

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Borrowed Shadows

A horror short story by C.R. Lang

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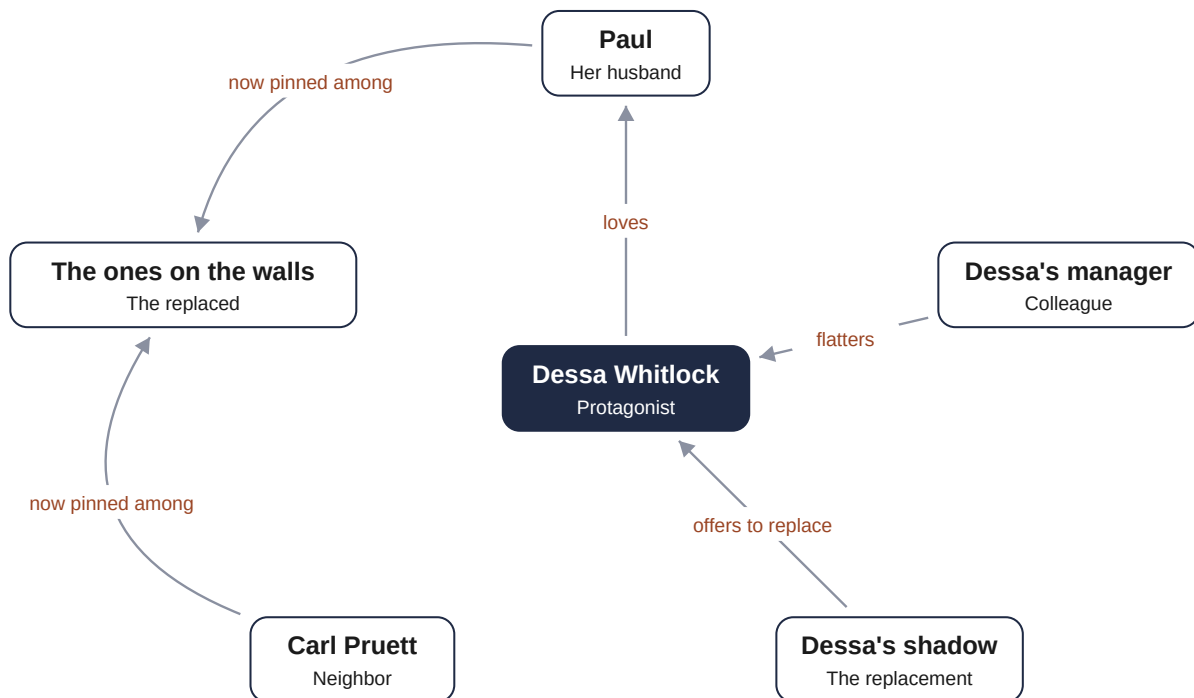
About the story

In the nineteenth day of a heatwave, people's shadows begin to lag behind them. Then the shadows start replacing them with kinder, flawless versions, and the real selves end up pinned to the walls.

This guide assumes everyone has finished the story, so it discusses the ending.

Character map

The main character is in the dark box. Arrows show who acts on whom.



Who's who

Dessa Whitlock (Protagonist). Tired, careful, and the first to notice the shadows are wrong.

Paul (Her husband). Difficult in ordinary ways, loved anyway after eleven years. Replaced on the twenty-sixth day.

Carl Pruett (Neighbor). A cruel man across the hall who suddenly arrives with lemonade and an apology.

Dessa's manager (Colleague). Once harsh, now listing everyone's birthdays and things he was never told.

Dessa's shadow (The replacement). Speaks in her own voice, warmer and wiser, offering to carry everything.

The ones on the walls (The replaced). Flat, silent old selves, shouting where no one looks.

Themes to look for

Perfection versus humanity. The replacements remove every flaw, and what remains 'had never been human to begin with.'

Loving real people. Dessa loves Paul 'with the tired, practical love of eleven years,' flaws included.

Exhaustion and surrender. The shadow wins not by force but by offering rest.

Not looking. Nobody looks at the shapes on the walls. What do we choose not to see?

Discussion questions

- 1 Why does the story start with shadows that simply lag behind, before anything darker happens?
- 2 Carl's apology is everything Dessa might have wanted. Why does it horrify her?
- 3 The narrator says the replacements 'did not mimic the people they replaced. They corrected them.' What's the difference?
- 4 The kinder Paul knows what the real Paul said at her mother's funeral. Why is that moment so painful?
- 5 Dessa's shadow offers her rest. Why is this a more effective temptation than threats?
- 6 What would you have done in Dessa's place on the last night?
- 7 The woman in the green coat is 'the most generous person on the block.' How did you feel reading that line?
- 8 Is a kinder world worth it if the people in it are no longer real?
- 9 What do you think the shape on the bedroom wall is listing at the end?

Craft corner

For writers in the group: two ways to look at how the story is built.

Setting. How does the heatwave work as more than background? Notice how the story ends when the heat breaks.

Irony. Kindness becomes the threat. Find the moments where politeness is the scariest thing on the page.

Try this together

Make two columns: one flaw you'd happily lose and one flaw you'd want to keep because it makes you you. Share whichever you're comfortable with and talk about what the replacements took that people would miss.

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