

*Sea Glass*

Anita Shreve, 2002, Little Brown, 378 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

*Sea Glass* completes a trilogy of sorts for popular New England author, Anita Shreve. It is the third book set in the same house located in fictional Fortune's Rocks, New Hampshire. Ms. Shreve admits that the real life inspiration for the town where the actual house exists is Biddeford Pool, Maine. The first time we encounter this house is in *The Pilot's Wife*, in the year 1998, followed by *Fortune's Rocks*, set in 1899. In *Sea Glass*, the reader returns to the three-story, ocean-front, now abandoned clapboard in the turbulent year of 1929.

Honora Willard Beecher looks upon the ocean from this wistful house, at the same salt-crusted windows where Kathryn and Olympia previously stood, unaware of the impending disaster drifting to the doorstep. Our current story begins on Honora's wedding day, when she and her husband, Sexton, enter the house for their first time, in a touching scene of intimacy and innocence. *"Sexton comes around the corner then, his palms upturned and filled with dirt. He is a man with a surprise, a stranger she hardly knows. A good man she thinks. She hopes...Sexton has an offering: sandy soil, a key. 'The soil is for the solid ground of marriage,' he says. 'The key is for unlocking secrets.' He pauses. 'The earrings are for you.' "*

The title of the novel is taken from the shards of milky, rounded glass found on ocean beaches, made smooth by a constant grinding against surf and sand. *"In the afternoons and early evenings when the tide has drawn off, Honora looks for sea glass. She finds a slim sliver of amethyst and a jewel-like bit of cobalt. She picks up a thick chunk that looks like dirty ice after a long winter, ice that has been skated on and has gone cloudy with use...She puts the pieces in her pocket and takes them home, and lays them on the windowsill...She never keeps a piece of sea glass if it hasn't gone cloudy or if it still retains its sharp edges. Those she buries deep in the sand."*

The reader's awareness of the impending October, 1929 stock market crash permeates the first third of the book, when the newlyweds find their pace together, and as a colorful medley of characters are blended into the story like instruments tuning prior to a concert. Shreve artfully captures the past like a specific memory awakens with a special scent. What was once idyllic becomes horrific, as the effects of the simmering economic collapse boil over. Crisis confronts mill workers, wealthy heirs, Sexton as a typewriter salesman, and Honora. Faithful readers have previously been placed on this unsteady precipice by the author, where hope rises to the surface over tragedy, passion and betrayal. With the sweeping backdrop of the Great Depression, one might not be so sure about a happy resolution this time around. It was with anxiety that I read on, in the knowledge that Ms. Shreve believes life is essentially a painful march towards the final disappointment of death.

*Sea Glass* wraps itself in the class struggle of the era, when children engaged in back-breaking work for meager wages instead of attending school. This tragedy is exposed from the inside out by laborers like good-hearted McDermott, as the grip of depression tightens, as well as through Vivien, a wealthy socialite. The story retains its charm by joining the strikers in their cause, and at their beach parties, dances and diversions along the way. It's an endearing portrait taken of a sliver of humanity during this cruel time. Readers will admire the spunk of twelve-year Francis as he takes on duties that would sink many adults. Like the ever-present tide, passions swell and ebb.

Trust, a recurring Shreve theme, is questioned early in the marriage of Honora and Sexton. Time further tests it. The threat of potential violence pervades the final course of the novel. We don't doubt it will come, we just don't know who or when. Readers might find the ending abrupt, feeling too rushed in the last few pages, especially as we deal with the emotions it provokes. Like sea glass, the characters are shaped by turbulence. We are left sorting it ourselves. Shreve skillfully holds a mirror up to a troubled, character-building age for our nation, reflecting a harshness smoothed by soulful hearts.