

# The Pilot's Wife Short Guide

## The Pilot's Wife by Anita Shreve

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# Characters

Kathryn, the "pilot's wife," is the most dynamic character, moving from a kind of complacency through grief to a new vision of herself and her marriage. A music and history teacher fifteen years younger than her husband, she is a sensible, practical person who takes things in stride and easily puts trust in others—too easily, she eventually recognizes. Having once struggled with her and Jack's shift "from being lovers to being a couple," that transition she once accepted as normal shifts meaning as a result of her discoveries. While flattened somewhat by the numbness of the grief process, Kathryn does undergo significant change. A direct and honest person, she unflinchingly pursues the clues left by her husband, becoming more clear-sighted about her relationship with him and even beginning to consider the possibility of forgiveness: If a woman forgives a man who betrays her, she wonders, is it "an affirmation or was it merely foolishness?"

While the novel filters all events through Kathryn's point of view, distancing other characters somewhat, and while those characters often remain static, Shreve is masterful at using brief details that cause Kathryn's supporting cast to come to life, achieving at least the illusion of roundness—the illusion that we know these characters even when they are relatively flat. Even Jack, who is absent from the current action because the novel starts after his death, is a constant presence. Shreve creates a sense of a complex character through the constant reversals in what Kathryn thought she knew about him. Trying to describe Jack to the priest preparing for a memorial service, Kathryn reinforces the novel's theme about how difficult it is to truly know a person: as she says that he was an only child who grew up in Boston, served in Vietnam, and liked to fish, play tennis, and spend time with his daughter, Kathryn feels as if "the real Jack, the Jack she knew and loved" is somehow missing from the bare facts of his life. Jack's attraction to excitement and adventure drove his career choice as much as it did his eventual double life; Kathryn is awed by how as a pilot he does "tricks with gravity, with physics, with fate." While Jack only appears in flashbacks, he becomes a dynamic character in the sense that the reader's understanding of him deepens as Kathryn's does. She comes to recognize how Jack's political activities and relationship with Muire would have offered instant meaning to a life grown stale and routine: "The falling in love itself, the romantic idealism, the belonging to a righteous organization, and even the religion would have been part of a whole."

Teenage daughter Mattie becomes both a reflection of Kathryn's grief and a distraction from it, and also through her confession about her sexual experience, is a catalyst for Kathryn's revelations about how little she knew her loved ones. Close to her father and devastated by his death, Mattie is typically mercurial, emotional in her reaction but distant from her mother, at once sophisticated and immature, usually "plugged into headphones as if they delivered oxygen through her ears." Mattie's independence eventually leads her to withdraw even further from Kathryn and move on with a life more influenced by her peers than her mother, moving toward healing.



Mattie was, Kathryn realizes, the reason that Jack stayed rather than leaving as his mother left him when he was nine. Kathryn protects Mattie from the knowledge of Jack's double life, and though Kathryn has lost most of her illusions, she remains determined to believe the Mattie is the last person Jack thought of, hers the last name he spoke.

Julia, Kathryn's grandmother, serves as the novel's voice of wisdom, offering her support and insight about the grief process, telling Kathryn early on that "the only way to the other side is through it." From the time that Kathryn was very young, her family lived with Julia, who provided stability for Kathryn in a way that her alcoholic parents did not. Julia, while not a highly developed character, still comes across as an individual rather than a type, someone who remains a source of stability and strength for Kathryn, offering her the support and Mattie the care that allows Kathryn the freedom to take care of details, and eventually giving her the courage to confront her illusions.

In her first appearance, Jack's "other" wife, the Irish Muire, appears to be cold, calculating, and angry, a beautiful and sophisticated woman who took what she wanted even knowing that Jack was married. This first view of Muire proves a facade when she makes her second and final appearance, seeking out Kathryn and apologizing for her cruelty. The conversation deepens her character and reveals her passion and desperation. On the verge of arrest and on the run, Muire tells the truth about Jack's involvement with the IRA and her own loss of family members through Loyalist violence. While never a fully developed or fully sympathetic character, Muire is presented as a complex woman with complicated motives.

Curiously, Robert Hart, who appears on the page far more than most of the other characters, remains somewhat flat, shadowy and indistinct. A quiet, supportive presence throughout Kathryn's ordeal, he is doggedly concerned and caring, apparently very experienced at notifying families of plane crashes and the deaths of loved ones, yet also attracted to Kathryn. Robert's character parallels Jack's in some ways, choosing his career because he is "drawn to moments of intensity." Kathryn gets to know Robert, a divorced recovering alcoholic, at the same gradual pace that she uncovers truths about her husband. Some reviewers have criticized Kathryn's realization that Robert has "used" her, given that it is his job to look for signs of knowledge about her husband's activities and convince her to name others involved. However, Kathryn's sudden anger at him occurs during her shocked response to her husband's betrayal and though irrational, highlights Kathryn's too-easy trust in others. The fact that Robert makes no attempt to detain Muire is more puzzling and left unexplored. Robert Hart functions as a rather flat love interest for Kathryn, a more trustworthy stand-in for Jack who enables Kathryn to move toward a more stable future.



