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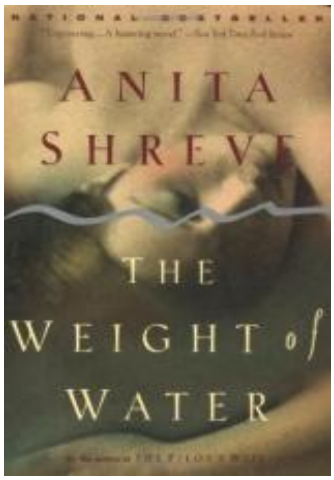
The Weight of Water

by Anita Shreve



About the Book

"I wonder this: If you take a woman and push her to the edge, how will she behave?" The question is posed by Jean, a photographer, who in 1995 arrives on Smuttynose Island, off the coast of Maine, to research a century-old crime. As she immerses herself in the details of the case-a fit of passion that resulted in the deaths of two women-Jean herself becomes caught in the grip of an intense emotion.

The suspicion that her husband is having an affair burgeons into jealousy and distrust, and ultimately propels Jean to the verge of actions she had not known herself capable of-actions with horrific consequences.

In a novel everywhere hailed for its beauty and power, Anita Shreve takes us on an unforgettable journey through the farthest extremes of emotion.

Shreve learned about the Smuttynose murders in 1973, while on a sailing trip with her family. During this trip, she visited the Isles of Shoals, a small group of islands off the coast of New Hampshire. Shreve was struck by the islands' beauty and intrigued by the enduring power of the lore and legend surrounding the century-old crime. Soon, Shreve began writing about the murders?as fiction. In 1975 "Silence at Smuttynose," Shreve's story based loosely on the murders, was published in Cimarron Review. Twenty years (and four novels) later, Shreve again reread "Silence at Smuttynose" and realized she wasn't quite finished with the story. She resumed her research on the case, studying the transcript of the trial to find out the facts as they were recorded.

In creating **The Weight of Water**, Shreve carefully wove the historical story with the fictional one, though, she maintains "the heart of the book has almost nothing to do with the facts." Rather, she used the historical record as a springboard for a larger story that explores the consequences of pushing a woman to the edge. Shreve says she was not the first to question the outcome of the murder trial, but she found it "a very hard book to write" because ultimately she intended for the reader to have sympathy for the women of Smuttynose.

Debate about the identity of the Smuttynose murderer continues to this day, rekindled by the publication of **The Weight of Water**. "The facts are out there for speculation," Shreve says, "The book is something separate from that debate."

Discussion Guide

1. What are the similarities between Jean and Maren? In what ways are they different?

2. The Weight of Water is both a love story and a whodunit. Who do you think really killed Anethe and Karen? What evidence is there to support Louis Wagner's innocence or guilt?

3. Atmosphere - the terribly rough climate and unbearably close living quarters -- plays a significant role in the characters' psychological states. To what extent are these external conditions responsible for the events of the novel?

4. "No one can know a story's precise reality," Jean points out (p. 117). Discuss the significance of this statement as it applies to Jean's reading of Maren's journal. Should she -- should we -- believe Maren's document as truth? To what extent does Jean fill in the blanks of Maren's story to explain her own life? Do you think Jean maintains enough objectivity to write a fair account of the murders?

5. The Weight of Water is concerned with the subject of jealousy and its consequences. Discuss this theme as it emerges in the exchanges between Jean and Maren and their families. Do you believe that Adeline and Thomas were having an affair?

6. Maren and Evan have a very close sibling relationship. What events from their childhood fostered this attachment? Is there evidence that their relationship goes beyond that of brother and sister? How does Anethe's arrival on the scene affect this relationship?

7. Jean ponders, "What moment was it that I might have altered? What point in time was it that I might have moved one way instead of another, had one thought instead of another?" (p. 192). Are there moments in which Jean could have acted differently and thereby changed the course of the events that followed? If so, identify them. How much control do Jean and Maren have over their respective fates? How much does anyone?

8. It is often small resentments and indiscretions that lead to greater misdeeds. What small offenses do Jean and Maren commit? Do you feel these acts should be taken into account when determining their culpability for greater crimes?

9. How does the structure of the story -- the weaving together of Maren's story with Jean's -- underscore the novel's theme? Have you ever been so influenced by an event in the past that it changed your present or your future?

10. Jean's story begins with a plea for absolution: "I have to let this story go. It is with me all the time now, a terrible

weight." Similarly, Maren's document opens with an appeal for vindication: "If it so please the Lord, I shall, with my soul and heart and sound mind, write the true and actual tale of the incident which continues to haunt my humble footsteps." (p. 39). How do these pleas affect you as a reader? Does it make you more sympathetic to the characters, more willing to believe in their innocence?

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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