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# Bright Spark

**Anita Shreve** returns to Maine in her latest novel, *The Stars Are Fire*, hitting shelves this month. Ahead of her New England book tour, the bestselling author takes us deep into her creative process, her rise to success, and her enduring love of Maine.

INTERVIEW BY SARAH MOORE

Where are you right now?

I'm at my home in Newfield, New Hampshire. I wrote most of my latest novel right here at my desk.

You also have ties to Maine, specifically Biddeford Pool. We used to have a place in Biddeford Pool. I had a writing desk that looked out right

across to the Wood Island Light. Then we sold it and bought two tiny cottages on Basket Island. It's beautiful, but we have five kids, and now they have kids. The island is connected by a sandbar when the tide is low, so it's not the most practical place to live. You're too subject to the tide. You get invited to someone's home for dinner and

you have to ask if you can stay overnight! So now we're building a place in Biddeford Pool again.

Set amid the wildfires that ravaged southern Maine in 1947, *The Stars Are Fire* tells the story of a young mother [Grace] attempting to rebuild her life and find her independence in the aftermath of disaster. How

## ISN'T THAT...

did you arrive at this idea?

I first learned about the fire after I read a pamphlet on the subject some time ago. Then we had that really hot, dry summer last year and the idea of a story inspired by the 1947 disaster began to catch. I got very excited about the subject. A lot of Mainers have only a passing knowledge of the fire. They'll say, "My dad used to talk about that when I was young." I came to Maine to do research, and I got access to the archives of the *Portland Press Herald*. Everything was on microfiche, of course! It was fascinating. They had every fact you can imagine, first-person accounts, and a lot of wonderful photos. The description of the post-fire landscape where only the mill's brick chimneys remain is inspired by one of those pictures.

You've said that you often have an idea or two tucked away to 'ferment' over time. Did you hold this story back specifically to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the fire? Is it really the anniversary? [Laughs] I actually never realized. No, that wasn't intentional. When an idea like that teases you it's best not to wait. It needs to be written when it wants to be written.

Tell us more about the title, *The Stars Are Fire*. What does the *Hamlet* reference tell us about the story?

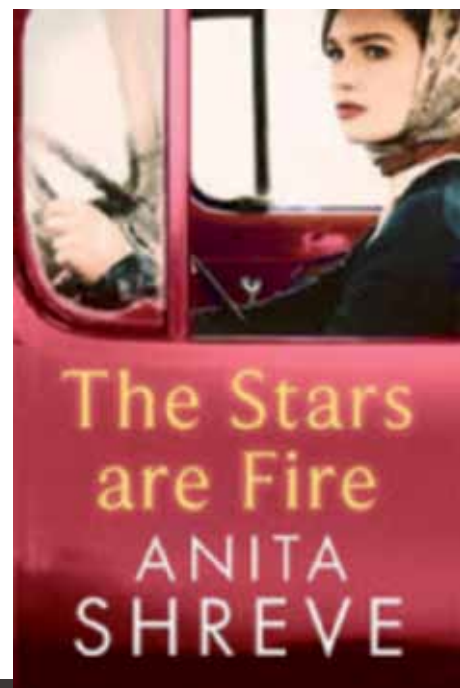
The idea behind the title was in part to do with *Hamlet* and in greater part to do with the story itself. It's the idea of destiny. For the main character Grace, the fire literally is her destiny. It's written in her stars.

The U.S. cover and the UK cover are very different [inset]. What was the creative decision behind them?

The original UK cover showed Grace in a red car, but the publishers wanted to change it to show a woman in a 1930s bathing suit. When they first suggested it, I was like "Over my dead body!" Well, you can see how that turned out.

The Oprah Book Club recommendation for *The Pilot's Wife* launched you into the literary stratosphere. In the years following you put out about a book a year—an incredible creative output. Did you feel the pressure live up to the hype?

I'm lucky in that I never felt pressured by the success I gained from the Oprah recommendation, neither from my editor nor internally. That was just a really fertile creative period in my life.



Despite Shreve's protests, the original UK cover (right) was replaced by a more daring image (left).

