

# Anita Shreve

**Thrillers,  
emotional dramas,  
ordinary people,  
extraordinary choices.**

**C'mon, you know you  
like that stuff.**

BY JESSICA TEISCH

**I**N BEST-SELLING AUTHOR ANITA SHREVE'S NEWEST NOVEL, *Testimony* (reviewed below), a small New England community deals with a sex scandal. A thriller and an emotional drama, *Testimony* explores the fears, secrets, and temptations that compel men, women, and teenagers into unthinkable situations.

In Shreve's fictional worlds, many set in New England, ordinary people face tough choices—and driven by betrayal, loss, desire, and love, these folk may act on their darkest impulses. A character, pushed to the edge, may make a split-second decision that forever alters her—and others'—lives. The thorny issue of love, of course, propels many of Shreve's characters to act so rashly. If, indeed, Shreve did not penetrate so deeply into universal human themes and avoid feel-good subjects, she might just sidestep being labeled a romance writer.

Shreve's use of various perspectives—from married and widowed women to adolescent girls and elderly men, from the Victorian era to the 1930s depression to today—lends a surprising heft to her work. In *Testimony*, Shreve experimented with using multiple first-person narrators, including a headmaster, students, their parents, and innocent bystanders, to tell her story. "The most enjoyable and challenging part of writing *Testimony*," Shreve told *Bookmarks*, "was being able to inhabit all of those voices

and run with them. But the trick is not to re-tell the story, but rather to keep that thread of suspense from losing tension." She learned how to build suspense—and, indeed, honed her craft—by reading the masters. Works by Eugene O'Neill, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Shirley Hazzard most influenced her own writing, she told *Bookmarks*, but her "favorite" list changes constantly. "I read a great deal and am frequently excited and influenced by new writers all the time," she said.

The eldest of three daughters, Shreve was born in 1946 in Dedham, Massachusetts. After graduating from Tufts University in 1968, she taught high school English and started to write; her story "Past the Island, Drifting" (1975) won an O. Henry Prize. She then turned to journalism and spent three years working in Nairobi, writing for magazines while her then husband attended graduate school. When they returned to the United States to raise their children, Shreve continued freelance writing. Two of these articles, initially published in the *New York Times Magazine*, inspired her first books: *Remaking Motherhood* (1987) and *Women Together, Women Alone* (1989). After her first novel, *Eden Close* (1989), Shreve turned to writing fiction full-time. Since then, her dozen novels have sold millions of copies worldwide.

## THE ORANGE PRIZE FINALIST

### The Weight of Water (1997)

♦ ORANGE PRIZE FOR FICTION SHORT LIST



*The Weight of Water*, Shreve's fifth novel, introduces her literary trademarks: a raw, gloomy, sea-dominated New England landscape; the inclusion of "source" materials like trial transcripts into the story; and the rapid unraveling of relationships and lives. The *New York Times Book Review* described this novel as "a cryptic long-lost narrative inside an impending family tragedy wrapped in a true-crime murder mystery framed by the aftermath of all of the above"—and it is all of those things.

**THE STORY:** More than a century after the 1873 double murders of two Norwegian women, Jean, a photojournalist, sets out with her family to Smuttynose Island, one of the Isles of Shoals off the coast of New Hampshire, to write about this supposedly closed case. Tensions build as Jean starts to suspect her tormented poet-husband and his brother's girlfriend of clandestine romance. As Jean becomes immersed in the trial records of the killer and the diary of the lone female survivor of the murders, she discovers parallels with these women's tragic, estranged lives and her own. Haunted by the murders and her increasingly worrisome marriage, Jean embarks on a disastrous, final path.

**"There is so much factual information about the Shoals here—geographical, historical, nautical, meteorological—that you might well take it along on your next cruise as the**

definitive guide to the islands. ... Deftly moving among almost as many plot lines as there are islands and employing at least two distinct voices, Ms. Shreve unravels themes of adultery, jealousy, crimes of passion, incest, negligence, loss and guilt, and then manages somehow to knit them all together into an engrossing tale—a fine seaborne story of the double.” SUSAN KENNEY, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 1/19/97

“Shreve’s sharp descriptions depict a landscape as raw and gloomy as any to be found in the books of Thomas Hardy. ... There is plenty for the reader to ponder and savor in this accomplished inquiry into the ravages of love.” N. HELLER MCALPIN, LOS ANGELES TIMES, 1/19/97

**THE MOVIE:** 2000, starring Catherine McCormack, Sean Penn, Elizabeth Hurley, and Sarah Polley, and directed by Kathryn Bigelow.

## THE OPRAH BOOK CLUB SELECTION

### The Pilot’s Wife (1998)



In her sixth novel—about love, betrayal, and loss—Shreve asks, “How well can we really know another person?” Filled with suspense, the novel reads like a mystery as the eponymous wife searches for clues to

her husband’s past—and comes to understand that we can’t, truly, ever fully know the ones we love. The Oprah seal of approval catapulted the novel onto best seller lists.

**THE STORY:** One early-morning knock on the door of her New England home changes Kathryn Lyons’s life forever. A happily married pilot’s wife, she learns that her husband, Jack, has been killed in an airplane crash off the coast of Ireland. But as the crash investigation proceeds, Kathryn discovers shocking clues that suggest her husband may have led a completely different life than the one she knew. With union representative Robert Hall as her support, Kathryn embarks on a journey not only into her and Jack’s past, but also into a terrifying, politically charged present that destroys everything she once believed about her husband.

