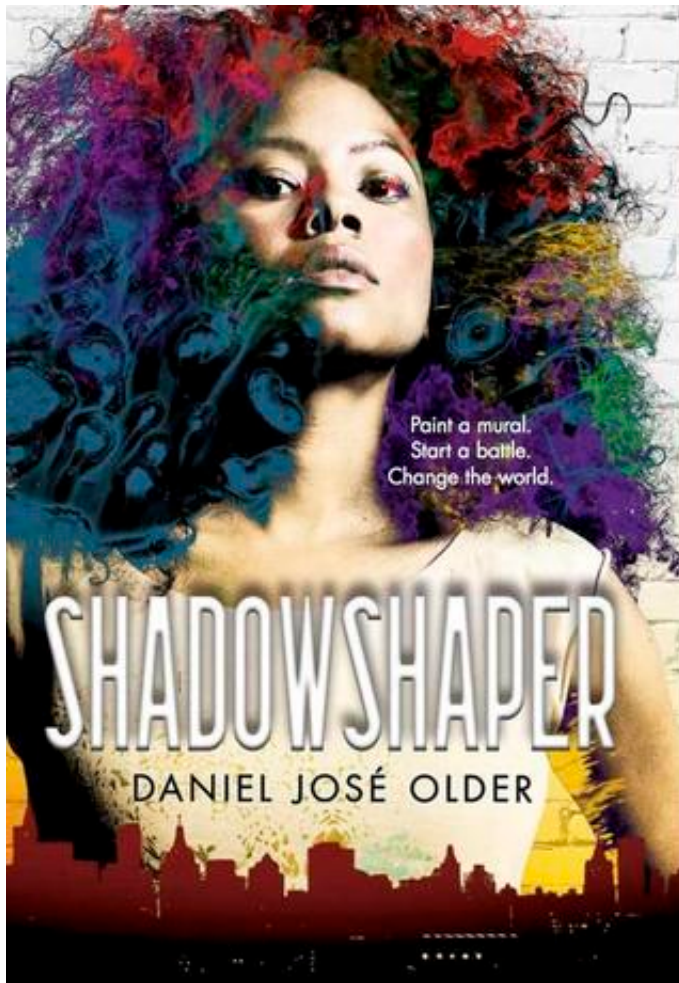


Review: *Shadowshaper* by Daniel Jose Older



After a long hiatus, I return with a review of *Shadowshaper* by Daniel José Older. This urban fantasy novel is the story of Sierra Santiago, a young artist who lives in Brooklyn with her mother and grandfather (who is permanently disabled from a stroke). When strange things start happening in Sierra's neighborhood -- murals start crying, her grandfather mutters strange warnings, a dead man attacks her at a party -- she knows her family is hiding something from her and is determined to discover what it is. As she uncovers the mystery, she, along with the reader, is swept into a world of beautiful and frightening magic known as shadowshaping.

Shadowshaping is the act of channeling spirits into art to give them physical form. Sierra befriends a young man named Robbie, a fellow artist and shadowshaper who teaches her about the magic and eventually helps her master her own powers, which have been hidden from her all her life by her mother and grandfather. Together, they set out to stop Dr. Jonathan Wick, a power hungry anthropology professor who is hunting down and murdering the shadowshapers in order to steal

Sierra's family's legacy for himself.

I've been an avid fantasy reader most of my life, but this was the first fantasy book I read with a canonically non-white protagonist. Sierra is biracial, being of Puerto Rican and African heritage. She is insecure about her appearance due to the bigotry she faces -- her Aunt Rosa is deeply racist and derides Sierra's "wild, nappy" hair, and Sierra herself describes her skin as being the color of "coffee with not enough milk". More than that, she feels that she, as a person, is not enough, which isn't helped when she finds out that her grandfather hid her powers from her for sexist reasons while he willingly told her older brother about shadowshaping. But she doesn't allow her insecurities or other people's bigotry to interfere with her mission, and it's truly satisfying to see her embrace her powers and defeat Wick.

Wick, notably, is the only white character in the main cast. His goal of "saving" the shadowshaper legacy from Sierra's family and claiming it for himself is very relevant to real life. Robbie and the other shadowshapers we meet are all people of color, as are Sierra's friends, two of whom are also lesbians. Robbie isn't quite as well fleshed out as Sierra, but as a dark-skinned black man with dreadlocks, he also faces bigotry due to his appearance, allowing them to bond over similar experiences as well as their shadowshaping powers. Their relationship has a clear romantic subtext, but there's never a danger of it taking the spotlight away from Sierra's quest to discover (and later to reclaim) her family legacy, and refreshingly, the climax has Sierra saving Robbie from Wick.

Sierra's friends Bennie, Izzy and Tee are rather flat characters, which is my only real complaint about this book. While it's commendable that Older treats Izzy and Tee's relationship as completely normal -- no one questions the presence of two lesbians in Sierra's group of friends -- I sometimes had trouble distinguishing between them. Bennie, who is stated to be Sierra's closest friend, also has few distinct personality traits of her own.

With its strong and relatable female protagonist, complex and intriguing mythology, and powerful commentary on racism and sexism, *Shadowshaper* is a memorable and enjoyable read for both teens and adults. I look forward to seeing what this author comes up with next.

Rating: 4.5 out of 5 stars