## Social Concerns

A plane crash resulting from an act of terrorism kills everyone on board; the wife of the pilot subsequently discovers that her husband was leading a double life.

In portraying the ultimate marital betrayal along with the large-scale tragedy and disaster of a plane crash, Shreve touches public nerves on both a personal and global level. The title character Kathryn's stages in uncovering the truth about her husband and, in the process, of discovering what caused the plane crash humanize a seemingly sensational event and raise uneasy questions about limits of marital trust.

The novel opens at the moment that Kathryn's life changes; not only does life as she has known it explode as she is notified of her husband's death, but her perception of her marriage begins to disintegrate. The plane crash, at first rumored to be caused by pilot error or mechanical failure, soon is suspected to be the result of suicide or an act of terrorism on Jack's part—these latter theories a result of the revelation that an object pulled from her husband's flight bag caused the explosion.

Kathryn's belief in the solidity of her marriage continues to shift as facts emerge that throw into doubt her image of Jack and her trust in him. Though Jack told her that his mother died when he was nine, Kathryn learns that his mother is actually alive, an Alzheimer's patient in a nursing home.

Kathryn finds brief notations with another woman's name in Jack's office. Jack, it turns out, did not spend his last night in the crew apartment—information forcing Kathryn to wonder about their agreement that Jack would always be the one to phone her because of his erratic schedule and need to sleep without being awakened. Kathryn also begins to wonder about a time that she tried to call him under unusual circumstances and was unable to reach him. When Kathryn tracks down, in London, the woman mentioned in the notations, Kathryn's vague suspicions turn to absolute knowledge: Muire holds a child with eyes that are different shades of blue, a characteristic that Jack shared.

Kathryn is shocked to learn that Jack and Muire married in the Catholic church several years before and had two children, despite the fact that Jack was already married. The Jack presented by Muire is someone Kathryn barely recognizes; a Catholic who never attended mass at home, Jack had been a devout churchgoer during his time in London and through Muire and her family had become involved with the Irish Republican Army, using his position as a pilot to act as a smuggler. Muire also reveals that Jack's mother deserted him when he was nine, running away with another man, offering a motive for his insistence that his mother was dead and his decision to maintain two families rather than abandon his and Kathryn's daughter Mattie.

Kathryn's illusions about her marriage unravel entirely like the scarf she pulls apart thread by thread during the frenzy of shock and grief that follows her encounter with Muire. Knowing that her husband was "two different people" throws Kathryn's own identity into question as she wonders if she herself was "the pilot's wife"—or if Muire



was. Kathryn grapples with her anger at Jack for "gutting" her memories, struggles with the best way to help their daughter through her grief, and blows up at the pilot union's grievance expert, Robert Hart, who has assisted her through the disaster's aftermath, accusing him of "using" her to extract information about Jack's activities. The gamut of emotions that Kathryn experiences before she comes to terms with her husband's death and betrayal call into question all of her beliefs about what constitutes a good relationship. At the same time, her incipient romance with Robert reaffirms possibilities.



# Techniques

Described by one reviewer as "part detective story and part interior monologue," *The Pilot's Wife* moves at a brisk pace through Kathryn's discoveries about her husband, dwelling only on her psychological processes, which Shreve details lyrically. Though the book contains many elements of a thriller, ultimately the solution to the mystery and the details of the plane crash are too vague to allow the novel comfortably into that category; the emphasis is on psychological exploration, Kathryn's interior monologue of grief and her reassessment of her marriage.

At one point, Kathryn says that if Jack's motive had been suicide, "there'd be one small thing that maybe wouldn't register at the time, but would after the fact." This quotation describes the novel's structure: past tense chapters telling the story of Kathryn's reactions to the loss of her husband alternate with present tense chapters that sketch out scenes from Jack and Kathryn's courtship and marriage, reminding readers of the eternal presence of that past for Kathryn. Shreve uses each new discovery that Kathryn makes about Jack as a trigger for a present-tense memory in which suddenly, some small detail registers for Kathryn and she sees it in a new light. These recast memories are at the heart of the novel, emphasizing the ways that new information can radically alter the meaning of an event.

The very close third person point of view that filters all events, characters, and observations through Kathryn lends itself to metaphors that resonate thematically. When Kathryn thinks of getting to know another person—in this case Robert—as like painting a portrait, she also might be describing Shreve's technique for accruing details that gradually deepen our knowledge of the characters while underlining the elusiveness of knowing them entirely. Other metaphors revolving around vision and visual detail function similarly; Kathryn thinks early on about how "night would settle in like slow blindness, sucking the color from the trees and the low sky and the rocks . . .

until there was nothing left in the window but her own reflection." This description captures the coastal Massachusetts setting and Kathryn's grief while also reinforcing themes of vision and self-examination.

