

Back Bay Readers' Pick

Reading Group Guide

A Wedding in December

A NOVEL BY

Anita Shreve

A conversation with Anita Shreve

The author of *A Wedding in December*
talks with Ronni Gordon of the *Republican*

The day is dismal, but still, the living room where Anita Shreve sits in a deep, comfortable off-white chair is suffused with light. The room, decorated mostly in neutral tones, has the same clarity and economy of line that have earned praise for the bestselling novelist.

Shreve is discussing her twelfth novel, *A Wedding in December*. It takes place over an unseasonably warm weekend as seven high school friends convene at a Berkshires inn for the wedding of two of them, first loves who have been reunited. It begins with a description of the expansive view of mountains and lake, and of the architecture and furnishings of the turn-of-the-last-century inn that its owner, Nora, renovated while rebuilding her own life after the death of her husband.

“If there was a central image in my mind, it would have been the inn,” said Shreve, who has always paid careful attention to buildings. She describes the layout of the inn, the placement of furniture, and the windows that let in western light much as her own house does. “You must create layer upon layer of reality in the details,” she said while sipping from a bottle of water. “When you make that leap, the reader trusts you because everything is so grounded in reality.”

The book brings to mind the movie *The Big Chill*, only in Shreve’s book the characters come together for a wedding, not a funeral. Old attractions, buried secrets, and still vivid memories bubble to the surface as Shreve revisits such themes as “choices made, second chances, meeting again after a long time, losing someone and finding them.”

She started the book in December 2001, placing the characters’ meeting directly under the cloud of September 11, a date which

influenced the characters' psyches and their conversations. "It made me think of natural catastrophes, man-made catastrophes, and emotional catastrophes," she said.

She weaves in a parallel plot by having one of the friends, a history teacher named Agnes, write a short story based on an explosion that devastated the Canadian city Halifax during World War I. Shreve said she was trying to capture "the sense of the democracy of catastrophe. It knows no class or race."

Shreve also wove in a defining personal experience of her own — breast cancer. Labor Day marked two years from the end of her treatment. She had surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, and received a good prognosis.

In the book, Bridget, the woman getting married, is being treated for breast cancer. Bridget struggles with fear, nausea, and loss of dignity.

Shreve said that although Bridget is sicker than she herself was, the character expresses many of Shreve's sentiments, although no more than some of the other characters do. "You write out your daydreams and you write out your fears," she said. "Maybe it's like voodoo. I'm going to make it stay away."

For example, in *The Weight of Water*, a five-year-old girl falls out of a boat and drowns. "It's every mother's fear of the careless moment when you're not paying attention."

Then there is "the knock in the middle of the night, the knock I don't want to get." It marked the beginning of *The Pilot's Wife*, which sold more than four million copies after Oprah Winfrey featured it in her book club six years ago.

At fifty-eight, Shreve said that cancer cured her of existential angst. "You don't ask why are you here. You're just glad you are here," she said. The flip side, though, is the worry. She said it is not as bad as in the beginning and continues to diminish over time.

Shreve and her husband, John Osborn, have five children between them. They lived for seven years across the street in a house built in 1776. She loved the character of the house. But, she said, it

had no closets, her office was in the living room, and by 3:00 p.m. the backyard was in shadow. “I really wanted a western light,” she said.

In 2002 they renovated the hundred-year-old carriage house, set back from the road, where they live now. Her office is in a smaller studio attached to the main house. “I love this house,” she said.

Shreve started *A Wedding in December* on a warm winter day. The weather made her think about the “freakishness in nature and the beauty in nature.” She wrote story lines about Agnes and another central character, Harrison, best friend of Nora’s high school sweetheart. She abandoned both stories and wrote *All He Ever Wanted*, followed by *Light on Snow*.

“The novel did not fall into place until I had Bridget,” she said. “I wanted to make Bridget a strong woman who was struggling with serious stuff yet willing to admit the possibility of love into her life.” The character just came to her, as did the others.

She doesn’t outline the plot. “I really have more of a ‘plunge ahead and I’ll deal with it later’ attitude,” she said.

Like her other books, this one has a melancholy streak, expressed, for example, by these words about Nora’s marriage: “In the beginning, one has such high expectations. And then life, in small increments, begins to dissolve those expectations, to make them look naive or silly.”

Shreve said she never sets out with an agenda. “I never have a message. I want to offer what I most love in a book, which is to get lost in a universe and want to pick it up again.”

As always, she is writing another book, and, as always, she does not want to discuss it. It will not be lighthearted or comical. “I’m just not built for it,” she said.

