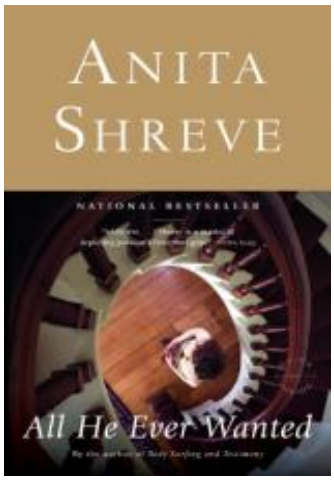
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# All He Ever Wanted

by Anita Shreve




## About the Book

A marriage is always two intersecting stories." This realization comes perhaps too late to the husband of Etna Bliss - a man whose obsession with his young wife begins at the moment of their first meeting, as he helps Etna and her companions escape from a fire in a hotel restaurant, and culminates in a marriage doomed by secrets and betrayal. Written with the intelligence and grace that are hallmarks of Anita Shreve's bestselling novels, this gripping tale of desire, jealousy, and loss is peopled by unforgettable characters as real as the emotions that bring them together.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** How would you describe the voice of the novel's narrator? What does the manner in which Nicholas Van Tassel tells the story suggest to you about his character? How reliable a narrator is he?

**2.** We learn about Etna only through Nicholas. Do you think we see her clearly? What role do the "letters" play? What about Nicholas's comments and asides on these letters? Do they shed more light on Nicholas or on Etna?

**3.** Some readers have seen Nicholas as a monster; others have been moved by his humanity. How do you feel about him? Do you think he knows himself?

**4.** Do you agree with Nicholas's own assessment that "we design our own fate, to suit our circumstances" (page 45)?

**5.** Do you agree with his idea about "the necessity of having extraordinary love returned in order to have achieved true greatness" (page 127)?

**6.** When Nicholas begins to court Etna, he makes the distinction between the qualities of a woman and the qualities of a wife. What does he imply with his musings? How does he define Etna?

**7.** After Nicholas and Etna's wedding, the narrator jumps ahead fourteen years. Why do you think he chooses to do this? What is the benefit of sweeping past those first years of the marriage?

**8.** Nicholas has a tense relationship with one of his students, Edward Ferald. Why does Nicholas feel such animosity toward Edward? How does this color Nicholas's future at Thrupp?

**9.** Etna accepts Nicholas's proposal but promises that she can never love him. Why does Etna agree to marry Nicholas? What does she hope to achieve with this marriage? And after finding herself trapped in a restrictive role as Nicholas's wife, why does she remain in the marriage for so long?

**10.** After her uncle's death, Etna informs Nicholas, "It is a treasure. To be able to love someone in that way. So thoroughly. So freely" (page 159). Discuss the significance of this statement.

**11.** Discuss Nicholas's relationship with his children.

**12.** Etna is an enigmatic figure. Analyze her means of escape within her marriage.

**13.** After Nicholas discovers Etna's house, she insists that she must have her own space in order to claim her independence. Does Etna achieve her goal in the end? How much power does she have in her relationship with her husband?

**14.** In his wife's absence, Nicholas wonders whether he was set free as well (page 304). Can Nicholas fully escape his obsession? What are his feelings for Etna thirty years later? Despite his lengthy journal, does Nicholas ever truly understand Etna?

**15.** What do the parenthetical asides woven throughout the narrative reveal about Nicholas's character? Do you think these devices are effective?

**16.** Why do you think Nicholas chooses to tell the story when he is in his sixties? How might the story be different if told without the benefit of Nicholas's hindsight?

**17.** The story's frame is a train ride that Nicholas takes en route to his sister's funeral. How does Nicholas's account of the events that transpired on this journey resonate with the story of Nicholas and Etna's relationship?

**18.** How does Nicholas change, if at all, in the course of this novel? What has he learned from his time with Etna?

## 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.

## Critical Praise

"An incisive study of obsessive desire. . . . One of Shreve's most accomplished novels."

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