The praise we most often hear from your legions of fans and fellow writers is for your "deft storytelling" (Richard Russo) and your wholly believable characters. How do you take us so convincingly close to the action?

I always seek to create a tangible sense of presence in my stories. What I tried to do was put myself in Grace's position day-by-day—trying to feel what it would be like to be a young mother in that house, in that weather, looking after two young children alone. Her sense of desperation. This story was also largely dictated by the time period. The things she's struggling to cope with—mental illness, what goes on in the marital bed—no one was talking about those things at that time. I tried to imagine that sense of isolation.

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You have described writing as 'a kind of daydreaming.' Do you find immersing yourself in the often troubling and tragic situation of your characters difficult?

Often I'm driving in the car and I'm daydreaming about part of a story, like the fire, and I stop and say to myself, "What is wrong with me?! Why don't you find something delightful to daydream about?" I'm not sure why my brain goes there. And it's funny—as a person, I'm very happy and cheerful. But when I go to that well, that place of deep imagination, those neural pathways open up and out come these ideas. So it's very easy for me to fantasize and make it real in my writing.

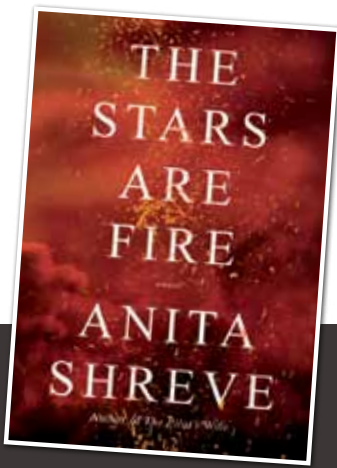
You've written novels set in Kenya and London, but you're an iconically New England author. Is that a case of writing what you know, or is there something about New England that ignites your creativity?

It was while writing *The Weight of Water* (set on the Isles of Shoals off the coast of Maine and New Hampshire) that I initially became fascinated with the area. The crag-giness, the backbone. There's something about the character of the landscape and the nature of the people who live here that attracted me. And, of course, many of my novels take place beside the sea. I used to say the sea was an inexhaustible metaphor, but really that's not true. I think I may have exhausted it by now!

How has Maine changed in your eyes over the years? Does it still hold a magic for you?

The magic hasn't changed, but I've been amazed by the changes in Portland and





Anita Shreve will give a reading and discussion of *The Stars Are Fire* at Maine Historical Society on April 23 and at Camden Public Library on May 2.

Portsmouth. When I was young, Portland wasn't somewhere I would think of to visit, but now I love escaping up there for a day to look around the PMA and get lunch. My husband John and I like Petite Jacqueline, Grace, Fore Street. I love that little place with the milkshakes...Duckfat. I don't go too much, though. You walk through the door and that's a thousand calories right there.

*The Weight of Water* and *The Pilot's Wife* have all been turned into movies. How did it feel to see your novels realized on the big screen?

I had very different experiences with each movie. *The Weight of Water* [2000] was my first time on set, and I found it thrilling. Everything was new, and everything was exciting. Kathryn Bigelow was directing, and it had some heavy-hitter actors (Sean Penn, Elizabeth Hurley) in the lead roles. I wrote the screenplay for *The Pilot's Wife* [2002] myself, so that was a different kind of experience. It was a tutorial in screenwriting for me. I would write something, and the producers would tell me how to re-write it—we'd do this about 20 times. It was a steep learning curve!

*The Stars are Fire* is cinematic. Can you imagine it as a motion picture? Who would play Grace?

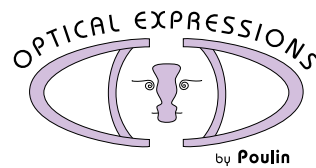
Oh yes, I certainly can. I think this particular novel would look great on screen. I've never thought about an actress to play Grace, though. I think it would have to be a new actress, someone young.

You're notoriously private about future novels, but tell us: What's next?

I took a little time out between the last few books, but think the pace is going to pick up for me again. Yes, I've got an idea for a story underway. No, I'm not going to tell you what it is! ■



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