of loss—are temporary and disappear soon after the text is finished. But all is not lost. After all, Bennett and Royle tell us that in literature the feeling of bliss involves “a state of suspension.”¹⁸ Suspension, not a final cessation. We need to believe in the possibility of more adventures, and Ruiz Zafón’s ending that hints at a continuation achieves this exact effect. To continue feeling this euphoric delight, the reader will thus continue to imagine adventures of their own, perhaps even attempt to reproduce the effects of the text in real life. The imagining of such adventures, long after readers have finished consuming the text, shows to them that the literary work has not ended. Rather, it allows them to feel that there can always be adventure lying ahead, not only in the fictive world, but also in the reality it mirrors. Of course, whether the author is capable of such a worthy continuation varies, and it is a sad truth that the subsequent books in Ruiz Zafón’s series, although interesting, have been unable to replicate that same level of magic. But it has already provided the perfect springboard for readers to continue imagining, and it is this tantalising ending that made me fall in love with the book, and it means that every time I open *The Shadow of the Wind*, I finish it feeling as if there could be more adventures down the road.

So that is *The Shadow of the Wind* in a nutshell: not just an intriguing novel that lures readers in with a promise of humour and a good dose of drama, but also a book that explores why we read, what we find within ourselves when reading, and the everlasting power of words. Behind the fun and the excessive emotion lies a masterpiece of readership, and as an obsessive literature student, nothing has come close to recapturing the heart-rending experience of reading quite like *The Shadow of the Wind* does. As the novel says early on, a book that finds its way into the reader’s heart accompanies us “throughout our lives and sculpt a

place in our memory to which, sooner or later — no matter how many books we read, how many worlds we discover, or how much we learn or forget — we will return.”¹⁹ Since my first read many years ago, I have returned time and again to Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s magical world of books and bibliophiles, just to remind myself what it means to love reading. I have yet to be disappointed. I don’t think I ever will be.

NOTES

1. Alison Flood, “Carlos Ruiz Zafón, author of *The Shadow of the Wind*, dies aged 55,” *The Guardian*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/19/carlos-ruiz-zafon-author-of-the-shadow-of-the-wind-dies-aged-55>.

2. Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*, trans. Lucia Graves, (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), 177.

3. *Ibid.*, 182.

4. Stephen King, “Stephen King on books he recommends,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 1 Feb. 2007, <https://ew.com/article/2007/02/01/stephen-king-books-he-recommends/>.

5. Glennis Byron, “Gothic, Grabbit and Run: Carlos Ruiz Zafón and the Gothic Marketplace,” in *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture: Pop Goth*, ed. Justin Edwards and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (Abington: Routledge, 2012), 79.

6. Mark Lawson, “The Shadow of the Wind and the remarkable success of Carlos Ruiz Zafón,” *The Guardian*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/19/the-shadow-of-the-wind-success-carlos-ruiz-zafon>.

7. Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*, 88.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 62.

10. *Ibid.*, 1.

11. Frank Kermode, “Secrets and Narrative Sequence,” *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 86.

12. Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*, 6.

13. *Ibid.*, 215.

14. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang), 53.

15. Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*, 24.

16. Romana Cortese and James Cortese, “A Labyrinth of Mirrors: Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s *The Shadow of the Wind*,” in *21st-Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels Since 2000*, ed. Danel Olson (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 4z.

17. Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*, 506.

18. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Abington: Routledge, 2009), 292.

19. Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*, 6.