

READERS' GUIDE

Shadow Life by Michael Decter

INTRODUCING *Shadow Life*

In one minute, delivering a not guilty verdict at the end of the trial for a disturbing murder of a child, Matthew Rice's life begins to unravel. The very structures his life is built upon start to collapse.

Matthew retreats to Quarry Island in Georgian Bay, where he loses his wallet in a boating mishap. Among the pieces of identification he needs to replace is his birth certificate, but he's informed it's not on file.

His birth certificate was a forgery. Not only have the foundations of his life given way, his very identity is shattered.

Matthew learns that the woman who raised him was his father's second wife, and that his real mother died when he was a baby. What began as a search for a replacement for his birth certificate becomes a search for a woman who was a trailblazing journalist. His search takes him on a journey to Sydney, Australia, Boston, and Dublin; it results in the possession of the journals his mother kept up to her dying days in 1952. These entries are a window into a fascinating woman and a distant time not so different from our own.

Still unsure of his place in a world that has changed in ways he has difficulty completely understanding, he returns to Quarry Island in Georgian Bay, where he stocks up on books and a case of good Scotch to sit out the end of his world as he knew it.

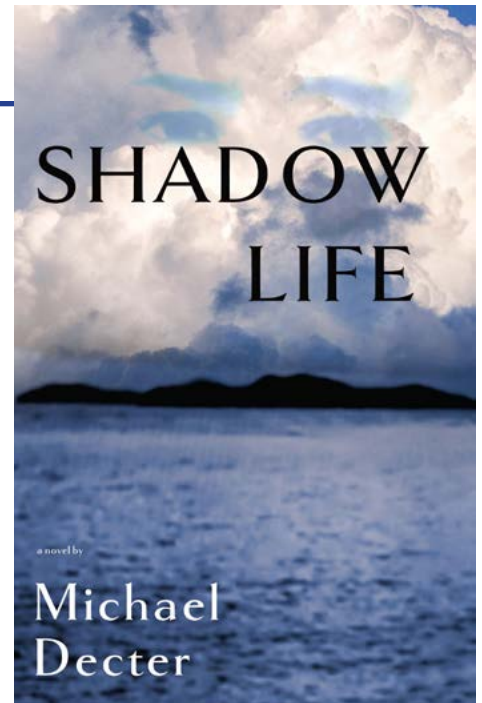
But fate has more in store for Matthew than he can understand.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Nature vs. City — Matt seeks the refuge of nature on Quarry Island. Here, he is free from bureaucratic duties or societal conflicts, but must grapple with more elemental obstacles and dangers.

Public Service — Matt defines himself by his long career working in government, but through his journey to learn about his birth mother and his newfound heritage, he reflects on his conception of himself in the wake of uncovered secrets, his national pride, and the limitations and the necessity of government service.

Good and Evil — The hung jury of the murder trial shakes Matt's faith in the goodness of humanity. Unmoored and restless, Matt takes a leave from work and wrestles with his guilt and doubts about the looming evils in this changing, modern society.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In chapter 2, Matt believes that the Canadian identity is centered upon survival — of testing one’s strength against its nation and the wild elements. Do you find this to be an accurate characterization of Canadian people?
2. What does Matt do to prepare for his stay on Quarry Island? What did he need to consider about potentially staying the winter on Georgian Bay? How would this differ from spending a winter in a city, such as Toronto?
3. Matt lived in and travelled through many places over the course of the novel. Compare and contrast the locations he has visited: Winnipeg, Toronto, Quarry Island, Sydney, Boston, and Dublin. What does each setting represent in his past, his character, and his story?
4. On page 45, Matt states that “his father, Daniel, favoured the Old Testament, An Eye for an Eye. Beth, his mother, believed the commandment Thou Shalt Not Kill extended to the state as well as individuals.” What do you make of these two philosophies? Which ideal does Matt subscribe to, if any?
5. Throughout the book, Matt hears many stories about the political histories of many cities and countries. What do these stories say about the way change is enacted? About the role of government? About legacy? In what way do these histories impact or parallel with Matt’s present day?
6. On page 207, Matt says, “There were always strict rules. All large organizations must have a forest of rules. ... There were also times when rules had to be broken.” When, over the course of the novel, does Matt choose to follow the law, and when does he choose to bend or break it? At each crossroad, do you think he made the right choice?
7. Consider Matt’s childhood with his parents, Daniel and Beth, compared to his newfound knowledge of his mother Norah’s life. How did Matt’s parents, and the absence of his birth mother, shape Matt’s life? In what way is Matt similar to or different from any of his parents?
8. By the end of the novel, what conclusion does Matt come to about his connections with his mother Beth and his birth mother Norah? How does Matt hold space for them, both now long dead, in his memory?



ABOUT MICHAEL

A Harvard University graduate, Michael Decter was awarded the Queen’s Jubilee Medal in 2017 and the Order of Canada in 2004. He has written three non-fiction books on healthcare, three on investment, a memoir, and *Tales from the Back Room*, a collection of political stories. Decter has also written about health and healthcare in the *Literary Review of Canada*, contributed op-ed pieces to the *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*, and for several years he wrote a column for Osprey Media. Born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Decter now lives in Toronto, Ontario. *Shadow Life* is his first novel.