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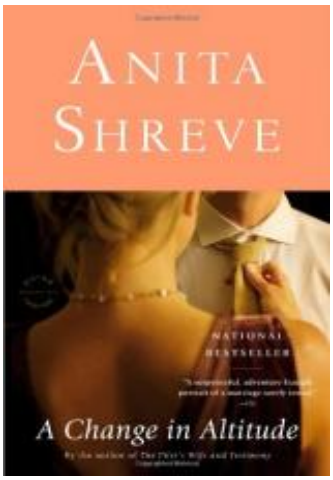
A Change in Altitude

by Anita Shreve



About the Book

Twenty-eight-year-old Geraldine travels to Kenya with her new husband James with the intent of staying a year. In a dizzying multicultural city, she struggles to maintain her balance as well as her sense of self. Her marriage, and her understanding of the world, are shaken to the core.

Invited on a climbing expedition to Mt. Kenya, the newlyweds are caught up in a horrific accident. In its aftermath, Geraldine must try to understand exactly what happened on that mountain and what it has done to her and to her marriage.

A major author in terms of critical acclaim and bestseller status, Anita Shreve limns the secrets at the core of our closest relationships and the ways in which lives can turn on the axis of a single catastrophic event.

Discussion Guide

1. How would you interpret the novel?s title? Does the concept of altitude have significance in the story beyond its literal meaning?

2. During the drive to Mt. Kenya, Margaret and Patrick talk about whether photography detaches you from the present or helps you immerse yourself in it more fully (75). In your own life, do you find that taking photographs enriches experiences or prevents you from being fully in the moment?

3. When Diana brings Adhiambo to stay with Patrick and Margaret for the night, they disagree about how best to deal with the situation. Margaret seems more concerned about Adhiambo?s emotional well-being, while Patrick focuses on her physical state. In what way do their differing perspectives reflect other aspects of their characters? Do you think Adhiambo would have been better off if Margaret and Patrick had taken her to the hospital that night?

4. Throughout the novel, Margaret is struck by the way Kenyan characters use the phrase ?Just all right? (67, 189, 246, 303). How would you interpret the meaning of this phrase? Why is it so surprising to Margaret?

5. How culpable is Margaret in what happens on the mountain? To what extent does the blame fall on others involved in the climb? Should a person be held responsible for the unintended consequences of her actions (124)?

6. Is Patrick right to confront Margaret about what happened on the mountain? Margaret argues that if he loves her and intends to stay with her, he should not have told her his opinion, while Patrick believes it is most important to be honest (125). What do you think is most important in a relationship, total honesty or sensitivity to the other?s feelings?

7. Why do you think Margaret feels so strongly about taking the photograph of the leopard? Are there parallels between this action and Diana?s behavior on the glacier? Have you ever put yourself in danger because of a momentary impulse? What do you think motivates actions of this kind?

8. What is your definition of infidelity? Does Margaret?s relationship with Rafiq constitute unfaithfulness to Patrick? Is there such a thing as emotional infidelity or is only physical cheating really cheating?

9. How much of a marriage?s success or failure do you think can be attributed to the love between husband and wife, and how much to external factors, such as jobs, finances, location, and other people? Patrick says, ?I think couples need projects to keep them together? (271). Is he correct that a couple must put in effort to make their marriage work?

10. If the accident on the mountain had never occurred, do you think Margaret and Patrick?s relationship would have evolved differently? Would anything more have happened between Arthur and Margaret? Between Rafiq and Margaret?

11. Imagine Margaret and Patrick thirty years after the end of **A Change in Altitude**, looking back on their life in Africa. How do you think each of them would describe the trajectory of their relationship during this time?

12. Describe your response to the novel?s ending. Did you find it sad? Uplifting? Did you feel that things had worked out for the best?

Author Bio

Anita Shreve was a high school teacher and a freelance magazine journalist before writing fiction full time. She was the author 19 novels, including THE STARS ARE FIRE as well as the international bestseller THE PILOT'S WIFE, and THE WEIGHT OF WATER, a finalist for the Orange Prize. On March 29, 2018, Shreve passed away from cancer at the age of 71.

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Publication Date: May 4, 2010
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Back Bay Books
ISBN-10: 0316020710
ISBN-13: 9780316020718