book on the beach

■ Matthew Hunt

The Shadow of the Wind

by Carlos Ruiz Zafon

Daniel Sempere, a ten-year-old Spanish boy, lives with his father above a bookshop in Barcelona. Daniel's mother had died in 1939, when he was only four.

The Shadow of the Wind is Daniel's story, though it is also the story of Julian Carax. It begins in 1945, when Daniel is taken by his father to visit the Cemetery of Forgotten books, an enormous library hidden from the city, a secret repository for exceedingly rare books. According to the rules established by the founders of this hidden maze of forgotten texts, anyone who visits it for the first time must choose one book to take away with them and treasure.

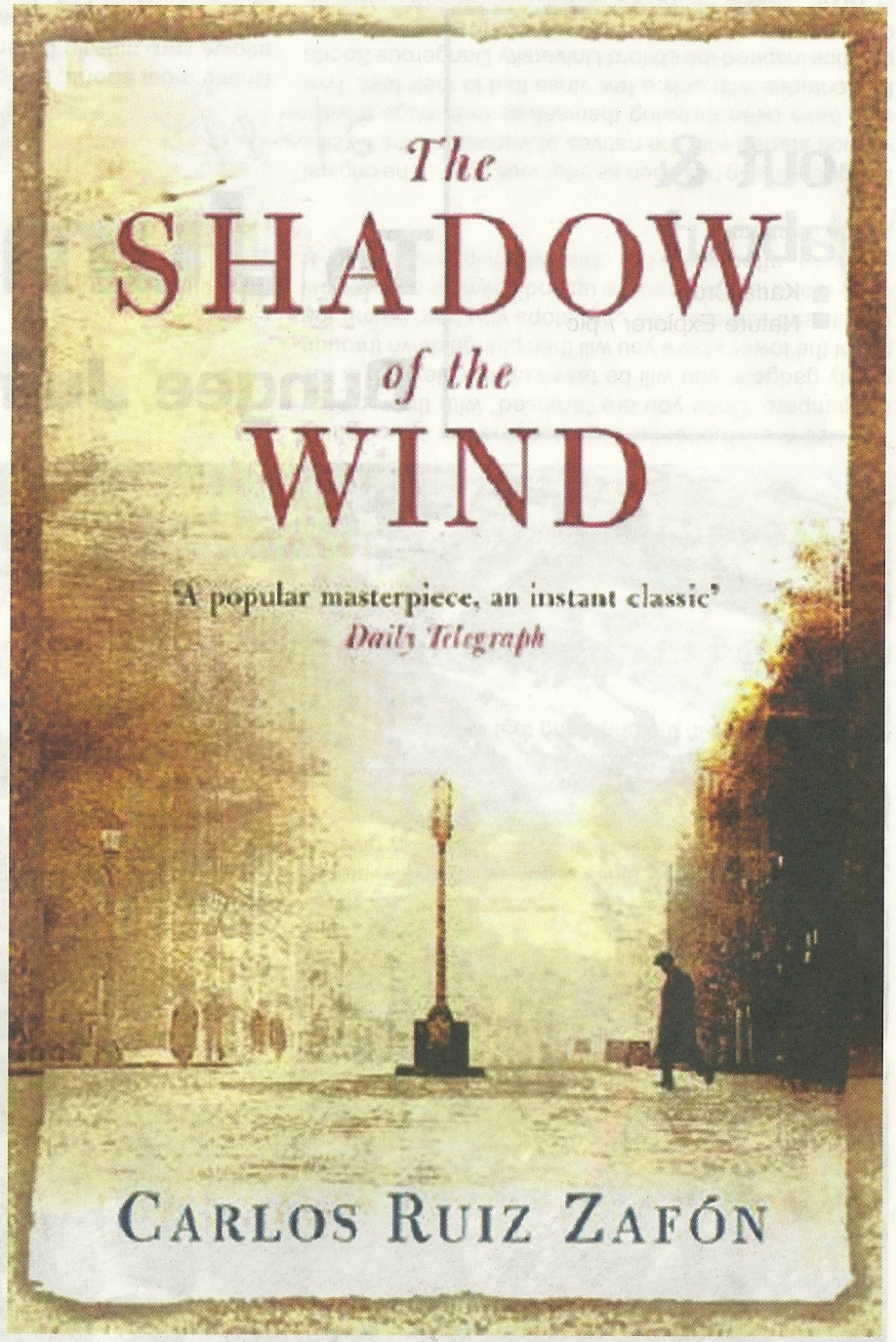
Daniel wanders amongst the labyrinthine bookshelves, and finds himself mysteriously drawn to one volume in particular - ***The Shadow of the Wind***, by Julian Carax. Daniel has never heard of the author before, though he feels that destiny has brought the book to him for some reason he does not understand. He is determined to discover all he can about the life of Julian Carax, and the novel is his own account of his increasingly frantic investigations. So, Carlos Ruiz Zafon's novel is about Julian Carax's novel – and they both have the same title.

