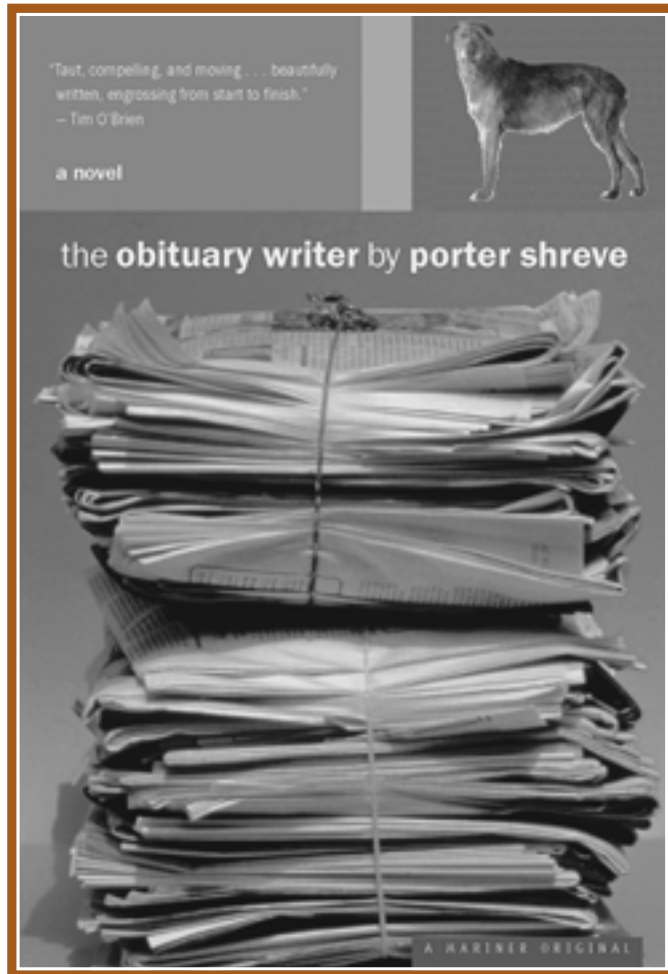




MARINER BOOKS
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

A Reader's Guide



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A Mariner Original

"It's a gem of a first novel . . . with just the right blend of satire and thriller to keep any reader going."

— Mary Morris

THE OBITUARY WRITER

"A fine novel, whose surprises are—very pleasingly—inevitable and right."

—Charles Baxter

Gordie Hatch is twenty-two, disarmingly naïve, and certain that his first job as a journalist—junior obituary writer for the *St. Louis Independent*—is a steppingstone to a sterling career. His model and ideal is his father, who died when Gordie was five and whose journalistic exploits have been kept ever fresh by Gordie's mother's stories.

Gordie watches helplessly as the dramatic events of 1989—the very events that could be his lucky break—unfold. His mother keeps badgering him about his high-school sweetheart, who has just moved to St. Louis and from whom Gordie distanced himself four summers ago. His advancers—the seventy-nine anticipatory obituaries that Gordie has written on his own time—draw a reprimand from his boss. Nothing can prepare him, however, for the phone call from Alicia Whiting, a young widow with an accent he can't quite place. When Gordie agrees to meet the insistent Alicia, against his better judgment, his journalistic curiosity quickly gives way to an obsessive love for Alicia and an equally obsessive search for the truth behind the Whiting family.

Shot through with affectionate humor, *The Obituary Writer* introduces an author of rare talent and enormous heart. Porter Shreve brings a deft touch to the moments that mark a young person's entry into the world and a penetrating eye to the ways in which the lead story can be seductively, wonderfully misleading. "It's a delightful read, the kind of book one simply wants to nestle into . . . The reader is propelled forward quite willingly through the book's own special world." (Elizabeth Strout)

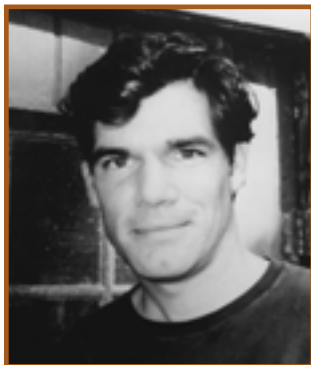
FOR DISCUSSION

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups, and for every reader, provide a deeper understanding of *The Obituary Writer*.

