

Anita Shreve has brought readers forbidden love, betrayed love and ill-fated love in past books. What we read on the pages of her latest novel, *The Last Time They Met*, might be called fateful love. It is what's intended between two soulmates, whose destinies are intertwined as one. It is the story of these two lovers told backwards, not from the point they meet, but from a point in the future, many years away from those teenage years, progressing in reverse, until we learn what actually happened to them thirty-five years earlier.

The story of Thomas Janes and Linda Fallon is revealed in three distinct parts. It opens in Toronto, where the pair are attending a writers' conference. Time, like dust on a neglected nick-knack, has accumulated past the point of recent memory since "the last time they met." We next follow Linda and Thomas to a dreamlike Africa, and then to Boston, where their first meeting and deepening connection is witnessed. Characters and occurrences drop into the story like droplets of rain before an oncoming storm. Slowly, readers gain an understanding regarding the identities and events in the lives of the two protagonists.

Shreve's readers may remember Thomas as a character in *The Weight of Water*, the author's fictionalized account of one of Maine's great mysteries, the Isle of Shoal murders of 1873. Thomas' grief is established by recalling the tragedy that strikes him, his wife Jean, and daughter Billie, as they encountered a fierce storm on a sailboat in that book. It seems he is no stranger to mishaps, as passages in the current volume are sprinkled with references to a car accident. " 'Do you remember anything from the accident?' he asked. She was silent, perhaps surprised by the question so soon. 'I have a blank,' he said. 'It begins with seeing the little girl on the tricycle and ends with my nose filling with water. When I couldn't see you, I felt a sense of panic so terrifying that even now it can make me sweat.' She smiled and shook her head. 'You never were any good at small talk.' "

Thomas is highly regarded for his collection of poetry known as "The Magdalene Poems," a series "about a girl who did not become a woman. An elegy for a life not lived." He states as Linda asks why he calls them by this title, " 'You must know why.' Of course she knew and wished she hadn't asked. For the asking invited confidence and memories she didn't want."

The section devoted to Africa, when Linda and Thomas again find one another face-to-face, and drawn to each other, shows the author's skill as a writer. We see lush scenery, such as jasmine petals atop a pillow in a room open to the sky, and harsh poverty, as children attend school in bare feet and are fed breakfast by their teacher as the only nourishment of their day. Brutal politics is blended with beautiful kindness. Linda and Thomas chart a passionate course toward each other, as they dangerously navigate between their marriages. There's a sense of voyeurism of the large, complex drama that the reader sees unfolding.

It is the simple awakening of their youthful attraction in the final section that holds our attention. The reader can feel being drawn closer to the secret that's been dangled, yet not revealed during the entire book. The closing pages will not soon be forgotten. *The Last Time They Met* is a haunting story, and testament to how powerful love and grief can be in a person's life. It is a superb, fascinating novel by one of our best contemporary writers.