Obsession with a mysterious, life-changing book is hardly a new concept for a story, though Zafon's novel becomes increasingly surprising and original as it progresses.

The Thai film Citizen Dog, last year, was the latest in a long line of novels and films employing the very same device. In Citizen Dog, a maid discovers a book written in a language she cannot read, and clings to the hope that once she discovers the book's message it will lead her life in a new direction.

Daniel Sempere's fascination with his book is sparked by a curiosity about its author, though the more he delves into Julian Carax's past, the more his own life is changed.

The initial chapters, describing the wonderful, atmospheric Cemetery of Forgotten Books, and Daniel's optimistic curiosity about the book he has taken, are a bibliophile's delight - if you like scouring dusty second-hand bookshops for undiscovered rarities, you will enjoy ***The Shadow of the Wind***.



With its labyrinths of bookshelves it evokes the Spanish-language short stories of Jorge Luis Borges, and Borges's tale of a man who finds a unique encyclopedia with an entry on a non-existent country has parallels with Zafon's story of Daniel Sempere and the equally unusual book he discovers. ***The Shadow of the Wind*** being the title of both Zafon's novel and the novel that Daniel finds is another Borgesian touch.

dark as he is – sometimes literally, as he secretly explores abandoned buildings, old cellars, and gothic mansions.

The plot becomes more and more complicated, and Zafon sometimes deliberately indirects us, though the whole truth is revealed in due course.

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Zafon's novel is written largely in the first person, as if narrated by Daniel Sempere himself, though it also includes long passages from Carax's novel and a 100-page letter written to Daniel by one of Carax's associates. We soon discover that the lives of Daniel and Carax are remarkably similar, and these parallel events - coupled with the narrative shifting between Zafon, Daniel, and Carax amplify the similarities between the two characters.

As Daniel meets more of the people Carax knew, his impression of the author changes. Carax becomes a somewhat sinister figure, always spoken of though seldom seen. (Think of Harry Lime in The Third Man, or Kurtz in Hearts Of Darkness/Apocalypse Now.) The people in the story of Carax's life are all full of loneliness, and some are also full of bitter vengeance.

Daniel tracks all of these people down, and as he meets each one Zafon gives us a long account of their past. Indeed, even when Daniel visits a building for the first time, we are treated to an extensive history of it. These details add atmosphere to the novel, though they also slightly detract from the otherwise gripping narrative.

Unraveling the truth of Julian Carax's life is no easy task, as everything Daniel is told becomes increasingly contradictory. As the novel is narrated by Daniel himself, we are as in the

The whole novel seems to be infused with death. Daniel discovers Carax's novel in a place called the Cemetery of Forgotten Books, a place where books come to die.

Carax's associates all seem to be waiting to die, too, and many of the places Daniel visits are described as resembling gothic tombs. This morbid atmosphere, and the sometimes heartbreaking sadness of the characters, is offset by a series of intense love affairs, though Daniel's (admittedly adolescent) feelings of eternal love at first sight are sometimes overly melodramatic.

More than anything, though, ***The Shadow of the Wind*** is a captivating thriller. We are caught up in friendships made and lost, old scores settled, the determination of a brutal police officer (who personifies the Fascist regime of the period), the pursuit of Daniel by more than one sinister character, and the revelation of secrets kept literally locked away for years. The Spanish-language original (La Sombra Del Viento) was a best-seller in Spain in 2001, and has been translated into English by Lucia Graves. It is Carlos Ruiz Zafon's first adult novel, though he has previously written several books for children. One of these is a story about a haunted house, a subject very similar to the sinister and exciting atmosphere of ***The Shadow of the Wind***.

The Shadow of the Wind is available at Asia Books.

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