
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

The Last Time
They Met

A NOVEL BY

Anita Shreve



*A brief conversation
with Anita Shreve*

The character Thomas Janes also appears in one of your earlier novels, The Weight of Water. What compelled you to write about him again? Do you consider this book a sort of sequel?

Well, it's kind of a prequel and a sequel. The idea for *The Last Time They Met*, the conceit of the book, is contained within a couple of sentences in *The Weight of Water* — in a reference to Thomas Janes's life's work. So, in a sense, he had to come with the package.

You've written about love affairs before. In what ways is the story in The Last Time They Met different?

The story is about two people who have a lifelong passion for each other even though they only meet three times in their lives — when they're fifty-two, when they're twenty-six, and when they're seventeen. You might say the book is about moments of no return. It's about missed and retrieved opportunities, about time and memory.

The novel moves backward in time, with Linda and Thomas fifty-two years old at the beginning and seventeen at the end. Did you write the novel in this reverse order?

Yes, I wrote it backwards. It was challenging because I had to keep the thread of suspense alive even though the reader starts at the end and moves toward the beginning. I had to plant clues along the way so that when the reader got to the end of the book somehow it would all make sense.

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I don't set out with an agenda when I write. I let the characters evolve. Sometimes it's similar to seeing a ravaged face on a street. You wonder what came before to create what you see.

Many readers are surprised by the novel's ending.

Well, you should feel at the end of the book — really, on the last page — that the whole story is sort of turned on its ear.

Part of The Last Time They Met is set in Kenya, where you lived for a while. Are there autobiographical elements in the book?

Well, the story is not autobiographical. But, yes, I lived in Africa for three years in the late 1970s. It was the only time in my life that I kept journals. And when I had the idea for this book, I went up to the attic and after a few days I unearthed these old journals. They were incredibly valuable. They lent an impressionistic immediacy to the book that I might not otherwise have been able to tap into.

I spend the majority of my writing life imagining other people's lives. Writing itself is about experiencing the un-lived life in many senses.

*Reading group questions and
topics for discussion*

1. “She peered into the mirror. Tonight she would wear long earrings of pink Lucite. She would put her lenses back in and use a lipstick that didn’t clash with the Lucite, and that would be that. Seen from a certain angle, she might simply disappear” (page 8). How would you characterize Linda’s self-image at age fifty-two? What events and circumstances in her life have contributed to Linda’s sense of self and, in particular, to her impulse toward self-effacement?
2. Speaking about love, Linda says, “I believe it to be the central drama of our lives. For most of us, that is. . . . It’s something extraordinary that happens to ordinary people.” Do you agree? To what extent is love the central drama of your life? Of the lives of the people around you?
3. What is the significance of Linda’s success as a poet? How does it color Thomas’s response to her when they meet again at the writers’ festival?
4. Linda and Thomas feel an abiding passion for each other over many years. And yet Linda is also deeply in love with Vincent; her marriage to him was ostensibly happy and of profound importance to her. Do you believe it’s possible to be passionately in love with two people at the same time?

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5. Discuss Linda's relationship with her children. Do you consider her a good mother? Is there more she could or should have done to help Marcus? Why does Linda feel that every conversation with one's child, even one's adult child, must be a "mix of truth and lies" (page 58)?
6. Why is Thomas ambivalent about living in Kenya? How and why is his response to Africa different from Linda's? From Regina's?
7. Linda and Thomas have very different family backgrounds. Why is the teenage Thomas immediately drawn to Linda when she walks into his high school English class? Why, soon after, is she drawn to him? Is this a case of opposites attracting?
8. Thomas's most celebrated collection of verse is entitled *The Magdalene Poems*. Why do you think he chose this title?
9. How do you interpret the novel's ending? Identify passages throughout the novel that might have prepared you for what is fully revealed only at the very end of the book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anita Shreve is the author of several internationally praised and bestselling novels, among them *Body Surfing*; *A Wedding in December*; *Light on Snow*; *All He Ever Wanted*; *Sea Glass*; *The Last Time They Met*; *Fortune's Rocks*; *The Pilot's Wife*, which was a selection of Oprah's Book Club; *The Weight of Water*, which was a finalist for England's prestigious Orange Prize and for which the author received the New England Book Award and the PEN / L. L. Winship Award; *Resistance*; *Where or When*; *Strange Fits of Passion*; and *Eden Close*. She lives in Massachusetts. For more information, visit www.AnitaShreve.com.