The complete text of Ronni Gordon’s interview with Anita Shreve originally appeared in the Republican (Springfield, MA) on October 2, 2005. Reprinted with permission.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Each of the former schoolmates who are reunited in *A Wedding in December* has faced a number of challenges and disappointments since graduation. In particular, they've all found themselves in quandaries when it comes to romance. Which characters would you say are the luckiest in love? How do you define a successful relationship?
2. "One can never tell the story of a marriage," Nora says to Harrison (page 151). "At the very least, a marriage is two intersecting stories, one of which we will never know." What does Nora mean by this observation? Are there relationships depicted in the novel that support her statement?
3. As the story of the reunion weekend unfolds, another story is revealed — the tale Agnes is writing about Innes Finch. Why do you think the author chooses to tell another story within the story? What is the significance of the Halifax tragedies to Agnes at this point in her life?
4. For Harrison, Nora is the epitome of the perfect woman. Hazel represents the same for Innes. Yet their respective encounters are relatively brief. What is it about these two women that the men find so compelling? Do you think the two men really know the objects of their desire?
5. Some of the novel's characters regard the events of 9/11 as reminders of the "democracy of catastrophe" (page 146). Jerry, on the other hand, draws a distinction between the people who witnessed the tragedy firsthand and those who viewed it from the safety of their homes miles away. Which opinion do you favor?

6. In *A Wedding in December* we are privy to select perspectives—those of Harrison, Agnes, Bridget, and Innes. Do you think these were the best narrators for the respective stories? How might the novel’s principal narrative have been different if filtered through Nora’s eyes? How might the Halifax story have been different if told from Hazel’s point of view?
7. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of the novel’s main characters. How do the male and female characters compare to one another?
8. Harrison acknowledges that the defining feature of private lives is “that anyone looking in from the outside could never know the reality” (page 151). He longs to tell Nora the truth about Stephen, and Agnes’s stunning revelation triggers the others to reveal their own hidden truths as well. What, if anything, do these confessions change for the friends? Do they come to regard one another differently in the end?
9. On page 188, Agnes makes a conscious decision concerning the character Louise in the story she’s writing. What are Agnes’s reasons for her choice? Do you feel it is a fair one?
10. Harrison is at a crossroads in the novel’s final chapter, torn between his family and duty and a chance at true love. Which path do you think he will choose? What, in your opinion, is the right decision?
11. Early in the novel, Agnes ponders the definition of a good person (page 35). Which of the novel’s characters do you think might be considered “good”? Explain your answer.
12. Many of the characters in the novel have made or will make significant sacrifices in their lives. Identify some of these sacrifices. Are they necessary? Are they justifiable?

13. Although the novel centers on a happy occasion, the characters also experience a great deal of disillusionment. Does this story end on a hopeful note? Why or why not?
14. The reunion provides ample opportunity to see changes in the various friends since their days at Kidd Academy. How does each character's 1974 teenage self compare with his or her 2001 adult self?
15. How do you think this reunion weekend will ultimately influence the group? What is the likelihood that these high school friends will be in touch with one another after the wedding?

LOOK FOR THESE OTHER NOVELS BY ANITA SHREVE

Light on Snow

“An evening’s entertainment that will linger at the edges of your mind for days. . . . Shreve’s writing is spare, neat, and crisp, yet the principal characters are fully formed, and their lives worth caring about.”
— Lynn Hopper, *Indianapolis Star*

All He Ever Wanted

“Anita Shreve is up to her old page-turning tricks. . . . There’s something addictive about her literary tales of love and lust. . . . She is a master at depicting passion’s ferocious grip.”
— Jocelyn McClurg, *USA Today*

Sea Glass

“Shreve simply has the Gift — the ability to hook you from the first page and not let go until the final word.”
— Zofia Smardz, *Washington Post Book World*

The Last Time They Met

“*The Last Time They Met* is a flat-out, can’t-put-it-down page-turner. . . . A riveting story that teases and confounds as it moves back in time from the end to the start of a love affair.”
— Shelby Hearon, *Chicago Tribune*



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LOOK FOR THESE OTHER NOVELS BY ANITA SHREVE

Fortune's Rocks

"*Fortune's Rocks* kept me reading long into the night — and found me back at it right after breakfast. . . . Shreve renders an adolescent girl's plunge into disastrous passion with excruciating precision and acuteness." — Katherine A. Powers, *Boston Globe*

The Pilot's Wife

"From cover to rapidly reached cover, *The Pilot's Wife* is beautifully plotted, tensely paced, and thoroughly absorbing." — Heller McAlpin, *Newsday*

The Weight of Water

"An engrossing tale. . . . Shreve unravels themes of adultery, jealousy, crimes of passion, incest, negligence, and loss . . . ultimately creating a nearly intolerable tension. . . . A haunting novel." — Susan Kenney, *New York Times Book Review*

Resistance

"A simple story set in terrible times. I reached the last chapter with hungry eyes, wanting more." — Danielle Roter, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*



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