

Shadow People

about the book

Four teenagers from dysfunctional families join together and commit increasingly violent crimes as a way of dealing with their anger, frustration, and loneliness.

“The characters are well drawn and the surprise ending is true to our justice system today. This look behind today’s headlines . . . could well be a topic for discussion.”

—School Library Journal

pre-reading activity

Ask the group to research recent cases of teenage violence. Discuss the factors that cause teenage violence, and build a character profile of a violent teen. Brainstorm nonviolent ways that teenagers can deal with anger.



questions for group discussion

1. Explain Gabriel’s nightmares. Why does he call them “the shadow people?” Discuss why Gabriel never shares his nightmares with anyone. How might his life have been different if he had talked about his nightmares and fears with his family? Gabriel’s father moves the family out of the city on “some quixotic quest for safety” (p. 58) after Ben, the older son, is murdered. Discuss the irony of this move.
2. How does Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* take on a new and different meaning for Gabriel when he reads it after Ben is murdered?
3. Explain why Gabriel feels that he is living a “Jekyll and Hyde” existence. There isn’t a lot of discussion about Gabriel’s family before Ben is murdered, but there are small hints about the family and their relationship to one another. Discuss why Gabriel feels that the wrong son has been murdered. How does Gabriel’s father change throughout the novel?
4. Gabriel, Alec, Lydia, and Hollis are troubled teenagers from dysfunctional families. Which of these teens is the most troubled? Discuss how loneliness contributes to their desire to form a group. Hollis hates the word “gang.” He prefers to be considered an “organization.” Discuss the difference.
5. The four teens become the “Lords of Destruction.” How does this name reflect power? Who is the most powerful member of the group? How do the other members of the group become his “victims?” After the Lords of Destruction vandalize the train station, a local reporter writes that they are “probably teenagers of below-average intelligence with nothing better to do on a Saturday night.” (p. 143) How is this a common stereotype that society has of teenage vandals?
6. By nature, Gabriel isn’t a destructive person. Why does he get such a rush from vandalizing the train station and stealing items from the convenience store? Both Gabriel and Lydia have flashbacks to when they were caught stealing things during their childhood. How do these memories cause brief feelings of guilt in these two teens? Lydia doesn’t want to destroy things, but goes along for the excitement. How does her decision change her life forever?
7. Debate Gabriel’s thought, “Sometimes, when justice wasn’t being served, you had to take the law into your own hands.” (p. 214) Discuss whether his thoughts derive from anger, desperation, or both. Why does he feel Hollis is his answer to finding Ben’s killers? How would finding the killers change Gabriel’s life?
8. Retell the last chapter in the novel in first person from Gabriel’s point of view.