. . . AND HER MOST RECENT NOVEL

In October 2008, Little, Brown and Company will publish Anita Shreve's *Testimony*. Following is a preview from the novel's opening pages.

It was a small cassette, not much bigger than the palm of his hand, and when Mike thought about the terrible license and risk exhibited on the tape, as well as its resultant destructive power, it was as though the two-by-three plastic package had been radioactive. Which it may as well have been, since it had produced something very like radiation sickness throughout the school, reducing the value of an Avery education, destroying at least two marriages that he knew of, ruining the futures of three students, and, most horrifying of all, resulting in a death. After Kasia brought Mike the tape in a white letter envelope (as if he might be going to mail it to someone!), Mike walked home with it and watched it on his television — an enormously complicated and frustrating task since he first had to find his own movie camera that used similar tapes and figure out how to connect its various cables to the television so that the tape could play through the camera. Sometimes Mike wished he had just slipped the offensive tape into a pot of boiling water, or sent it out with the trash in a white plastic drawstring bag, or spooled it out with a pencil and wadded it into a big mess. Although he doubted he could have controlled the potential scandal, he might have been able to choreograph it differently, possibly limiting some of the damage.

Much appeared to have happened before the camera in the unseen hand focused on the quartet. One saw the girl (always *the girl* in Mike's eyes) turning (twirling, it seemed to be) away from a tall, slender boy who still had his jeans on, and toward a somewhat shorter, more solidly built naked young man, who caught the young

girl and bent to suck on her right nipple. At that point in the tape, no faces were visible, doubtless a deliberate edit on the part of the person behind the camera. Also, at that moment in time, Mike, who was then headmaster of Avery Academy, did not recognize the setting as a dorm room, though he would soon do so. The shorter boy then turned her to face the first boy, who by then was unbuckling his belt, his jeans sliding off in one go, as if they were cartoon pants, too big for the boy's slender hips. The camera panned jerkily, instantly causing in Mike the beginnings of motion sickness, to a narrow dorm bed on which a third boy, entirely naked and appearing to be slightly older than the other two boys, lay stroking himself. And Mike remembered, among other images he wished he could excise from his brain, the truly impressive length of the young man's empurpled penis and the concentrated tautness of the muscles of the boy's chest and arms. The camera slid back to the center of the room, producing a second dip and rise in Mike's stomach, to the two standing boys and the now kneeling girl.

It was at this point in the tape that Mike realized there was sound attached, for he heard a kind of exaggerated groaning from the side of the room where the bed was, as well as hard-pounding music (though the latter seemed to be, for some reason, muted). Meanwhile, the tall boy with the slender shoulders was holding the blond head of the girl to his crotch. She appeared to know what to do — even to have, at some point prior to the event, *practiced* what to do — for Mike couldn't help but notice a certain expertise, a way of drawing the standing boy's engorged penis toward her so that it seemed she might painfully stretch it before gently swooping forward and seeming to swallow it whole. The slender boy came with an explosive adolescent sound, as if taken by surprise. The cameraman or -woman (it was difficult to picture a girl behind the camera) swung the lens up to capture the boy's face, which, with a start, Mike Bordwin recognized. He had assumed, when Kasia had solemnly

handed him the tape just an hour earlier, saying to him in an extremely sober tone, *I think you should take a look at this*, that the tape was simply confiscated pornography (not that the tape *wasn't* pornographic) — something a dorm parent might have dealt with. The idea that there would be recognizable people attached to the action — students he had seen in hallways, in the cafeteria, and on the basketball court — did not really occur to him until he saw the face of the boy, contorted as it was in a paroxysm of pleasure and therefore somewhat grotesque to the outside observer. He thought, *Rob*, and *It can't be*. The Rob he had known was a polite, hardworking student who also happened to be an outstanding forward on the basketball team. And was that how Mike had seen his students, he wondered then, even as he was observing the moment of coming on Rob's face, as *excellent student* or *promising actor* or *pretentious brownnoser* or *good arm*? Because it was perfectly apparent that such descriptive tags were entirely inadequate. The Rob whom Mike had known seemed to be but an embryo of the full-fledged sexual being on the tape. There was a kind of seizure then in Mike's chest as he suddenly, from different parts of his brain, received alarming and unwanted bits of information, not unlike an air traffic controller watching several blips on his radar screen inexplicably about to collide. The girl hardly seemed to come up for air when she turned to the other standing boy, whose face had not been visible during the first pan but which now clearly was, jolting the headmaster and causing him to cry out the name of the boy — *Silas* — and to emit a groan of his own, entirely unsexual. Silas and the girl lay down on the floor with Silas on top and went at it in an old-fashioned though frenetic way, the girl's body thudding lightly onto what was clearly now a dormitory floor, dotted with a half-dozen beer cans. Mike closed his eyes, not wanting to watch this particular boy have his own paroxysmal seizure. When he opened them again, the camera was on the face of the girl, who was either experiencing the heights

