

IN THE SHADOW OF BLACKBIRDS | *Discussion Questions*



In 1918, the world seems on the verge of apocalypse. Americans roam the streets in gauze masks to ward off the deadly Spanish influenza, and the government ships young men to the front lines of a brutal war, creating an atmosphere of fear and confusion. Sixteen-year-old Mary Shelley Black watches as desperate mourners flock to séances and spirit photographers for comfort, but she herself has never believed in ghosts. During her bleakest moment, however, she's forced to rethink her entire way of looking at life and death, for her first love—a boy who died in battle—returns in spirit form. But what does he want from her? Featuring haunting archival early-twentieth-century photographs, this is a tense, romantic story set in a past that is eerily like our own time.

1. Mary Shelley Black describes 1918 as “a year the devil designed.” What was your knowledge of 1918 history before reading *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*?
2. Aunt Eva goes to great lengths to protect both herself and Mary Shelley from the 1918 flu. What would you have done to protect yourself from the “Spanish influenza”? Which modern health trends do you believe will be looked upon as odd or excessive in the future?
3. Archival photographs and illustrations appear throughout the novel. How do these images enhance Mary Shelley’s descriptions of the time period?
4. Mary Shelley and Stephen’s time together is shown through letters, flashbacks, and even spirit communication. How does their relationship compare to that of couples in more traditional love stories? How does it differ?
5. In his letter from jail, Mary Shelley’s father writes, “We have a great deal of fight inside us, and sometimes our strength of spirit forces us to choose truth and integrity over comfort and security.” Have you ever had to make a decision that didn’t feel safe, but you believed it to be right?
6. Mary Shelley is initially skeptical of Julius’s spirit photography, and ghosts in general, until Stephen appears. Have you ever had a paranormal experience? How did your own view of ghosts influence your reading of the novel?
7. Stephen says of his brother’s photography customers, “I hate seeing people so desperate for proof of the after-life they’ll sacrifice just about anything to communicate with the dead.” What modern-day scams compare to Julius’s practice of convincing mourners he’s photographing spirits?
8. What impact do the young men from the Red Cross House have on Mary Shelley? How do they help her understand both her father and Stephen?
9. Most every character in the novel has his or her bravery tested. What does it mean to be brave? What do you feel was Mary Shelley’s bravest moment?
10. How was the ending of the novel similar to your predictions about the conclusion? How was it different?
11. In Stephen’s letter that’s tucked inside the picture frame, he includes a postscript referring to Mary Shelly’s originality. How do you define originality? How do you exhibit originality?
12. How will Mary Shelley “come back fighting?” What do you think she will do with her life? How will her experiences in the novel affect her future actions?

