

More "Testimony"

Written by Terry Mathews - News-Telegram Arts Editor
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ANITA SHREVE: BIOGRAPHY

Anita Shreve grew up in Dedham, Massachusetts (just outside Boston), the eldest of three daughters. Early literary influences include having read *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton when she was a junior in high school (a short novel she still claims as one of her favorites) and everything Eugene O'Neill ever wrote while she was a senior (to which she attributes a somewhat dark streak in her own work). After graduating from Tufts University, she taught high school for a number of years in and around Boston. In the middle of her last year, she quit (something that, as a parent, she finds appalling now) to start writing. "I had this panicky sensation that it was now or never." Joking that she could wallpaper her bathroom with rejections from magazines for her short stories ("I really could have," she says), she published her early work in literary journals. One of these stories, "Past the Island, Drifting," won an O. Henry prize. Despite this accolade, she quickly learned that one couldn't make a living writing short fiction. Switching to journalism, Shreve traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, where she lived for three years, working as a journalist for an African magazine. One of her novels, *The Last Time They Met*, contains bits and pieces from her time in Africa.

Returning to the United States, Shreve was a writer and editor for a number of magazines in New York. Later, when she began her family, she turned to freelancing, publishing in the *New York Times Magazine*, *New York magazine* and dozens of others. In 1989, she published her first novel, *Eden Close*. Since then she has written 12 other novels, among them *The Weight of Water*, *The Pilot's Wife*, *The Last Time They Met*, *A Wedding in December*, and *Body Surfing*.

In 1998, Shreve received the PEN/L. L. Winship Award and the New England Book Award for fiction. In 1999, she received a phone call from Oprah Winfrey, and *The Pilot's Wife* became the 25th selection of Oprah's Book Club and an international bestseller. In April 2002, CBS aired the film version of *The Pilot's Wife*, starring Christine Lahti, and in fall 2002, *The Weight of Water*, starring Elizabeth Hurley and Sean Penn, was released in movie theaters.

Still in love with the novel form, Shreve writes only in that genre. "The best analogy I can give to describe writing for me is daydreaming," she says. "A certain amount of craft is brought to bear, but the experience feels very dreamlike."

Shreve is married to a man she met when she was 13. She has two children and three stepchildren, and in the last eight years has made tuition payments to seven colleges and universities.

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TESTIMONY: READING GROUP QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The story in Testimony is told from many different perspectives. Why do you think Anita Shreve chose this narrative style for the novel? Can you see any connection between this style and some of the novel's themes?
2. Some characters in Testimony—for example, the students—narrate from the first person point of view. For other characters, such as Mike and Owen, the author always uses the third person. Rob's mother, Ellen, speaks in the second person. What do these different points of view tell you about the roles of various characters in the story? Did you find yourself empathizing most with any character in particular?
3. Several characters comment that if the sexual incident at Avery had occurred at a local public school, it would have drawn little or no attention. Do you agree with this assessment? Is it fair that this elite institution be held to a different standard?
4. When Mike initially brings J.Dot into his office and accuses him of taking advantage of the girl in the video, J.Dot replies that "She knew better" (123). Do you think that Sienna knew better? Setting aside the letter of the law, how responsible do you think Sienna is for what happened?
5. When Sienna calls her mother on Wednesday morning (129), she cries hysterically. Her roommate, Laura, implies that Sienna may have been acting. Do you think that Sienna is acting or are her emotions genuine? Is it possible for both to be true at the same time?
6. When Silas first reflects on what he did on the videotape, he repeats the phrase "I wanted" (43) many times. When Anna recounts her affair with Mike, she too uses this refrain, "I wanted" (210). What do Silas and Anna each want? Are these purely sexual wants or are they more complicated? Why do you think mother and son use the same language of desire to condemn themselves? How much do you think desire is to blame for what happened?
7. Discuss the evolution of Anna and Owen's marriage over the course of the novel. Are you surprised that they do not separate after all that has happened? Do you believe that by the end of the book Owen has forgiven Anna?
8. To describe her relationship with Silas, Noelle often uses the metaphor of walking through doors together. Did you feel this was an apt metaphor? How does the significance of this image change as the novel progresses?
9. Some of the parents of the boys feel a keen sense of responsibility for their sons' behavior. Ellen in particular says, "And, of course, you are. You are responsible" (189). Do you believe the parents of J.Dot, Silas, and Rob made decisions that in some way led to this event? How culpable should parents of teenagers feel for the behavior of their children?

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10. As Silas writes in his journal, all his entries are addressed to Noelle. How does the tenor of the letters change over the course of the novel? Do you believe Noelle is capable of forgiving him? Should she forgive him?

11. Were you surprised when you learned who filmed the incident? All of the students involved seem to have made an unspoken agreement to protect this person's identity. Do you agree with their reasons for doing so?

12. One of the big questions driving Testimony is "Why did these students do what they did?" In his letter to Ms. Barnard, Rob writes that "It was an act without a why" (303). What does Rob mean by this? Do you think the other three would agree with his assessment? If not, how might their answers be different?

13. What do you think will happen to the students in the future? What course can you see their lives taking in the months and years following the close of the novel? How will they be affected by the incident and its aftermath?

14. At the end of the novel, Rob suggests that, in an unexpected way, his life may turn out better because of what happened at Avery (304). Do you agree with his logic? Can you see any redemptive effects the scandal may have for other characters?