1. To what extent is Gordie's spectral father the most important person in Gordie's life? How would you describe the role of Gordie's father in his life, particularly in relation to Gordie's ambitions?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Gordie and his mother? What kind of a son is he? What kind of a mother has she been? To what extent—and with what consequences—has Lorraine determined her son's character and outlook on the world?

3. After learning the truth about his father, Gordie tells his mother, “I do understand why you thought those stories were necessary.” Why may Lorraine’s untrue stories about Gordie’s father have been necessary?
4. How does Shreve present Gordie’s struggle between his professional ambitions and his personal relationships and desires? Gordie tells us, “My job was taking the measure of people’s lives.” To what extent does he succeed or fail in “taking the measure” of his own and others’ lives?
5. In his job, Gordie tells us, he believed he “merely had to hunker down, work hard, and await the inevitable.” What does he expect the inevitable to be? In what ways, and to what extent, are his subsequent experiences inevitable?
6. Gordie recalls the school-age Thea as “moving with ease from circle to circle, hiding the wounds of abandonment.” What role does a sense of, or the reality of, abandonment play in the lives of Thea, Gordie, Alicia, Lorraine, and others? What “wounds of abandonment” do they suffer?
7. Recalling the summer of his break-up with Thea, Gordie says, “Clearly I had not been ready for the complexities of love.” What other complexities of life is he not ready for? With what consequences?
8. Why does Gordie lie or, at best, fantasize so consistently—to his mother, to others, and to himself? How are Gordie’s fantasies, daydreams, and lies related to the reality of his present situation and his likely future? If “Alicia tells lies of convenience,” as Margaret Whiting contends, what kinds of lies does Gordie tell?
9. Surprised that he is “falling” for Alicia, Gordie states, “I’d always been a cautious person, alert to the dangers of the world.” To what extent is this true or not of Gordie’s outlook and actions? What examples of this caution do you find in the novel? Why is he not “alert to the dangers” posed by Alicia?
10. “I knew one thing about myself from my experience with Thea,” Gordie admits early in his relationship with Alicia: “I was a deeply jealous person.” In what ways does his jealousy manifest itself throughout the novel? What else does Gordie know about himself at this stage? What doesn’t he know?
11. Why doesn’t Gordie immediately recognize Alicia as the model for the triptych painting that so fascinates him? What kinds of blindness do Gordie and others exhibit? What “cures” Gordie’s and others’ blindness?
12. Both Alicia and Gordie are involved in creating lives and identities for themselves. In what ways are their efforts similar and in what ways different? Are they both “utterly transient,” as Margaret Whiting describes Alicia?
13. “I’ve always wanted to be a promoter of unsung heroes,” Gordie tells Margaret Whiting, by way of “explaining” his interest in Arthur Whiting. To what extent, beyond his own understanding, is this true of Gordie? How might it apply to his father?
14. Simultaneous with his dismissal from the *Independent*, Gordie believes, “for the first time, that perhaps I had a story. By instinct or accident I had been following a story all along.” What does he understand his story to be? What do we see as his story? Which turns out to be the more accurate?
15. How important in the novel is the question of truth versus belief or—in newspaper terms—the question of reporting the truth versus reporting what is believed to be true? Showing Alicia the newsroom for the first time, Gordie tells her, “It’s what journalism is all about. No secrets.” Has this been his understanding of journalism all along? What view of journalism’s aims does the novel finally present?
16. In what ways do Gordie’s behavior and attitude (his lack of objectivity, for example) indicate that he is unqualified to be a successful journalist? To what extent does his experience with Alicia correct his inadequacies? At what cost?
17. Much of the novel’s action involves death and the dead—from the importance of Gordie’s father, to Gordie’s job as junior obituary writer, to Arthur Whiting’s death and funeral, to Dr. Osborne and his fellow crime-scene ghouls. How would you relate this to Gordie’s personality, behavior, and attitudes?