“*The Pilot’s Wife* is a gentle romance and a tale of inner anguish. ... In fact, Shreve’s novel is perhaps too gentle, too vague about such a horrific and powerful experience as a bomb blowing up an airliner.” GEORGIA JONES-DAVIS, WASHINGTON POST, 8/2/98

“[Shreve] writes in that genre known as ‘women’s fiction’—which, if her new book, *The Pilot’s Wife*, is at all representative, means building a story around a bourgeois romance (the



Anita Shreve (1946—)

subject most likely to hook a large number of female book buyers) using the most generic, white-bread characters imaginable. ... It would be unfair to give away the book’s conclusion, but it’s safe to say that whatever you suspect it is, that’s it.” LAURA JAMISON, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 6/7/98

**THE MOVIE:** 2002, TV, starring Christine Lahti, Campbell Scott, and Alison Pill, and directed by Robert Markowitz.

## A HISTORICAL NOVEL

### Fortune’s Rocks (1999)



In *Fortune’s Rocks*, Shreve added plenty of lust, sex, and drama to keep readers interested in the fate of a social outcast at the turn of the 19th century. Some reviewers described this historical novel as a modernized, gentler *Scarlet Letter*, while others criticized it for not going far enough with its feminist leanings.

**THE STORY:** In 1899, Olympia Biddeford, the teenage daughter of traditional, prominent Bostonians, is on the cusp of womanhood. Vacationing with her family on the



New Hampshire coast, she becomes captivated with one of her father's esteemed friends, an older, married physician—and he with her. Discarding Victorian propriety, they delve headfirst into a passionate affair. But soon enough, their fiery relationship comes to light—and a pregnant Olympia, striving to become an independent woman and to reinvent her life despite society's constraints, faces obstacles she never imagined.

**"Anita Shreve has published a morality tale that reads like something Edith Wharton would have written if she'd been a friend of Gloria Steinem instead of Henry James. *Fortune's Rocks* is a classic fin de siècle novel wrapped in millennial optimism."** RON CHARLES, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, 12/2/99

**"Reading Anita Shreve's latest book is like eating takeout: You get the salt and the sweet and the fat you're longing for, but afterward you can't help feeling a little disgusted with yourself for having gobbled it up. ... Any novel combining period dress with three childbirth scenes, at least as many lovemaking episodes and a fierce debate over the rights of biological vs. adoptive mothers is going to be gobbled up by a significant female audience."** SARAH HARRISON SMITH, SALON, 12/8/99

## ALSO REVIEWED BY BOOKMARKS

**All He Ever Wanted** (★★★ July/Aug 2003)

**Light on Snow** (★★★ Mar/Apr 2005)

**A Wedding in December** (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2006)

## THE NEWEST NOVEL



### Testimony

**THE STORY:** After a terrible game, three inebriated upper-class basketball players at Vermont's prestigious Avery Academy end up in a dorm room and have sex with a freshman girl. A videotape of the incident lands in headmaster Mike Bordwin's hands, and as news of the sex scandal spreads, everyone involved—the guilty and the innocent alike—find their lives forever changed. Told in alternating voices—those of the academy's headmaster, the three accused boys, their parents, police, bystanders, and others—*Testimony* explores the vast ramifications of a single action, which "can cause a life to veer off in a direction it was never meant to go." In this tale of family, peer pressure, underage drinking, and guilty secrets, no one walks away unscathed.

Little, Brown. 320 pages. \$25.99. ISBN: 0316059862



Entertainment Weekly



**"It's an ambitious narrative technique, but Shreve nails it and makes you understand and even sympathize with everyone involved. Just read one chapter about Silas—the kid who lands a scholarship, falls in love, and watches it all tumble apart during the course of a single day—and try not to shed a tear."** KATE WARD

Minneapolis Star Tribune



**"Shreve presents the story in character-told chapters, mostly in the first person; disconcerting at first as we struggle to parse out the timeline, it's a device that lends urgency to a story that starts out as simply sordid and devolves into tragedy. ... [A]lthough the story begins and ends with the teenagers, it is the bruised grownups—Bordwin in particular—who resonate most profoundly."** CYNTHIA DICKISON

San Antonio Express-News



**"Told in alternating voices, allowing each of the students to tell their own version of the tape's events, the novel is most gripping and provoking when the parents of the accused boys speak about how the incident shocked and shaped them. ... The author falters, however, in not fully developing all of the characters here, especially since the girl who appears on the tape is left very much a blank slate."** JENNIFER ROOLF LASTER

Los Angeles Times



**"The one-way nature of our mistakes makes for an interesting, if somewhat un compelling, hypothesis. But in the end, Shreve never gives her own characters the necessary depth or breadth, leaving us to feel like judgmental, if hopeful, outsiders ourselves."** ERIKA SCHICKEL

Telegraph (UK)



**"Testimony is a page-turner, its language crisp and uncluttered. But its emotional manipulations are so transparent that when it ends what remains is not catharsis, just relief that it's over."** KAMILA SHAMSIE

### CRITICAL SUMMARY

Most reviewers hailed *Testimony* as a deft, insightful exploration into the tragic, far-ranging effects of a single night.

Yet critics diverged on a number of points. Some thought that Shreve's diverse perspectives made the sex scandal and other characters' plights, such as those of the guilt-ridden adults, more immediate. But a few claimed that the fractured narrative distracted from examining the morally gray situation more fully and decreased the overall emotional impact. Character development similarly raised questions. As the reviewer from *Los Angeles Times* noted, the girl on the tape—portrayed more as vixen than victim—"is Shreve's missed opportunity for an exploration of what drives young girls toward promiscuity." In the end, however, *Testimony*—like Shreve's other novels—is not always enjoyable, but it's impossible to put down. ■