

The Obituary Writer

by Porter Shreve



About the Book

Gordie Hatch is twenty-two, charmingly naive, and certain that his first job as a writer for the ST LOUIS INDEPENDENT'S obituary page will be a stepping stone to a crackerjack career in journalism. The year is 1989, and Gordie watches helplessly while dramatic events -- the very events that could be his lucky break -- unfold in the world around him. But nothing can prepare him for the call he gets from Alicia Whiting, a young widow with an accent he can't quite place. When Gordie agrees to meet Alicia, against his better judgment, his journalistic curiosity quickly turns into an obsessive search for the outrageous truth behind the Whiting family. Shot through with affectionate humor and surprising twists and turns, *THE OBITUARY WRITER* introduces an author of enormous talent and heart. Porter Shreve brings a deft touch to the moments that mark a young person's entrance into the world, and a sharp eye to the ways in which the lead story can be wonderfully, seductively misleading.

Discussion Guide

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and, for every reader, provide a deeper understanding of *The Obituary Writer*.

1. To what extent is Gordie's spectral father the most important person in Gordie's life? How would you describe the role of Gordie's father in his life, particularly in relation to Gordie's ambitions?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Gordie and his mother? What kind of a son is he? What kind of a mother has she been? To what extent—and with what consequences—has Lorraine determined her son's character and outlook on the world?

3. After learning the truth about his father, Gordie tells his mother, "I do understand why you thought those stories were necessary." Why may Lorraine's untrue stories about Gordie's father have been necessary?
4. How does Shreve present Gordie's struggle between his professional ambitions and his personal relationships and desires? Gordie tells us, "My job was taking the measure of people's lives." To what extent does he succeed or fail in "taking the measure" of his own and others' lives?
5. In his job, Gordie tells us, he believed he "merely had to hunker down, work hard, and await the inevitable." What does he expect the inevitable to be? In what ways, and to what extent, are his subsequent experiences inevitable?
6. Gordie recalls the school-age Thea as "moving with ease from circle to circle, hiding the wounds of abandonment." What role does a sense of, or the reality of, abandonment play in the lives of Thea, Gordie, Alicia, Lorraine, and others? What "wounds of abandonment" do they suffer?
7. Recalling the summer of his break-up with Thea, Gordie says, "Clearly I had not been ready for the complexities of love." What other complexities of life is he not ready for? With what consequences?
8. Why does Gordie lie or, at best, fantasize so consistently—to his mother, to others, and to himself? How are Gordie's fantasies, daydreams, and lies related to the reality of his present situation and his likely future? If "Alicia tells lies of convenience," as Margaret Whiting contends, what kinds of lies does Gordie tell?
9. Surprised that he is "falling" for Alicia, Gordie states, "I'd always been a cautious person, alert to the dangers of the world." To what extent is this true or not of Gordie's outlook and actions? What examples of this caution do you find in the novel? Why is he not "alert to the dangers" posed by Alicia?
10. "I knew one thing about myself from my experience with Thea," Gordie admits early in his relationship with Alicia: "I was a deeply jealous person." In what ways does his jealousy manifest itself throughout the novel? What else does Gordie know about himself at this stage? What doesn't he know?
11. Why doesn't Gordie immediately recognize Alicia as the model for the triptych painting that so fascinates him? What kinds of blindness do Gordie and others exhibit? What "cures" Gordie's and others' blindness?
12. Both Alicia and Gordie are involved in creating lives and identities for themselves. In what ways are their efforts similar and in what ways different? Are they both "utterly transient," as Margaret Whiting describes Alicia?
13. "I've always wanted to be a promoter of unsung heroes," Gordie tells Margaret Whiting, by way of "explaining" his interest in Arthur Whiting. To what extent, beyond his own understanding, is this true of Gordie? How might it apply to his father?
14. Simultaneous with his dismissal from the Independent, Gordie believes, "for the first time, that perhaps I had a story. By instinct or accident I had been following a story all along." What does he understand his story to be? What do we see as his story? Which turns out to be the more accurate?
15. How important in the novel is the question of truth versus belief or—in newspaper terms—the question of reporting

the truth versus reporting what is believed to be true? Showing Alicia the newsroom for the first time, Gordie tells her, "It's what journalism is all about. No secrets." Has this been his understanding of journalism all along? What view of journalism's aims does the novel finally present?

16. In what ways do Gordie's behavior and attitude (his lack of objectivity, for example) indicate that he is unqualified to be a successful journalist? To what extent does his experience with Alicia correct his inadequacies? At what cost?

17. Much of the novel's action involves death and the dead—from the importance of Gordie's father, to Gordie's job as junior obituary writer, to Arthur Whiting's death and funeral, to Dr. Osborne and his fellow crime-scene ghouls. How would you relate this to Gordie's personality, behavior, and attitudes?

Author Bio

Porter Shreve is coeditor of a series of anthologies published by Beacon Press: **Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America** (1997); **How We Want to Live: Narratives on Progress** (1998); and the forthcoming **Tales Out of School: Contemporary Writers on Their Student Years** (August 2000). Shreve was born in Washington, D.C., in 1966. His education included two years at the University of Missouri Journalism School in Columbia, Missouri. A former journalist and a graduate of the M.F.A. program at the University of Michigan—where he won a Meijer Fellowship in Creative Writing and Hopwood awards in the novel and short story—Shreve now lives and teaches in Ann Arbor. He is at work on a second novel.

Critical Praise

"This novel is a delightful read; the kind of book one simply wants to nestle into. There are constant quirky surprises, as well as a great plot, and so the reader is propelled forward quite willingly through the book's own special world."

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