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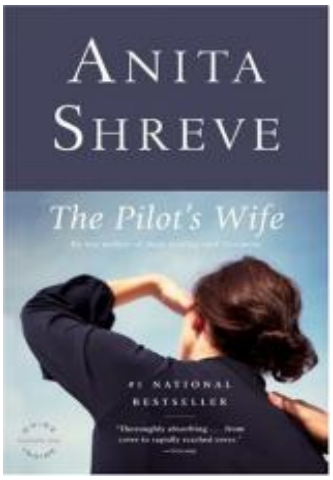
The Pilot's Wife

by Anita Shreve



About the Book

Who can guess what a woman will do when the unthinkable becomes her reality?

Until now, Kathryn Lyons's life has been peaceful if unextraordinary: a satisfying job teaching high school in the New England mill town of her childhood; a picture-perfect home by the ocean; a precocious, independent-minded fifteen-year-old daughter; and a happy marriage whose occasional dull passages she attributes to the unavoidable deadening effect of time. As a pilot's wife, Kathryn has learned to expect both intense exhilaration and long periods alone--but nothing has prepared her for the late-night knock that lets her know her husband has died in a crash.

As Kathryn struggles with her grief, she descends into a maelstrom of publicity stirred up by the modern hunger for the details of tragedy. Even before the plane is located in waters off the Irish coast, the relentless focus on her husband's life begins to bring a bizarre personal mystery into focus. Could there be any truth to the increasingly disturbing rumors that he had a secret?

Fighting the impulse to protect herself and her daughter from the details of the crash and the mystery surrounding it, Kathryn sets out to learn who her husband really was--whatever that knowledge may cost. The search will lead her to shocking revelations, testing both the truth of her marriage and the limits of her ability to face it.

From the bestselling author of *The Weight of Water*, this taut, impassioned novel asks fundamental questions we all have about how well we can really know anyone--even those (or especially those) we love the most. Written with grace and controlled beauty, *The Pilot's Wife* definitively places Anita Shreve among the ranks of the best novelists writing today.

Discussion Guide

1. The complex relationship between secrecy and intimacy is an important theme of **The Pilot's Wife**. Consider the

secrets kept by the following characters: Kathryn, Jack, Mattie, Robert, Muire. In each case, what motivates the deceiver? Who is protected and who is harmed by the secret? Can deception ever be an expression of love? Examine the conversation between Kathryn and Mattie on pages 118-119, especially Mattie's question: *"But how do you ever know that you know a person?"* Is there a more satisfactory answer to this question than the one Kathryn offers?

2. Does Shreve's use of flashbacks to Jack and Kathryn's marriage reveal the changes occurring between Jack and Kathryn? In what way did Jack and in what way did Kathryn each contribute to the marital problems? How did they each react to the difficulties?

3. Was Robert's betrayal the worst of all, as Kathryn thinks to herself? Who betrayed whom in this novel? Can you ever love someone who has betrayed you?

4. When Kathryn throws her wedding ring into the ocean, she thinks to herself: To be relieved of love is to give up a terrible burden. Do you agree?

5. Regarding Jack's religion or lack of it, he appeared to be quite divided. Was he assuming religious beliefs just to please the women he was with? How does his religious division give us clues to his character?

6. How do the memories and thoughts Jack and Kathryn each have about their respective mothers influence their views of marriage?

7. The theme of disaster is central to the story. Not just the physical disaster of the crash, or even the disaster to the family that Jack's death produces; but the disaster that unfolds as Kathryn learns the truth of Jack's double life and many secrets. How does the passage from the bottom of page 13 relate to the disasters?

8. *"and she thought then....such a thing of beauty."*
Could this passage also be used at the end of the book? Is there beauty in disaster?

9. What devices does Shreve use to make her novel such a compelling read? Consider the flashbacks, the action, the style of language and word choice, and character painting.

10. Do you think the reason Jack couldn't be honest with Kathryn about his mother and his life with Muire was not so much because of his love for Kathryn, but more because he didn't want to repeat what his mother did and subject his child to what he went through? In what ways do Kathryn and Jack repeat their respective mother's mistakes?

11. Muire revealed the whole truth to Kathryn about Jack's secret life. How did this confession help Kathryn find the answers to her questions about how "real" her marriage was? Who is the "real wife?" (p. 275) What constitutes a 'real wife'? Do we continue to think that Kathryn is the 'real' wife, because this is her story, or Muire for accepting the truth about Kathryn?

12. As the story progresses Kathryn gradually pieces together mysteries of her husband's life from the facts that come to light following Jack's death. At the same time she is trying to understand the pieces of her own life. Does Kathryn and Jack's house, originally inhabited by nuns retreating from the world, play a significant part in this story? In what way was the house that Kathryn and Jack lived in for 11 years a metaphor for their relationship? Discuss the significance of

Kathryn's discovery of the site of the Sisters' Chapel at the end of the book.

13. At what point in the story did you figure out that Jack was having an affair? Were you suspicious when Kathryn found the receipt for the bath robe, or the note in his pocket? Did you want to believe Kathryn's suspicions?

14. Discuss the differences between Kathryn's relationship to Jack and Mattie's to him. Which relationship seemed more honest? Which relationship seemed stronger? As a mother, is Kathryn obligated, at some future time, to share full knowledge of Jack with Mattie?

15. Do you think **The Pilot's Wife** would make a good film? If so, why? Who would you cast as the major characters in the film version? Why?

Booksellers whose questions have been used in **The Pilot's Wife** readers' group guide:

Melissa A. Frazer, Lake Country Booksellers, White Bear Lake, MN
Susan Avery, Ariel Books, New Paltz, NY
Justine Morgan, The Bookstore, Hollister, CA
Lucy Crane, Bookwoorks, Albuquerque, NM
Kristin Kennell, Elliott Bay Book Company, Seattle, WA
Peggy Baldwin, Bookworks, Aptos, CA
Heidi Gunter, Magnolia's Bookstore, Seattle, WA
Kristin Brackett, Key Chain Books, Tavernier, FL
Ettabelle Schwartz, The Learned Owl, Hudson, OH

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

"Compulsively readable....To create both sympathetic characters and an enticing plot is no small feat, but Shreve does it seamlessly."

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