

THE WORLDS OF  
MARGARET PETERSON  
**HADDIX**

A GUIDE TO THE MISSING AND THE SHADOW CHILDREN SERIES



# Discussion Guide for The Shadow Children Series

Available in paperback



## ABOUT THE BOOKS

Imagine living in the shadows, hiding your existence from almost everyone in the world. This is the plight of Jen, Trey, Nina, and all other third-born children. With their nation plagued by drought and food shortages, their government has made it illegal for families to have more than two children. Yet thousands of thirds exist without identification cards or rights of any kind. As these shadow children begin to discover and communicate with each other, their worldviews broaden. They begin to wonder why their government claims that they are the cause of all of their nation's ills, and they question the worth of their leaders themselves. Fearfully, unwittingly, or angrily, these secret children emerge from the shadows to fight for change.

The seven Shadow Children novels are told from the viewpoints of Luke, the beloved third son of a rural family; Matthias, the abandoned urban orphan raised by elderly moralist Samuel; and other third children. Their narratives offer readers differing perspectives on the compelling questions explored in the series. Should the government have the right to dictate the size of families or other aspects of how people choose to live their lives? In an age of televised news, how can one be certain what is really happening in the world and what is illusion—who is telling the truth and who isn't? Can individual actions truly affect the future of a nation? And, ultimately, what does it mean to live in freedom?

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Why do you think some families decided to have third children despite their society's desperate circumstances and strict laws? Do you think that the benefits of having another child would outweigh the sacrifices that must be made? Why or why not?
- Each third child comes from a different background and type of hiding place. How are these children treated by the people who care for them and hide them? How do they feel about their circumstances? How do these feelings affect their actions?
- How does the government enforce its rules? Do you think its plan for dealing with the low food supply is a good one? Is it justified? Must governments limit individual freedoms to protect their citizens as a group? Is this the case in your own country?
- To come out of hiding, shadow children must assume false identities. How would you feel if you had to live under an assumed name, denying your relationship to your family? Which shadow child's feelings about this situation are most like your own and why?
- Are the shadow children in more danger when they are hidden or when they venture out into the larger, more complicated world? In what ways do you think this would be a difficult transition to make? Would you feel safer or less safe out in the world?
- Shadow children are often uncertain whether people are their friends or their enemies. Cite examples when third children question the loyalties of Mr. Talbot, Smits, Oscar, and even members of the Population Police Force. Is trust as difficult in your world?
- A critical challenge faced by each shadow child is the sense that one individual cannot make a difference. When do Luke, Nina, Trey, and Matthias express this sense? Are they correct? What is the relationship between this feeling and the leadership roles these children ultimately take on?

- How do different characters contribute to the fight for the freedom of the shadow children? How effective is Jen’s rally? Does Luke help the cause when he joins the Grant family of Barons? Can Trey’s fear be a type of courage? How do Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, Mr. Hendricks, and even Philip Twinings help the fight?
- It becomes increasingly clear that the government is misinforming its citizens. What lies are told on the public television channels? How is the information on the Baron channels different? What roles do television and the Internet play in the novels?
- Why do you think the government is, in a sense, framing the shadow children for the nation’s problems? Whom do you think the starving population would be angry with if they did not have the shadow children to blame for their hunger?
- In what ways does hunger affect different characters and their actions? If your family were hungry, would you have joined the Population Police? Why or why not?
- When Aldous Krakenaur and the Population Police are defeated in the final book, are the third children truly safe? What does Luke do to expose Oscar? Why does Nina feel that only a third child could have stopped Oscar?
- What kind of government do you think—or hope—the shadow children will help to create? How does Luke imagine the future? Do you think it will be perfect? Do you think it will be better? Explain your answer.

## QUOTATIONS TO DISCUSS

- *Among the Hidden* begins with Luke musing: “I will never be allowed outside again. Maybe never again as long as I live.” What might you do if you were facing your final moments outside? How does this passage affect your understanding of the series?
- Jen tries to persuade Luke to join the rally, saying, “You’ve got to come, Luke, or you’ll hate yourself the rest of your life. When you don’t have to hide anymore, even years from now, there’ll always be some small part of you whispering, ‘I don’t deserve this. I didn’t fight for it. I’m not worth it.’ But you are, Luke, you are.” List three ways Jen’s words are important. How is Jen, who dies, a key character throughout the series? Compare and contrast the characters of Jen and Samuel as moral thinkers and leaders.
- Near the end of *Among the Impostors*, Mr. Hendricks explains that, “The Population Police can lie too...It suits the government’s purposes to say they are arresting third children rather than traitors.” Why might this be better for the government’s purposes? Are third children the real cause of the nation’s troubles?
- *Among the Betrayed* opens with Nina’s thought that “...like the bogeyman and the Big Bad Wolf and the Wicked Witch and the creep-show monster, the Population Police belonged in stories and nightmares, not real life.” What makes these rebellious thoughts? What makes these brave thoughts?
- In Chapter 29 of *Among the Barons*, “Luke remembered a quote from one of his history books: ‘The king is dead, long live the king.’” How do Luke’s experiences help him understand these words spoken upon the death of France’s Kings? Is the transfer of power in Luke’s world really this clear? How might this quote be understood in terms of the way leadership changes hands in your country?
- In Chapter 21 of *Among the Brave*, Luke’s brother, Mark, compliments Trey on being braver than him. As Trey responds, he realizes, “People are brave in different ways.” Explain this quote in terms of the different types of bravery depicted in the series.
- In Chapter 19 of *Among the Enemy*, Matthias wonders why he could save a Population Police officer, then fight against him. “It had to do with Samuel telling him, over and over again, ‘Killing is wrong.’ Even...back in the cabin, Matthias hadn’t wanted to be an accomplice to any more murder.” How does the memory of Samuel affect Matthias’s thoughts and actions? How do Samuel’s words affect your understanding of the relationship between third children and their government?
- At the end of Chapter 8 in *Among the Free*, Luke asks a boy about his loyalties. “‘Which side am I on?’ [the boy] repeated. ‘What do you think? Whatever side feeds me—that’s the one for me.’” Luke later muses, “Shouldn’t the enemies of my enemies be my friends?” Discuss loyalty in terms of these two quotations. Could you ever be driven to think like the hungry boy? Why or why not? How would you respond to Luke’s circular question about the enemies of his enemies?