of pleasure or giving an excellent imitation of same. It was then that he saw the girl was very young — very, *very* young: the number *fourteen* floated through his brain — though he didn't at that time know her name. It was not unusual for the headmaster not to know all of the students by name, particularly the underclassmen who hadn't yet distinguished themselves, which Mike was pretty certain she had not. He suddenly wondered how many other persons — faculty or students — had watched this performance on the tape, this particular worry marking perhaps the worst moment of his life to date (though far worse was yet to come).

Groping for the camera, he found and pressed the *pause* button. He was on his knees in his empty house, his breath tight, causing him to put his hand to his chest as if an angina attack might be coming. That any number of people might already have seen the tape was creating in Mike what felt like a temporary heart stoppage but what was really a temporary brain stoppage, his neurons refusing to fire, or whatever they did — *connect* — because he couldn't process another thought, the last having been too awful to contemplate, with its attendant images segueing into the words *police* and *rape* and *alcohol* and *press*, none of which any headmaster wanted in any sequence in any sentence. It seemed important then to focus on the girl to determine how willing a participant she had been in this . . . this *thing* that he was witnessing. Since he didn't have the heart to rewind and review what had gone before, he poked *play*, wishing he could slow down the action, not so that he could enjoy it more — Lord, no — but so that his whole being could catch up to what was inevitably going to be a difficult future. To ease into it, so to speak.

The tape started again with what felt like a snap, once more zooming in on the girl's face. Mike saw, to his dismay, that no matter how experienced she had seemed earlier (and also seemed now, in her fairly convincing expression of ecstasy), she was, in fact, as he had suspected, very young indeed. A freshman, there could be no

doubt about it. He thought he could almost retrieve the face and body in a uniform — field hockey? soccer? JV? thirds? — and he was certain that she was a boarder, not a day student like Silas, who seemed to have collapsed upon the girl, who was smiling now, actually smiling. *Is this good or bad?* Mike wondered.

There seemed to be a great deal of chaos. Perhaps the unseen hand had lowered the camera for a moment. Mike narrowed his eyes to keep the nausea at bay while the lens momentarily came to rest on the perfectly innocent corner of a desk leg, with a boy's dirty white sneaker, its laces untied, leaning against it. Mike felt an ache in his throat at the sheer innocence of that image, since it seemed to represent, at that moment, a universe of loss. In the background, there were sounds — none of them very articulate. Mike was fairly certain he heard *Hey* and *Go for it* and *Your turn* (and not necessarily in that order), and then the lens, with a sudden, wild swoop, settled upon the body of the third boy. (*Boy*, Mike thought, *isn't at all accurate in this case*. There was a subtle moment in time when boys turned into men, and it had nothing to do with age or facial hair or voice timbre. It had to do, he had decided — and he had seen this happen hundreds of times over the course of nearly twenty years in a secondary-school setting — with musculature, the set of the jaw, the way the male held himself.) The young man was quite literally holding himself, masturbating over the supine body of the (Mike had to admit) heartbreakingly lovely girl, who appeared to be urging the young man on with rhythmic movements and even various contortions, doubtless learned from watching movies. The unseen person behind the camera had moved his or her vantage point, and one saw now, saw all too clearly in fact, the utter determination on the face of the young man, who was, Mike instantly recognized, a PG (postgraduate) brought to the school to take the basketball team to the play-offs. It was then that Mike quickly calculated and arrived at the number *nineteen* just before the PG, whom the other students called J. Dot (as in *J.Robles@Avery.edu*), came all over the chest and

neck and chin of the girl who was *at least* four years younger, causing Mike to reach forward and push *stop*, the way he wished he could push a *stop* button on the future long enough to figure out what to do with this very unwanted piece of celluloid now poised to explode inside his camera.

He sat back against the sofa in the TV room. Mike had tried, in the early years of their residence in the impressive Georgian, to refer to the room as a *library*, as befitted his position in life, but in fact Meg and he had spent more time there watching television and DVDs than they had reading, and so they had started calling it what it really was. Mike was panting slightly, his mouth dry. That there was probably more to the tape seemed unthinkable. (And, after all, hadn't all three boys come within minutes of one another? But then again, these were teenage boys.) He doubted that he could watch any more. He was both glad and sorry that Meg was not in the house, glad because he needed to think about what to do, and sorry because it was just conceivable she might have comforted him, though probably not. Would Meg have been as shocked as he? Was she closer to the kids? Did she understand them better?

