



# Readers' Guide



## The Shadow King

### Maaza Mengiste

Canongate Books

Other novels by Maaza Mengiste  
*Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010)

[thebookerprizes.com](http://thebookerprizes.com)

## About the author

Maaza Mengiste was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in March, 1971. A Fulbright Scholar and professor in the MFA in Creative Writing & Literary Translation programme at Queens College, she is the author of *The Shadow King* and *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, named one of the Guardian's Ten Best Contemporary African Books. Her work can be found in the *New Yorker*, *Granta*, and the *New York Times*, among other publications. She lives in New York City.

## About the book

Ethiopia, 1935. With the threat of Mussolini's army looming, recently orphaned Hirut struggles to adapt to her new life as a maid. Her employer, Kidane, an officer in Emperor Haile Selassie's army, rushes to mobilise his strongest men before the Italians invade.

When the Emperor goes into exile and Ethiopia loses hope, it is Hirut who offers a plan to maintain morale. She helps disguise a gentle peasant as the emperor and soon becomes his guard, but how could she have predicted her own personal war, still to come, as a prisoner of one of Italy's most vicious officers?

*The Shadow King* casts light on the women soldiers written out of African and European history. It is a captivating exploration of female power, and what it means to be a woman at war.

## What the judges thought

'*The Shadow King* is a meticulously researched and lyrical novel, a beautifully constructed historical fiction of women in war. We were drawn into the story of Hirut, the lead character who has, until now, never been heard. It is a brave, noble, gripping book that would not have been written at any other point in history.'

## Discussion points

Stories of war often focus on the experiences of men. How are women shown to be central in the story that *The Shadow King* tells?

What role does Effere Navarra play in the novel?

How important are memories, both documented and undocumented?

How did you feel reading about the violence many women endured?

## Themed reading

*Adua* by Igiaba Scego

*The Wife's Tale* by Aida Edemariam

*Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese

*Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini

## Useful links

<http://maazamengiste.com/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/18/the-shadow-king-by-maaza-mengiste-review>

<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/25/763907282/the-shadow-king-is-a-gorgeous-meditation-on-memory-war-and-violence>

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-body-is-a-battlefield-on-maaza-mengistes-the-shadow-king/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/29/homer-alexievich-top-10-books-about-the-human-cost-of-war-the-shadow-king-maaza-mengiste>

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