

Author Anita Shreve relies on everyone's "Testimony" in new bestseller

Written by Terry Mathews - News-Telegram Arts Editor
Friday, 05 December 2008 12:37



Testimony

By Anita Shreve

Little, Brown & Co.

305 pp. \$25.99.

Five Stars

Until "Testimony" hit the New York Times best sellers list recently, I had lost contact with author Anita Shreve.

I had read her "The Weight of Water" and "Sea Glass," but with so many books and so little time, she fell off my reading radar.

The plot in "Testimony" seems to be ripped from the nightly news. A sex scandal brought on after a night of drinking shocks Avery Academy, a New England prep school, especially since the parties involved, three boys and a 14-year old girl, were caught on videotape.

"I'm very much interested in the consequences of a single reckless act," Shreve said in an interview for her website. "In this case, it is very evident that this one single drunken episode has terrible consequences for not only the 4 teenagers involved. It causes the school to face a tremendous amount of challenges. The town itself begins to divide over some of the issues, too."

Two years after the scandal, a researcher from the University of Vermont requests interviews with those involved in the scandal for a project on "Alcohol and Adolescent Male Behaviors," thus allowing Shreve to tell the story from everyone's point of view. She includes the voices of other students and some of the the adults who weren't caught on tape, but who were certainly effected by the incident.

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"In this novel, I've had the principles speak for themselves," she explains. "My attempt is not to brand any one of these people as insensitive and totally evil. I wanted to show how very easy it is to get oneself into a situation like this."

We meet Mike, Avery's headmaster, at the beginning of the novel. Someone has handed the videotape to him, and as readers, we get to sit in his living room and watch as the action unfolds.

"Mike immediately wondered when the event had taken place and in what dorm."

We meet Sienna, the girl, now living in Houston and trying to get on with her life.

"I'm like, if anyone touches me, I'm going to kill them," she tells the research assistant. "My name used to be something else, but I like Sienna better. I was traumatized. I had to be in therapy for ages. I was the victim. I think someday I'll write a book about it."

We meet J. Dot, the big man on campus, who is ticked that he was blamed.

"I don't know if you should have your life ruined over just one little time," J. Dot says. "They called me the ringleader in the press. ... If anyone was the ringleader, it was her."

Rob Leicht tells his story, too, with shocking frankness.

"It was an act without a why," Leicht says in a letter to researchers. "That isn't an excuse, either. It is simply what I believe. ... the consequences of that one night have been catastrophic."

We get to know Silas, the young man whose life is forever changed by an incident prior to the one in the dorm room – something that drove him to drink himself numb.

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"For those minutes, I wanted," he writes in a note to his girlfriend Noelle. "I was drunk. The room was spinning, and there was music. ... And they were taping, and you will see the tape, and you will be so hurt, and that I can't stand."

Along with the students, Shreve lets her readers look at what parents go through when their children make bad choices.

What makes Shreve's story so compelling and worth every minute of a reader's time is that today's parents and teenagers face the thorny issue of underage drinking. Putting the matter on paper helps us process the problem from all sides.

"I am very concerned about underage drinking," Shreve said. "I don't normally write with an agenda, and I don't know this necessarily was what motivated me, but it was very much in the air."

Although I read the book weeks ago, the people of "Testimony" linger. Shreve is a gifted writer, taking care to weave a memorable story around finely honed characters. Well done.

See more about Shreve and "Testimony" in the mysslife section of our new website:

www.myssnews.com.