

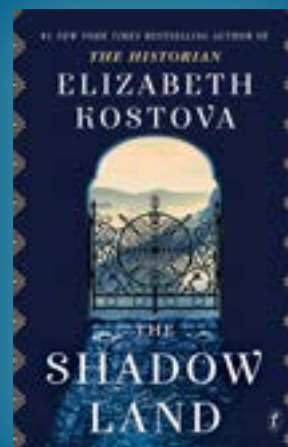
# The Shadow Land



Elizabeth Kostova

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## PRaise FOR THE SHADOW LAND

'In this brilliant work, what appears at first a minor mystery quickly becomes emblematic of a whole country's hidden history. Lyrical and compelling, *The Shadow Land* proves a profound meditation on how evil is inflicted, endured and, through courage and compassion, defeated. Elizabeth Kostova's third novel clearly establishes her as one of America's finest writers.'

RON RASH

'Transporting...draws us into Bulgarian history and character revelation like an elegant, mysterious labyrinth. Page-turning, evocative and richly imagined.'

DOMINIC SMITH

'Recommend[ed]...to readers seeking outstanding and suspenseful historical fiction.'

BOOKLIST

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## ABOUT ELIZABETH KOSTOVA

Elizabeth Kostova is the New York Times bestselling author of *The Historian*, which sold over three million copies, and *The Swan Thieves*. She graduated from Yale and holds an MFA from the University of Michigan. She has spent time in Bulgaria, and met her husband there. In 2007 she co-founded the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation for Creative Writing in Bulgaria.

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## A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO THE SHADOW LAND

Past and present collide when Alexandra Boyd flies to what was once just a pale green patch on a map that entranced the brother she mourns. Bulgaria becomes vividly real to her as she journeys through its cities, towns and landscapes, its people, history and politics, with Bobby – police detective turned poet, activist and taxi driver – as her friend and guide.

As well, Alexandra's and Stoyan Lazarov's stories collide as his past determines what she does in her present, trying to return his ashes to his family. And as Alexandra discovers Stoyan's memories, so does the reader. A survivor of a brutal labour camp, Stoyan knows the truth about the Bulgarian politician who brands himself as being against corruption, but who is, of course, cruelly corrupt himself.

So *The Shadow Land* is at once a multi-layered mystery story – who was Stoyan Lazarov? why is someone desperate to have the urn? and who might that someone be? – and a literary novel about place, history, art, love, grief and moral compromise.

The moral compromises he has made trouble Stoyan deeply. When he is first arrested by the police and witnesses others being beaten, he recognises 'the long bifurcation that became my life: Obey and hate yourself, survive. Disobey, redeem yourself, perish' (285). However, he refused to obey Momo and tell the Commission that the prisoners were treated well and lived, so perhaps his realisation is not entirely true.

The other 'truth' Stoyan holds close is that he is responsible for a man's death. Here too, we can see that Stoyan's judgement against himself is not wholly justified. Alexandra also feels responsible for a death, and again we can see that Jack's disappearance was not her doing.

*The Shadow Land* also introduces us to (or reacquaints us with) the story of Bulgaria, from liberation from the Ottoman Empire, its time as a monarchy which sided with Germany in the two World Wars, its move to communist rule, and finally its modern history as a chaotic and corrupt democracy. The country's history illuminates the characters' stories, just as their stories bring Bulgaria's history to life.

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**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Is Stoyan as morally compromised as he thinks he is? What choice do you think you would have made in Stoyan's position when Momo offers him the chance to go home? Would you have lied about the camp? Or would you have refused?
2. Neven says that his father was a good man who thought he was bad and that this belief destroyed his life (430). Do you agree that Stoyan's life was destroyed? Or was his survival its own achievement?
3. As he is loaded onto the train, Stoyan understands that he must protect his mind even more than his body. Was it this decision that kept him safe from death? Can willpower be enough in such circumstances?
4. Do Stoyan and Alexandra have reason to feel guilty? Does Stoyan deserve to be punished for what he did, rather than what he did not do as he explains to Baba Yano (211)? Is his rebuilding of her house proper reparation? Is Alexandra's determination to return Stoyan's ashes a similar impulse?
5. Kurilkov styles himself as the Bear. Is he more like the Bear or the Wolf from the Bulgarian tale or neither? Which other characters might be bears or wolves? Why are the bear and the wolf such important motifs throughout the novel (they appear on the urn and possibly in Irina's brooch, for example)?
6. Seeing a memorial to the revolution and thinking of his father and Kurilkov, Neven mutters 'What is the meaning of such suffering?' (457). Is there any possible answer to this question?
7. The novel has four artists as characters – a musician, a poet and two painters (possibly five artists given that Alexandra will become a writer). What does the novel say about the importance and power of art. Stoyan's art helps him through his brutal existence in Zelenets – can art help in the fight against a brutal regime more broadly?
8. Bobby stops to take a photograph of stand-alone doorway in the field saying that 'literature is like that, like a door in a field' (169). Do you agree? In what ways are they similar?
9. Why doesn't Alexandra have any stories to tell when she makes the decision to go to Bulgaria? And how does she find them again to become a writer in her future?
10. Discuss the metaphor of edges and precipices in the novel. For example, Alexandra says: 'Do you ever think—sometimes I have this feeling that we're walking along the edge of a precipice. I mean everyone, all the time.' Bobby agrees (189). As well, Jack possibly disappears over a precipice in the Blue Ridge Mountains; Nasko's house sits on a precipice; men throw themselves or fall over the edge of the quarry in Zelenets.
11. *The Shadow Land* very much shows Bulgaria as a country rather than just a background setting. What sense do you get of the place? Are there parallels between the story of the country and the stories of the novel's characters?
12. The phrase 'shadow land' comes from Alexandra remembering a trip into caves: 'If there were a hell, she thought, it must be cold, like Hades, a land of shadows with this frightening stillness emerging from nowhere' (57). But there are many other types of 'shadow' in the novel – under eyes, as a symbol of death, hiding people and expressions. Discuss shadows and the different meanings of 'shadow land'.
13. What do you make of the relationship between Alexandra and Bobby? Did you share her initial suspicion of him? Is he a stand-in for Jack? Why is he so willing to help her? Why does he call her Bird? At one point he reminds her of herself (169) – why? What makes them, in the end, such close friends?
14. How do Alexandra's experiences in Bulgaria help her recover from her grief?
15. There are moments in the novel where reality shifts into something uncanny: the dog Stoycha shows them the nekrolog; Neven is almost willed into being by Stoyan. Are we meant to understand these events as magical or not? Are the ghosts of the last line real or metaphorical? What are we to make of the many coincidences that occur throughout the novel?
16. Irina tells Alexandra that 'often we don't know the reason for things when they happen' (128). Does that suggest that there is a reason behind seemingly random things happening? How else does the novel suggest this is the case – or the reverse? Why are Alexandra and Neven drawn to each other and are we to understand that they destined to be together?
17. How do the mystery story and literary elements of the novel work together?
18. If you have read Kostova's bestselling debut novel *The Historian* discuss the similarities and differences between the two books.