## WRITING AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

### Hiding

- The premise of the Shadow Children series is that third children must live in hiding, pretending not to exist. Imagine you are a third child. Write three to five journal entries describing your life, how you feel about it, and your dreams, if any, for the future.

- Margaret Peterson Haddix calls these novels the “Shadow Children” series. What other words, such as *hidden* or *forbidden*, describe third children? Look up “shadow” in the dictionary. Based on these exercises, write a short essay explaining why “shadow” is, or is not, the best word to use in the series title. If not, what series title would you suggest?
- Make a “top ten” list of reasons people join the Population Police. Then, in the character of one of those of people, write a speech explaining to the Population Police why you have come to join them. Read your speech aloud to classmates.
- In the final book, Luke balks at being interviewed on camera, stating that if he is free then he has the right to say nothing. Why does Luke say this? Role-play this scene, having one classmate act as the interviewer while others play liberated citizens. You may also want to role-play the scene in which citizens begin to testify against third children once again. Discuss ways in which these role-plays are similar and/or different.

## Population

- The world’s six billionth child was born in 1999, and our population continues to grow. A growing population poses risks to the planet. Imagine you have just been told that you are child number six billion. Write a journal entry describing how you feel about this fact.
- The world’s three most populous countries are China, India, and the United States. Research how population growth has been handled in one of these countries. Compare and contrast the different population changes and policies with the research of other classmates or friends. Have the policies been successful? What positive and negative effects might these policies have in the future? (Hint: Excellent data is available on the Population Reference Bureau website: [Prb.org](http://Prb.org).)

## Food and Hunger

- Luke’s family lives on a farm, and he is very interested in gardening and hydroponics, the growing of plants in a nutrient-rich water rather than soil. Learn more about these disciplines by trying to grow some vegetables of your own or trying your hand at hydroponics.
- The people of the Shadow Children world sometimes act against their moral senses because they are starving. What does it mean to be hungry? Write a paragraph describing how your stomach, limbs, and mind feel when you have missed a meal. Compare this to an encyclopedia definition of starvation. Based on these observations and facts, write a defense of the starving people’s bad acts.
- How do we deal with hunger and famine in our modern world? Research the policies that different countries have for dealing with hunger both at home and abroad. Stage a debate, with each person advocating a different approach, and see if you can reach a consensus about which methods are the most effective.

## Governments and Control

- Are these novels about a strong government preventing famine through limiting population? Or are they about a failing government attempting to keep control despite the famine by blaming third children for the entire population’s hunger? Write a paragraph explaining which of the above sentences best describes the crisis of the Shadow Children series and why.
- Research the population control efforts of the Chinese government, the vilification of the Jewish people by the Nazis in World War II, or the racial hierarchy established between the Hutu and Tutsi people in Rwanda. Present an informative poster based on your research to friends and classmates. Discuss the ways in which each of these governments resembles the actions of the Shadow Children government. Then, if desired, write a paragraph stating which real-life situation you think is most similar to the series and why.
- To promote the idea that third children are villains, the government feeds the population propaganda through television and posters. Find the dictionary definition of propaganda. Look for examples of propaganda in the novels. Then create your own propaganda poster defending or blaming third children for the troubles of their nation.
- Luke and his friends ultimately have the opportunity to help create a new government. With classmates or friends, brainstorm a list of rules, regulations, and freedoms for the new government you would create for the Shadow Children. Or you and your classmates can each draft a new constitution for the Shadow Children to present to your class. Vote on the best constitution.
- What does it mean to be free? Hold a Freedom Day at your school or classroom. Learn about celebrations of freedom across time and cultures. Write an essay, poem, or song lyrics; create a sculpture, drawing, or collage; or improvise a dance or a play showing what freedom means to you.

*This guide was written by Edward T. Sullivan, a librarian and writer.*

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