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THE SHADOW MAN

By John Katzenbach

Ballantine Books. 468 pp.

Even as we tour Washington's Holocaust Museum, standing in the boxcars that herded millions to the camps, seeing the tattered empty shoes of the victims, studying models of the crematoria and watching propaganda films equating Jews with sewer rats, something that entitles us to feel part of the civilized community blocks our understanding.

How, we wonder, could minds work this way? How could anyone, let alone so many, contain all the perversity we associate with the kommandant, the propaganda minister or the camp guard?

Yet, at the opening of John Katzenbach's chilling fifth novel, Sophie Millstein, who had survived the Nazis a half century before, steps out of a Miami Beach mall and sees someone even worse. *Der Schattenmann*, *The Shadow Man*, Sophie knows it is him.

Terrified, she runs to her neighbor, retired homicide detective Simon Winter, begging for help. She has seen the worst of "the catchers."

What on earth, Winter asks, were the catchers?

"Jews like us, Mr. Winter," she answers. "Jews that worked for the Gestapo." Working for Berlin's Jewish Bureau of Investigation, the catchers kept an unsteady toehold on freedom by searching out fellow Jews in hiding, then informing the Gestapo. In 1943, Sophie, then 16, and her family hid in constant terror in Berlin: "I used to lie in bed, unable to sleep, praying that some British bomber would drop its load short, right on top of all of us, and so we could all go together and end all the fear."

It didn't work out that way. The Shadow Man found them. The woman who hid them was slaughtered on the spot, and all of Sophie's family died in Auschwitz, all but Sophie. Of all the catchers, The Shadow Man was the worst, she says, "Because it was said that he enjoyed what he was doing, and because he was so good at it."

His was a face she could never forget, and she is certain it was that face she saw outside the mall. She begs for Winter's help. It comes too late. The next morning, Sophie is found strangled on her bed.

Telling other survivors about what Sophie thought she'd seen, Winter wonders why The Shadow Man would have come to Miami Beach with its large population of Holocaust survivors.

The answer, suggests one, is obvious: "Der Schattenman was not a Nazi!... He was a Jew, like all of us! There was no Odessa organization or Iron Cross group to help him find freedom and safety after the war!... He would need to become one of us. A survivor." But he would also need to kill anyone who might recognize him, and there are many.

Tracking down a Gestapo-trained killer with superhuman stealth and cunning is a large task for the aging Winter. Fortunately, he has help. There's Miami Beach homicide detective Walter Robinson, a tenacious young African-American quick to empathize with a hunted minority. And there's his eventual love interest, Esperanza "Espy" Martinez, the assistant state attorney with spunk, a gun, and just a dim idea how to use it.

Still young enough to know all the answers, Robinson and Martinez sail after some red herrings in the wake of Sophie's murder before sage veteran Winter steers them onto the right course, but their treks around the underbelly of nighttime Miami provide some of the novel's most vivid scenes. For this is Katzenbach's turf, the former crime reporter for the Miami Herald. And Miami is fertile crime writer territory, which is why flourishing South Florida crime novelists like James Hall, Les Standiford, Paul Levine, Edna Buchanan and Carl Hiaasen have fixed this city of the tawny shoulders on the moral map somewhere between Sodom and Gomorrah.

Yet even the vilest of Robinson's suspects is a choir boy beside the true killer, as Katzenbach graphically demonstrates by how viciously The Shadow Man murders an initial suspect.

As the nets tighten—The Shadow Man's around his remaining victims, the good guys' around The Shadow Man—Katzenbach manages to sustain the taut suspense requisite to the thriller genre. Along with the novel's clever yet credible premise, that suspense makes this book obvious Hollywood material and helps it rise above its several flaws.

Among those flaws is that—except for Winter, Robinson and Martinez—Katzenbach's characters seem made of *papier mache*. Their dialogue sometimes slips into a wooden clunkiness. Peeks into their thoughts often prove too predictable to justify the space. Katzenbach has a grating addiction to archaisms like "amongst" and at times he states as a perceptive nuance what is merely a redundancy: "He had the feeling that he was entering in the midst of an argument that had been going on for weeks, which he suspected was precisely the case."

Balancing these slips, however, are marks of careful craftsmanship: the thematic echo of racism as Espy ponders her parents' prejudiced response to her black lover; details about the Nazis' obsessive record-keeping, ignorant, as was at least one U.S. President, that documents garnered for fame can instead chronicle infamy; and, most intriguing, Winter's struggle to understand The Shadow Man's mind, reminding us that failure to comprehend even the most aberrant thought process might doom us to again become its victim. For, as columnist Jeff Jacoby recently argued so poignantly in the Globe's pages, it was a quick and easy step for the land of Bach to become the land of Buchenwald, a catastrophic transformation impossible to forget, but not impossible to repeat.