PORTER SHREVE



Porter Shreve is coeditor of a series of anthologies published by Beacon Press: *Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America* (1997); *How We Want to Live: Narratives on Progress* (1998); and the forthcoming *Tales Out of School: Contemporary Writers on Their Student Years* (August 2000). Shreve was born in Washington, D.C., in 1966. His education included two years at the University of Missouri Journalism School in Columbia, Missouri. A former journalist and a graduate of the M.F.A. program at the University of Michigan—where he won a Meijer Fellowship in Creative Writing and Hopwood awards in the novel and short story—Shreve now lives and teaches in Ann Arbor. He is at work on a second novel.

A CONVERSATION WITH PORTER SHREVE

IS THERE A STORY BEHIND *THE OBITUARY WRITER*?

My grandfather began his career as a newspaper reporter with the *Cincinnati Post* in the 1930s. He had only been there a couple of months when a local woman was charged with poisoning her eighth husband. My grandfather was put on the story, which he followed straight through to the discovery that the first seven husbands had also been poisoned. During the trial, my grandfather and the older woman became quite taken with each other, and when she was sentenced to death, she invited him to be the only witness. She was the first woman electrocuted in Ohio. My novel's main female character began as a dyed-in-the-wool black widow. I had in mind that the narrative would unfold in much the way my grandfather's story had. But as I went from draft to draft, she became less the high villainess and more the endearing, if unstable, lost soul. I changed her name, reduced the number of husbands to one, removed much of the poison, and found that I had fallen for her too.

TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE IN JOURNALISM SHAPE GORDIE'S STORY? Like Gordie, I began my working career in journalism, but was never in love with it enough to become disenchanted. My job was very different from his. Mostly I worked nights, which meant the pressure was less intense, but I did have a nice vantage point for understanding the world of newspapers. Those years helped me get the details right. Journalism also led me to one of the central themes in my novel. As I was writing the book, I came to realize that Gordie in his personal life and journalism by its very creed happened to be after the same thing—the truth. Of course there are problems along the way: Which source to believe? Which narrative to trust? Entire belief systems can be built upon lies and subtle manipulations of the truth.

ALICIA WHITING IS ONE OF SEVERAL FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *THE OBITUARY WRITER*. CAN YOU SAY SOMETHING MORE ABOUT CREATING COMPLEX FEMALE CHARACTERS?

I feel comfortable writing female characters. I'm sure this has mostly to do with growing up in a house where women ran the show. My mother [Susan Richards Shreve], certainly, was a major force, but I also have two sisters with whom I'm very close. Two of my widowed grandmothers lived in the house with us. We also rented out rooms wherever we lived, and more often than not our boarders were women. So I spent my childhood at the kitchen table listening to women talk.

GORDIE SEEMS TO STRUGGLE BETWEEN HIS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PERSONAS. ISN'T AN OBITUARY, AFTER ALL, THE PERFECT EXAMPLE OF THE COLLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIVES? That's true. In an obituary a private individual's life is printed in a public forum. But I didn't think much about the underlying connection when I was writing. I just worried about character, getting to know these people who were filling up my pages. Idea and meaning are the last things to come. For the first couple of years I couldn't have told you much about what my novel was trying to do. Now I know that much of the tension in the novel is what you say—public versus private. It's about that time in a young person's life when he stops turning inward and begins to look out. I didn't think much about it, except perhaps unconsciously. Like most novelists, I just worked and reworked, and by and by the odd pieces found shape.

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