
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

RESISTANCE

A NOVEL BY

Anita Shreve



A Conversation with Anita Shreve

How did you get the idea for this novel? The dedication says “For our fathers who flew in the war.” Was your own father a flyer?

Resistance is dedicated to all of our fathers who flew in World War II, and there is a reference to “all the things our fathers couldn’t tell us” about the war, later in the novel. But the dedication is specific, too. I am dedicating this book not only to my own father, who flew reconnaissance missions over Germany during World War II, but also to William Osborn, who was a B-17 pilot, and on whom this novel is partially based.

William Osborn crash-landed his B-17 in southern Belgium in December 1943. He was hidden by the Belgian resistance for several months and then later captured by the Germans when he was betrayed by a double agent. He spent the remainder of the war in a German prison camp.

William Osborn died in 1979. After his death, two letters, written by the woman who had sheltered Osborn and sent to Osborn’s mother, found their way to me. The letters are wrenching to read. Within the polite context of a European woman writing to an American woman to tell her that her son was all right the last time she saw him, there is a second story — enigmatic, barely audible, poignant — about a possible relationship between a Belgian resistance worker and an American pilot. It was just the barest of suggestions, that hint, that was the wellspring of this novel.

Many of your novels have been set in the present. Did the World War II setting of this novel offer you any new challenges or opportunities? What kind of research did you do for the novel?

In August of 1993, I traveled to a small village in the south of Belgium to attend the dedication of a monument erected to the memory of the

B-17 that had fallen into their area in December 1943. The B-17 was William Osborn's plane. The dedication was moving, particularly the outpouring of gratitude toward the Americans who had come so far to fight for Belgium, and so many of whom died in Europe. During my visit in the south of Belgium, I met a number of people who had lived there through the war and one man, in particular, who had written several monographs not only on the crash of the B-17, but also on the role of the Maquis in southern Belgium during the war. I can barely speak French, and he could not speak any English, but somehow, between us, we were able to communicate. Back in this country, I painstakingly translated his monographs (my written French is hardly better than my spoken). Several episodes in the book are based on real occurrences: the shooting of the German guards, the terrible reprisals in the village.

Writing *Resistance* was challenging in that I had to imagine myself in that particular country in that particular period. I had help from a Belgian woman who sought answers to many of my questions about Belgium by enlisting the aid of her relatives back home, several of whom had lived through World War II. I don't know what her phone bill was, but I imagine it was significant.

Actually, the most difficult research had to do with the scenes of flying and crashing a B-17. It seemed an act of enormous hubris to put myself behind the controls of a wounded B-17. Often I just had to close my eyes and jump.

After I'd finished "jumping," I sent the flying sequences to John Rising, Chief Pilot of the Collings Foundation — a group that restores B-17s and flies them to air shows around the country. I remember the day that he called to tell that, apart from one or two details, I had got the flying portions "right" as one of the most satisfying experiences of the whole process of bringing *Resistance* to creation. I think this pleasure had a lot to do with having once been a journalist. Even when I'm writing fiction, if there are historical or factual details, I have the sense that somewhere there will be a fact-checker I have to answer to.

Resistance, however, is not a historical novel in the way we classically think of them. World War II is the canvas, but the heart of the story is the love affair between Claire Daussois and Lieutenant Ted Brice.

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Many of the resistance fighters in this book are women. Is this typical? Historically, did women have a strong role in the resistance?

Yes, they did — in many ways — and *Resistance* highlights two of them. Young women, even teenage girls, were recruited by the resistance movement because they were able to get away with so much. Most of them worked as couriers, carrying leaflets or even grenades, under the seemingly innocent groceries in the panniers of their bicycles. When stopped by sentries, young women had the best chance of bluffing or charming the sentries into letting them go. Able young men who were moving about with parcels were always suspect and much more likely to be subjected to an interrogation.

Other women also played a key role in the resistance movement, not only by hiding refugees in secret places in their homes, but also by helping to supply food for the growing army of refugees who had no ration books of their own. No small task. These women begged, borrowed, stole, and traded in the black market — all at considerable risk to themselves.

How do the themes, situations, and characters in Resistance relate to those in your previous fiction?

Of course, I think that all of the novels are quite different. But there are aspects of each that doubtless point to preoccupations of mind as a writer. Unfashionably, I believe in story. Well, “believe” is perhaps too strong; it’s more that I *want* a story — not only in the books I read, but also in my own work. Now that I think of it, I’m a bit obsessed with story, and it’s probably an addiction. If I haven’t had some form of “story” in the evening — a novel or a movie (even a made-for-TV movie), I can’t go to sleep.

I think that in my novels I try to tell a catastrophic story in an uncatastrophic manner. The tension between the event and the words and sentences used to tell about that event is what interests me as a writer. As I write, I have a sense of quiet all around me. I think that one of the most masterful examples of a catastrophic story told quietly is *Ethan Frome*. I keep trying to achieve *Ethan Frome* in all the novels I write, and since I am never likely even to come close to that ideal, I probably have a long future as a writer ahead of me.

Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. *Resistance* captures the life of a community under brutal foreign occupation. Some people actively resist; many others sympathize with the resistance; and others cooperate with the occupiers. Discuss the various reactions of some of the key characters. Does this extreme experience reveal each person's true character? Or does it transform them in some ways?
2. Claire observes "It was odd . . . how perfectly ordinary people, people who might not have amounted to much, people one hadn't even noticed or liked, had been transformed by the war" (page 79). What does she witness in her colleagues? How has she herself changed, if at all?
3. The young boy, Jean, takes a huge risk when he tries to search for and rescue a wounded soldier. He even goes as far as withholding information from his father, who is a collaborator. Why does he take it upon himself to help save the American?
4. Jean and Ted have very little direct contact, yet they somehow forge a strong connection in their brief acquaintance. How does each influence the other? Describe their relationship.
5. When the Gestapo gathers the prisoners for their punishment, why does Jean record the names of the captured villagers? How does this relate to his future role in the fiftieth anniversary?
6. Claire always knows the beginning of the refugees' stories but never their endings. How does Ted's arrival change these circumstances?
7. As their love for each other grows, Ted and Claire are faced with a choice: to ignore their desires or give in to them. Discuss their decision. Was it morally justifiable? How do they cope with their choice?

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8. Lieutenant Ted Brice is one of the best fighter pilots. Yet he doesn't expect to fly another plane after the war. In fact, he refers to flying as "a kind of engineering job." Why does he use that particular analogy? What does he envision to be the war's effect on flying?
9. The impersonality of the war plays an unmistakable role in the story. Ted notes that before being shot down, "he had not truly understood the ugliness that was at the core of this war" (page 149). What does Ted learn from his experiences in the war? How do his views change in the course of the book?
10. Ted relates to Claire a training scenario in which a jeep carrying a flight crew and a bus full of schoolchildren are headed for a collision on a one-lane road; one or the other must crash off a cliff. Her response is revealing. Analyze Claire's reasoning.
11. Ted and Claire know that in times of war the threat of betrayal can come from all sides and in any form. Yet they manage to work around the risk for some time. Had they met in different circumstances, do you think Ted and Claire would have had the same emotions for each other?
12. Languages play a key role in this novel. How does language help or hinder the course of events?
13. At the novel's end, we jump ahead to 1993, the fiftieth anniversary and the contemporary meeting of Ted's son and Claire. What does this framing story add to the novel? Was the conclusion satisfying?
14. Do you think Ted should have returned to Belgium after the war? Why does he choose not to find Claire?
15. Why do you think the author chose to call this novel *Resistance*? Does the title work on more than one level?

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.

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

