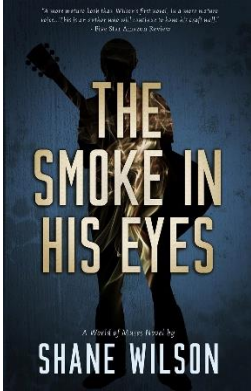


Reading Group Guide

The Smoke in His Eyes

by Shane Wilson



About the Book

When TJ—a musical prodigy—witnesses a traumatic event as a child, his senses are overrun with intense hallucinations. Over the years, his visions increase in frequency and intensity, but he hides them from those he is closest to, including his best friend and musical partner, Lila, who challenges TJ to reject formulaic creation in order to create something beautiful and unique. But when Lila signs a record deal, TJ feels left behind and alone with his art and his visions.

That's when TJ meets an artist named Muna. In his eyes and visions, Muna is made of smoke, and as this magical woman helps him learn how to manage his visions and how to translate what he sees and hears into music and lyrics, she begins to disappear. His journey into Muna's past is a journey to discover where inspiration originates and what happens to an artist when that inspiration is gone.

Discussion Guide

1. What specific trauma does TJ endure as a child? How does that trauma affect his childhood? How does it affect him as a young adult? How does it strain his relationships?
2. How would you describe TJ's relationship with Jenny, the babysitter? How does that relationship change as a result of his trauma? How does his relationship with Jenny change throughout the narrative?
3. What role does music play in TJ's life? What drives him to make music?
4. What role does music play in Lila's life? What drives her to make music?
5. Do the motivations of TJ and Lila change during the narrative? Why?

6. Do you think that TJ's return to his hometown to attend his mother's funeral was a good decision? Was his visit productive? How so? If you think his visit was more harmful to his mental health than helpful, why do you think so?
7. How does Lila's childhood and upbringing influence her decisions and aspirations?
8. At many different points in their collaborative relationship, TJ and Lila struggle with how they feel for one another. At times, TJ seems to love Lila romantically. At other times, Lila seems to be in love with TJ. At other times, their relationship seems purely plutonic while at other times it seems purely physical in nature. How do you explain these shifts? Why do you think Lila, ultimately, refuses to consider TJ a viable, romantic partner?
9. Muna, who is made of smoke, is a living, breathing metaphor. What does she represent?
10. Much of the narrative deals with complications in personal relationships that stem from artistic collaboration. The real world is full of examples of the same phenomenon. Why do you think collaborative relationships so often evolve into more intimate/ romantic relationships?
11. How, in your opinion, does Jenny end up married to TJ's father?
12. TJ spends most of the narrative chasing a song—the song that he (and Muna) believes he was put on earth to write. Do you believe that art is a calling? That something moves us to create? Do you believe this pursuit of one perfect and honest piece of art is a worthwhile endeavor? Why? Why not?
13. How would you describe Lila's relationship with Perry? Why do you think she remains in a romantic relationship with him for as long as she does?
14. How would you describe Lila's relationships with her bandmates—Tina and Nicki? What does Lila learn/ gain from having Tina and Nicki in her life?
15. Ms. Grave's School for the Muses is a physical representation for the place where inspiration originates. It also provides a contemporary mythology for where the Muses—people who provide inspiration, in this case—originate. Where does the compulsion to create come from in your opinion? Why do some have it while others do not?
16. Where does the compulsion to share our creations originate?
17. In your opinion, what should be the goal of artistic creation?
18. Do you believe that Lila and TJ's reunion will stick? Have they grown enough to be great friends and collaborators again? Cite your evidence.