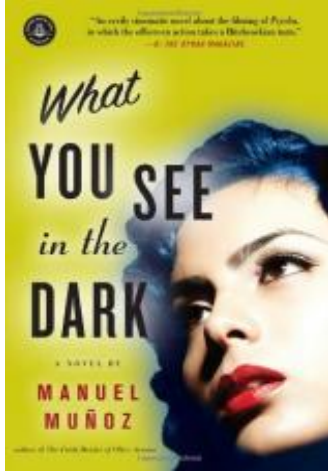


# What You See in the Dark

by Manuel Muñoz



## About the Book

Desire turns deadly in the small, dusty town of Bakersfield, CA circa 1959, with the arrival of a legendary director scouting locations for a film about madness and murder at a roadside motel. Though the story unfolds in much the same way that Hitchcock made *Psycho* ? frame by frame, in camera pans, zooms, and close-ups ? **What You See In the Dark** takes readers into places no cameras can ever go, venturing into characters' petty jealousies, private thoughts, and unrealized dreams.

Following the intimate perspectives of four women ? Teresa Garza, the young aspiring singer who works at a shoe store; Candy, the envious co-worker who covets Teresa's boyfriend, Dan; Arlene Watson, Dan's mother, head waitress at the local diner and owner of the roadside motel; and the Actress (read: Janet Leigh), preparing the role that will come to define her ? Muñoz perceptively explores the shadowy dynamics of small town America and the dark side of the American dream.

This finely wrought novel is a masterpiece of tone and an unflinching examination of our fascination with violence, on-screen and off.

## Discussion Guide

1. Many books begin with an epigraph that sets a particular tone or introduces a theme. What does the epigraph by the poet Ai suggest to you about the novel's larger concerns?

2. Most novels typically begin with first- or third-person narration. **What You See in the Dark** is mostly narrated in third person, but it begins in second person with a "you" who is later revealed to be Candy, Teresa's coworker at the shoe store. Why do you think the novel opened and closed with this point of view? What might have been different about the novel if it had opened or closed with third-person narration?
3. Why do you suppose the author referred to Janet Leigh and Alfred Hitchcock as "the Actress" and "the Director," rather than using their real names? Are there other instances in the novel in which people are addressed or referred to using pronouns rather than just their names?
4. Chapters 3 and 4 both begin with the same construction: "Around town, she was known as." What might this construction be saying about recurrences in the novel? Are there other moments when events or phrases are echoed? Do they have anything in common?
5. Though readers already know what has happened to Teresa, chapter 4 details how she met Dan and how she made a choice to pursue him over her more loyal and persistent suitor, Cheno. Discuss why you think the novel delayed this introduction and what effect it had on the characterization of Teresa.
6. In the diner scene in chapter 5, the Actress touches the hand of Carter, the driver, who returns the gesture with a "light, downward feather of a touch, just once" (page 99) before bringing up his wife in conversation. What do you think is happening in this scene? Is the Actress just testing out her new role? Or is there an attraction between them?
7. Why do you think Teresa steals the boots from the storeroom?
8. Part 2 begins with Dan's rush to leave town. Arlene is the central figure in that chapter, and she often thinks about her ex-husband Frederick and her long-lost brother. In the course of so much intense drama surrounding Dan's getaway, why does the chapter bring up those other two men so often? Discuss what this does to shape the character of Arlene.
9. The famous Psycho shower scene is broken down, frame by frame, to close out part 2. How different is the effect on the page than on the screen? Why do you think the author chose this particular moment for the Actress's last appearance in the novel?
10. "Things change, but she wasn't ever going to" (page 214). Describe Arlene's epiphany at the close of this novel. Is she really the central figure? Does she stand in as a parallel for Mrs. Bates in the film Psycho, or is she an entirely different character?
11. Chapter 11 is the only one with a man at the center: it's Alfred Hitchcock returning from the Cannes Film Festival, and the film described is Frenzy. Discuss why the novel waits until then to showcase the Director. Why is the Director so troubled by the fact that he has been unable to produce a work comparable to Psycho?
12. Candy ends up marrying Cal, which also means she will no longer be privy to the gossip traded at the shoe store. Discuss why the novel features Candy so vividly imagining the murder of Teresa. Is Candy obsessed with the murder? What is the novel saying about our willingness and desire to witness such horrific scenes of violence? Is it a satisfying ending in this regard?

## Author Bio

Manuel Muñoz is the author of two short story collections, the most recent of which, **The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue**, was a finalist for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Currently teaching creative writing at the University of Arizona in Tucson, he is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts literature fellowship and, in 2008, was awarded the prestigious Whiting Writers' Award.

## Critical Praise

"Manuel Muñoz has written a novel that is gripping to read and illuminating in what it says. **What You See In the Dark** begins with a sweet romance and a dark surprise as it traces the winding path of violence in our dreamy American longings. How beautifully the pieces of this book fit together, and how radiantly original it is."

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