



READING GUIDE

THE SHADOW KILLER GAIL BOWEN

Reading level: 5.0

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, family, fathers and sons

978-1-55469-876-9 PB

Summary

It's another night at CVOX's star program, *The World According to Charlie D*—and there's another unstable character on the other end of the line.

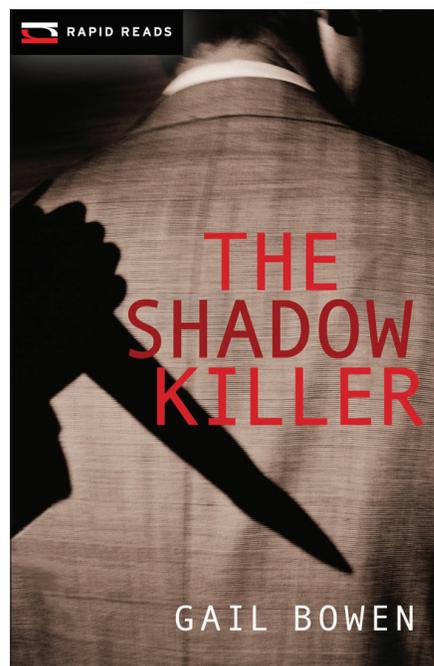
It's Father's Day, and everyone is listening to Charlie D's late-night radio talk show. Despite his own unfulfilling relationship with his politician father, Charlie and his producer, Nova, decide to build the show around the theme of dads. Typically a fraught relationship, there's plenty of fodder to get listeners thinking—and to light up the switchboards for the entire evening.

Except tonight, instead of the usual rollicking, rock-and-roll repartee with listeners and callers, Charlie and Nova find themselves drawn into the drama of one particular caller. One who seems to be on the verge of committing a shocking crime. Under the name *loser1121*, this individual contacts the CVOX studio ahead of the show to let Charlie know that tonight he plans to off his entire family, even going so far as to send a blueprint of his murder plans to the station. His reason? He hates his dad. And because his dad is such an infernal jerk, *loser1121* reasons that the world will be better off without him. But because having a murderer in the family would prove to be hell for his siblings and mother, he's decided to off *them*, too, to spare them the embarrassment.

The details of *loser1121*'s plot unravel throughout the course of the book with the help of the police, Charlie's own smooth talking and an unlikely informant in the shape of Charlie's dad, who happens to know the caller's father (a powerful politician) and is the only one who can identify the boy.

Readers are reminded of the chemistry between Charlie, who bears an arresting birthmark on his face, and Nova, who's taking life by the horns as a single mother by choice. While the show is on air, their techie's wife gives birth to their first child—a boy—which adds an element of reflection on how the father-son relationship often changes and sours as the sons pass from infancy through adolescence and into adulthood.

Among the evening's callers are the network owner, Evan Burgh, and his own father, Henry, whose 25-year-old girlfriend is poised to share in the family fortunes once she signs the pre-nup. The Burgh's thorny father-son relationship parallels Charlie's own issues with his old man, as well as those of *loser2011* and his father. As the stories unfold and intertwine, familiar phrases, songs and sentiments remind readers that the father-son relationship is a complex one—but one that is often worth exploring.



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Questions for Discussion

1. In the first chapter of *The Shadow Killer*, Charlie D observes that people just want to be listened to. Why is this so important for humans?
2. A *simile* is a literary device that adds description by comparing two things using the words *like* or *as*. Here's an example from *The Shadow Killer*: "Quick as the flick of a snake's tongue, the mother reaches out a perfect hand and slaps her son's cheek." How do similes add to the reader's experience of a passage? Find other examples from the book.
3. In chapter 1, Charlie reflects on his childhood. Of course, it doesn't measure up to the idealized image of childhood. Does anyone's? Discuss.
4. Charlie has an intuitive sense about a person just by listening to his or her voice. What kinds of conclusions and judgments do we arrive at when we hear other people speak?
5. Charlie D started doing radio because it allowed him to be somebody he wasn't. Why are we drawn to occupations and pastimes that allow us to express ourselves differently from how others see us? Brainstorm a list of such outlets.
6. Our relationships with our parents are fraught with complex issues. Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons—each dynamic carries with it its own set of challenges. What are some of these challenges?
7. *Cat's In The Cradle* is a well-known song that speaks to the difficulties of father-son relationships. What similar songs (or stories) are you aware of?
8. Charlie reflects that network owner Evan Burgh's face is "strained by the knowledge that what he wants will always be beyond his reach." How does this apply to all of us?
9. The way a character speaks and acts offers clues about his or her personality. What can we tell about Charlie's character by the fact that he goes head-to-head with his boss on national radio?
10. In chapter 5, young Britney offers a bit of wisdom that her grandmother shared with her: *There are no pockets in a shroud*. What does this mean?
11. When he calls in to *The World According to Charlie D*, 83-year-old Henry Burgh uses a familiar cliché: you can't teach an old dog new tricks. What other clichés can you find in *The Shadow Killer*?
12. Charlie muses that no matter what a boy does, genetics will ensure he ends up like his father. Do you agree?
13. In his words to *loser1121*, Charlie assures him that life gets better. How so? What words do you wish you could speak to your 14-year-old self?
14. At the end of *The Shadow Killer*, Charlie's dad observes that we never know how long we have. Why, then, do most of us behave differently?
15. Is it always worth it to try and fix a broken relationship with a parent? Or does there come a time to just let it go? Discuss.

