
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

Testimony

A NOVEL BY

Anita Shreve

A conversation with the author

Anita Shreve talks with her editor, Asya Muchnick,
about the origins of *Testimony*

The story is told in multiple voices. Why did you choose to write Testimony this way?

Originally I started writing *Testimony* from the headmaster's point of view alone, and I realized about fifty pages into it that he is not privy to certain bits of information that are critical. And I began to think about the play *The Laramie Project* and Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, which I had seen and read very recently. So I thought that taking each person who had been affected, either very directly or peripherally, and giving him or her a voice, would be a better way to tell the story. And actually, it was not just a better way to tell the story, it was immensely more exciting and challenging to me.

What are the challenges of writing from more than one perspective?

What you want to make sure is that each voice is distinctly different and that you're not overlapping—the next person along isn't repeating information that the reader already knows. In a way, it's a mosaic when you're done. But it also has to have forward momentum, and there has to be some element of suspense.

You often write about the way that a single action or decision can change the course of a life. The consequences of a single reckless

act seems to be a theme of Testimony. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Yes, it's a theme of a number of my books. I could mention *The Weight of Water*, for example. There is a moment, a careless second, in that book that just completely destroys the lives of so many people. I think anyone who has children—probably everybody thinks about these things all the time—but anyone who has children thinks about them a great deal, because you're so aware of getting on the wrong plane, or of a child not looking as he crosses the street. Or, as in the case of *Testimony*, getting drunk and just being very uninhibited and, even knowing that something is a foolish thing to do, going ahead and doing it—and it sets a lot of serious actions in motion and has dire consequences.

So Testimony deals in part with teenage drinking, as you just mentioned. Do you believe that this is, as some people describe it, an epidemic?

I do. I absolutely do. I've been stunned by it. My children are older now, but when they were younger, like thirteen and fourteen, I would hear stories—not necessarily from them—but I would hear stories from other parents about how kids were drinking, really drinking too much. Drinking to the point where they were passing out. I thought, "Wow, we're all so complacent. Why aren't we outraged about this? Why aren't we doing something?" I found it interesting that other mothers I spoke to would talk about it, and every single one of them believed that their own child was not doing it. Even though the odds would tell you that that was simply not possible. You know, everyone

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was willing to admit, “Yes, it’s an epidemic.” But no one really took it upon herself to actually do something about it.

I’m kind of amazed by this because the excess drinking spans a lot of years, it really spans from about age thirteen to age twenty. We’re talking about half a generation. And you always wonder about the life choices that these children, now adults, will be making.

When you’re in the middle of writing a novel, do you read other fiction? Or do you find other fictional voices distracting?

I’ve heard that other writers don’t read. In fact I have a lot of writer friends who don’t. I can’t imagine what that’s like, to go for a year and a half without reading anything. I’m a voracious reader. I’m an addict. And in fact I almost can’t fall asleep at night unless I’ve read part of a book. I sometimes find myself in hotels way past any shopping hour and realize that I haven’t brought my book with me, and panic sets in. I’ve been known to go down to the concierge in my bathrobe begging for some book that’s in the back room, because I just love reading. It’s something I so look forward to. I cannot imagine going that long without it. And presumably, if you’re writing most of the time, since that’s what you do, you’d be depriving yourself of reading indefinitely.

How do you get the ideas for your books? Do you have something in mind for a long time before you start writing it or does it just come to you in a flash?

You know, an idea will come to me. And that’s easy. The ideas are easy. What’s difficult is finding the way to tell the story. I

have many manuscripts that are about fifty to seventy-five pages long in which I couldn't find the right way to tell the story, and I knew it wasn't going to sustain me through to the end of the book. But the idea was good. A number of those I put in a drawer. And a number of those manuscripts in drawers have subsequently turned out to be novels. So sometimes it's just a matter of putting it away and letting it ferment for a while and then looking at it with a fresh eye and seeing exactly how you need to do it.

Some of your books clearly have involved a certain amount of research into a particular place or time. Do you do that research as you're writing or do you leave places in the manuscript to be filled in later and then go and do your research?

I think novelists research on a need-to-know basis. It's very unlike a scholar, who would amass all the research and then, being very comfortable with that, would attempt to write the novel. My feeling is that—unlike writing historical fiction, let's say, where fiction is at the service of history and you're really trying to elucidate a point or an era—fiction writers use history in the service of fiction. And very much *in the service of*, in the sense that you only research to the point where you have the exact detail you want. You can always tell when a writer has been too reluctant not to use everything. Because you see paragraphs of detail when one would have done, one detail would have given the scene so much clarity. The temptation is to use everything.