Mike immediately wondered when the event had taken place and in what dorm. It seemed likely that the incident had followed a drinking binge, to judge from the number of beer cans on the floor. Perhaps there was a clue on a desk or a date marked on a calendar. It almost certainly had to have been on a Saturday night, because students had to be present for study hall in their dorms at eight p.m. weekday evenings as well as on the Friday night before a Class Saturday. There had been a school dance the previous weekend. Geoff Coggeshall, the dean of students, had mentioned that there had been the usual number of kids who had been caught drinking or who were suspected of it. The abuse of alcohol was impossible to stop and was at the top of the list of worries for nearly every headmaster or principal of every secondary school in the country. Though there had been many assemblies and seminars on the

subject, it was Mike's opinion that the problem was more severe than it had been in previous years. He sometimes wondered if all the focus on alcoholism, meant to promote awareness of the dangers of drinking, had not, in fact, subtly brought it to the fore in a way it had not been so blatantly *important* before. Every generation of students had done its share of binge drinking, but it was pretty clear, from all the data he had seen, that the drinking was starting at an earlier age and was both more habitual and more intense than it had been just a decade earlier.

He lay his head back against the sofa and closed his eyes. The house was empty and quiet. He could hear the wind skidding against the windows and, from the kitchen, the sound of ice cubes tumbling in the Viking, recently installed. Tasks now needed to be accomplished, students queried, the Disciplinary Committee convened, and all of this conducted beneath the radar of the press, which would, if they got wind of the story, revel in a private-school scandal. In this, Mike thought that private schools had been unfairly singled out. He doubted that such a tape would have been of any interest to the press had it surfaced at the local regional high school, for example. The tape might have circulated underground, students might have been expelled, and meetings might have been held, yet it was likely that the incident would have been greeted with indifference not only by the local newspaper, the *Avery Crier* (its editor, Walter Myers, could be talked down from just about any story that might cause embarrassment to local kids and parents), but also by the regional and national press. Mike thought the national media would scoff at the idea that sex and alcohol, even sex and alcohol involving a fourteen-year-old girl in a public-high-school setting, was news of any sort; *whereas* if the same set of facts, but in a private-school setting, were to pass across the computer screen of a reporter at the *Rutland Herald* or the *Boston Globe*, it was entirely possible that the reporter would be dispatched to Avery to find out *what was going on*. In such a story, there was juice, there was heat,

there was blood. There was also, if this tape had been copied in any way, *footage*. Was it because private schools were held to higher standards, according to which such an incident ought to be nearly unthinkable? Or was it because everyone loved to see the elite (even if that elite involved a local farmer's son on scholarship) brought down and ridiculed? A little of both, Mike guessed, with emphasis on the latter.

More troubling, however, was the thought of police involvement. Though Mike felt nothing but revulsion when he thought of the Silas and Rob he'd just seen on the tape (boys whom he had previously much respected and even, in Silas's case, been quite fond of), the idea of them being led away from the administration building in handcuffs was appalling. (Did police routinely handcuff boys suspected of sexual assault, which was what this particular crime, in the state of Vermont, was deemed?) *Police* in this case meant either Gary Quinney or Bernie Herrmann, neither of whom would find any satisfaction in the arrest; Gary was, after all, Silas's uncle. Would the boys then appear some months later in the dowager courthouse across the street from the gates of Avery, the building itself smug in its self-righteousness? Mike's job would be at risk, and any number of teachers who were supposed to be supervising either the dance or the dorm that evening might be fired, for one could not expect the trustees to view the incident and its attendant legal fuss lightly. Would the boys then go to jail, to the Vermont State Prison at Windsor, where almost certainly they would be raped in turn?

Mike reined in his thoughts. He was getting carried away. No, he had to get a grip and act quickly. Three boys were in trouble, and a girl . . . well, presumably, if it did turn out to be a case of sexual assault, the trouble had already occurred to the girl, though the fallout for her might be endless.

Mike got up off the floor and sat on the sofa while he loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, as if increasing blood flow to the brain might help solve his problem. And it was

then that the word *containment* entered his mind. And with that word, moral, ethical, and political choices were made, though Mike would realize the implications of these only later, when it occurred to him that he might have chosen at that moment another word, such as *revelation*, *say*, or *help*.

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