

Discussion Questions for Kurtis Davidson's *What the Shadow Told Me*

www.KurtisDavidson.com

1. You have been overheard to say, regarding *What the Shadow Told Me*, “This is the greatest book I have ever read. It has changed my life.” Explain.
2. T. Coraghessan Boyle has written that *What the Shadow Told Me* “redefines black humor.” Given that Boyle himself is a black humorist and assuming that *What the Shadow Told Me* “redefines black humor” in the best possible way, Boyle is acknowledging that everything he published prior to June 27, 2002—the date of his comment—is by definition inferior to *What the Shadow Told Me*. Given this, should American readers rise up en masse and demand that Boyle relinquish to Kurtis Davidson every literary honor that he received before that date? And royalties, too? Justify.
3. Much of *What the Shadow Told Me* deals with the world of New York publishing, which is portrayed as obsessed with money at the expense of art. In the novel, for example, Timm Clifton fails to place his masterpiece, *Before Heimlich*, with a New York publisher and must publish in Minneapolis instead. Similarly, in real life, *What the Shadow Told Me* was published not in New York but in Spokane. How can New York publishers be so stupid? Discuss.
4. *What the Shadow Told Me* won the Gold Medal for Best Novel in the 2003 William Faulkner Creative Writing Competition. Is this the same as winning a PEN/Faulkner Award, and, if not, it doesn't matter. Agree.
5. The first edition of *What the Shadow Told Me* is a trade paperback, not a hardcover (see #3 above). This makes it much more difficult to erect book pyramids in the windows of bookstores. How do you think this makes Kurtis Davidson—who have been waiting for their very own book pyramid for as long as they have been writing—feel? What are you willing to do to make them feel better?
6. Readers are often surprised to learn that *What the Shadow Told Me* was written by two people. Kurtis Davidson is the pen name of Kurt Jose Ayau and David Rachels. Thus, Kurt and David must split all royalties for *What the Shadow Told Me*, and each will earn only half as much money as do most writers of comparably successful books. Are readers of *What the Shadow Told Me* therefore obligated to buy two copies each in order to remedy this injustice?
7. If the first several printings of *What the Shadow Told Me* are so successful that a New York publishing house recognizes its error in rejecting the book and acquires the rights from Eastern Washington University Press, would you buy the book again in hardcover at \$29.95? Would you pay more than \$29.95? How much more?

8. *What the Shadow Told Me* contains an extensive critique of consumer-driven Christmas culture. We see this, for example, in the plot of Henry David Monroe's screenplay for *Santa's Bastards*, which "offers a thoughtful critique of the selfish and materialistic excesses of the Christmas season that have alarmed so many Americans these past few decades." Do you share these sentiments about the over-commercialization of Christmas and wish to share this message with those who are close to you? If so, how many friends and relatives do you have who might appreciate receiving a copy of *What the Shadow Told Me* for Christmas?
9. One of the authors of *What the Shadow Told Me* is, to the best of his knowledge, 100% Caucasian-American. The other author is, to the best of his knowledge, 5/16 Caucasian-American, 7/16 Cape Verdean-American, and 4/16 African American. Does this mean that, by the so-called "one-drop rule," the author "Kurtis Davidson" is African American, and, if so, does it follow that Barnes & Noble must shelve copies of *What the Shadow Told Me* in their "African-American Studies" sections *in addition to* their "Fiction & Literature" sections, their "Staff Recommendations" sections, and all over those tables that fill the widest aisles of their stores?
10. If you are an African-American reader, are you offended by the fact that *What the Shadow Told Me*, with a corporate author that is 21/32 white, is mostly about African-American characters? If so, are you willing to spearhead a publicity campaign to get *What the Shadow Told Me* banned anywhere and everywhere possible?
11. If you are *not* an African-American reader, do you have African-American friends who might be offended by the fact that this novel, with a corporate author that is 21/32 white, is mostly about African-American characters? If so, are these friends willing to spearhead a publicity campaign to get *What the Shadow Told Me* banned anywhere and everywhere possible?
12. Are you close personal friends with Oprah? If so, please stop what you are doing right now and call either Kurt or David at (540) 464-7240. You may call collect.
13. Oprah Winfrey is a woman. Most of her viewers are women. Studies have shown that 70% of the novels read in America are read by women. Not coincidentally, the central character of *What the Shadow Told Me*, Justina Patterson, is a woman. In choosing to have a female protagonist, is Kurtis Davidson pandering to this female audience, or are they offering a tribute that the women readers of America should accept and share with as many other women readers as possible?
14. In *What the Shadow Told Me*, Justina Patterson and her husband have a son named Lem. One day Lem will attend college. At present, one year's tuition at a private college costs an average of \$20,082. Assuming no increases in college tuitions over the next fifteen years—which is, of course, an absurd fantasy—Justina and her

husband will spend \$80,328 dollars to send Lem to college—and that’s only tuition! Kurt and David have two children each, their ages ranging from 8 to 11. Assuming (a) that college tuition will rise 10% each year between now and when the 8-year-old graduates from college and (b) that Kurt and David earn 55¢ each for every copy sold of *What the Shadow Told Me*, how many copies must they sell in order to put their children through college?

15. Some might say that *What the Shadow Told Me* is obscene. In fact, National Book Award winner Julia Glass, a woman, has observed that *What the Shadow Told Me* is “obscenely funny.” Considering that the authors both teach at the Virginia Military Institute, a bastion of conservative propriety, are you outraged that two men with filthy minds are teaching the impressionable young, and are you willing to organize a movement to get them fired? Specifically, are you willing to picket VMI and to appear on *Oprah* and *Larry King Live* to mention the title of their book repeatedly while telling how dirty it is?
16. Are you Halle Berry? Would you like to star in the film version of *What the Shadow Told Me*? If so, please stop what you are doing right now and call either Kurt or David at (540) 464-7240. You may call collect, Halle. Please.
17. If you suspect that your answers to any of the previous questions were incorrect, please reread those questions and change your answers.
18. The ISBN of *What the Shadow Told Me* is 1-59766-002-7. Discuss what sort of mnemonic device would be most helpful in memorizing this number. Memorize.