Coming back more specifically to Testimony, because you do represent these different points of view, and some of the characters

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that you're writing about are quite flawed or have done something wrong: Did you find it more emotionally difficult or maybe more interesting to write from the perspective of someone who has done the wronging, than from the perspective of someone who has been wronged? How was that different for you?

All of the characters are very different. Some of the principals—the three boys and the girl—all had very different takes on what happened, and they respond in different ways. The catalyst in the novel is a researcher from the University of Vermont. Sometimes the characters choose not to answer the questionnaire, but it makes them relive the past. Some of them are speaking directly to the researcher. Some are writing their own perspective. I just loved that aspect of it. I would get a voice in my head and I would just sort of let it develop. I would say this was one of the most enjoyable—I mean, it's a funny thing to say because the novel is very serious and has serious outcomes for a number of people—but in terms of pure writing it was very enjoyable.

As you mentioned, the consequences for some of the characters are quite devastating. Do you feel that there is any sort of redeeming aspect at the end of this experience that any of the characters take away? Is it possible for even a terrible situation to be redeemed in the aftermath?

Yes, I think it is, and I think that Rob's letter at the end is meant to do exactly that. In a way, it's a coda. And the message that he leaves us with, which I think is important, is that "We're not necessarily ruined. Our lives have stepped off a path that they

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were meant to take, but in stepping off that path we've had the challenge of trying to figure out something new." I think Rob almost leaves the reader with a note of hope that he's going to go off, and he's a little bit excited about having stepped off the path.

Asya Muchnick's conversation with Anita Shreve was recorded in August 2008. To listen to a podcast of the complete interview, visit www.AnitaShreve.com or www.HachetteBookGroup.com.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Several characters in *Testimony* comment that if the sexual incident at Avery had occurred at a local public school, it would have drawn little or no attention. Do you agree with this assessment? Is it fair that this elite institution be held to a different standard?
2. When Mike initially brings J. Dot into his office and accuses him of taking advantage of the girl in the video, J. Dot replies, “She knew better” (page 123). Do you think that Sienna knew better? Setting aside the letter of the law, how responsible do you think Sienna is for what happened?
3. The story in *Testimony* is told from many different perspectives. Why do you think Anita Shreve chose this narrative style for the novel? Can you see any connection between this style and some of the novel’s themes?
4. When Silas first reflects on what he did on the videotape, he repeats the phrase “I wanted” (page 43). When Anna recounts her affair with Mike, she too uses this refrain, “I wanted” (page 210). What do Silas and Anna each want? Are these purely sexual wants or are they more complicated? Why do you think mother and son use the same language of desire to condemn themselves? How much do you think desire is to blame for what happened?
5. Some characters in *Testimony*—for example, the students—narrate from the first-person point of view. For other

characters, such as Mike and Owen, the author always uses the third person. Rob's mother, Ellen, speaks in the second person. What do these different points of view tell you about the roles of various characters in the story? Did you find yourself empathizing most with any character in particular?

6. When Sienna calls her mother on Wednesday morning (page 129), she cries hysterically. Her roommate, Laura, implies that Sienna may have been acting. Do you think that Sienna is acting or are her emotions genuine? Is it possible for both to be true at the same time?
7. Discuss the evolution of Anna and Owen's marriage over the course of the novel. Are you surprised that they do not separate after all that has happened? Do you believe that by the end of the book Owen has forgiven Anna?
8. To describe her relationship with Silas, Noelle often uses the metaphor of walking through doors together. Did you feel this was an apt metaphor? How does the significance of this image change as the novel progresses?
9. Some of the parents of the boys feel a keen sense of responsibility for their sons' behavior. Ellen in particular says, "And, of course, you are. You are responsible" (page 189). Do you believe the parents of J. Dot, Silas, and Rob made decisions that in some way led to this event? How culpable should parents of teenagers feel for the behavior of their children?
10. As Silas writes in his journal, all his entries are addressed to Noelle. How does the tenor of the letters change in the

course of the novel? Do you believe Noelle is capable of forgiving him? Should she forgive him?

11. Were you surprised when you learned who filmed the incident? All of the students involved seem to have made an unspoken agreement to protect this person's identity. Do you agree with their reasons for doing so?
12. One of the big questions driving *Testimony* is "Why did these students do what they did?" Rob writes in his letter to Ms. Barnard, "It was an act without a why" (page 303). What does he mean by this? Do you think the other three would agree with Rob's assessment? If not, how might their answers be different?
13. What do you think will happen to the students in the future? What course can you see their lives taking in the months and years following the close of the novel? How will they be affected by the incident and its aftermath?
14. At the end of the novel, Rob suggests that, in an unexpected way, his life may turn out better because of what happened at Avery (page 304). Do you agree with his logic? Can you see any redemptive effects the scandal may have for other characters?