Shreve often relies on symbolism rather than direct commentary to suggest her themes, in one case using an architectural detail to imply the completion of Kathryn's shift in vision. In one of the early flashback chapters, Shreve describes the former convent that had become Kathryn and Jack's home. Idly, Kathryn often wonders where the chapel used to be. At the end, her shifted vision helps her to recognize that what she thought was a marble bench was in fact the old altar, a recognition that substitutes for a more developed exploration of Kathryn's changed viewpoint.



# Themes

Despite its tense subject matter and tight plotting, *The Pilot's Wife* is above all the portrait of a marriage through the lens of grief and shifting realities. "How do you ever know that you know a person?" Kathryn wonders continually, thinking about how one first gets to know another by forming a picture, filling in "missing brush strokes, wait[ing] for form and color to materialize." As the novel meticulously sketches out the anatomy of grief, it also fills in the form and color of Kathryn's marriage.

320 Repeated references to and metaphors involving vision reinforce the necessity of self-examination and self-knowledge.

Kathryn moves through typical stages in her grief process, worrying about details such as Jack's last words, wondering if she will ever sleep again, imagining that she hears her husband on the stairs, marveling at "the way the body kept moving forward, past the shock and the grief, past the retching and the hollowness inside, and kept wanting sustenance, kept wanting to be fed." She notes with surprise that the shock begins to wear off, that gradually the thought of Jack's death "didn't rock her as violently as it had the day before." Still, Kathryn has to constantly negotiate the memories "like mines in a field, waiting to detonate." And on a plane to London, she finds herself obsessing over Jack's death, reliving it in her imagination.

Kathryn's experience of grief is sometimes intensified, sometimes ameliorated by her need to think about her teenage daughter, Mattie, who alternately feels guilty, sinks into depression, and blames her mother for her father's death, mostly because Kathryn is an available target for her anger. Kathryn wishes that her daughter could simply go into a coma "and then awaken to a consciousness dulled by time, so that she would not be hit again and again with the pain that was always absurdly and cuttingly fresh." Kathryn is a philosophical parent, understanding that children are always in the process of leaving, "incrementally at first, and then with head-spinning rapidity." Still, Kathryn's revelations about how little she knew Jack are paralleled in her grief over the gradual loss of her daughter.

When Mattie confesses to her mother that she has had sex, Kathryn is disturbed mostly because she had not suspected and because her daughter's experimentation has resulted from curiosity rather than love. It saddens Kathryn that she has known so little about the people she loves the most: "I didn't know about my daughter's sexual life, and I didn't know about my husband's sexual life."

What is perhaps atypical about Kathryn's grief process is the complication of her husband's infidelity, the need to reinterpret her entire life with Jack and re-examine herself.

Kathryn has previously seen her relationship with Jack as passing "out of being in love to just loving," an interpretation thrown into further doubt with each revelation.





Each of Kathryn's memories becomes infused with new insight as she recalls her few fights with Jack, the way he once was angry and out of sorts on his mother's birthday, the ways that he seemed distant and once alluded to divorce, and the dynamics of an argument that escalated out of control as Kathryn veered back and forth between repentance and grievance. Kathryn must reconsider her entire conception of a normal marriage as one in which a couple lives "in a state of gentle decline, of being infinitesimally, but not agonizingly, less than they were the day before . . . which means, on the whole ... a good marriage."

As Kathryn's view of her marriage and her image of her husband shifts, she does find that she knew her husband well enough to come to some understanding of his motives. She realizes that he would have been drawn to Muire's intensity and passion as well as to the adventure and idealism of involvement in dangerous political conflict.

Her new vision and self-knowledge also allow her to move toward forgiveness and great self-reliance and open the door for future relationships. Nevertheless, she remains shaken by the "impossibility of ever knowing another person . . . the fragility of the constructs people make."

# Adaptations

Blair Brown reads the audiobook version of Shreve's novel.

## Key Questions

Shreve's spare style and the multiple layers of her novel—some more developed than others—provide for a variety of discussion possibilities. The changes that Kathryn undergoes are more psychological and gradual than one might expect from a suspense novel, making the book difficult to categorize and causing it to operate on more than one level. Shreve's very interior writing style allows her to mention layers of background material that hints at motivations, but she chooses not to explore the characters' pasts in much detail, instead leaving the reader to draw conclusions. In the same way, she often substitutes symbolic detail for more developed exploration. The lack of development in some areas may be considered flaws by some readers and strengths by others. At any rate, what Shreve examines and what she leaves vague raises many questions about character, genre, and technique.

1. Some reviewers have complained that Kathryn is too passive a character. In what ways is she passive? In what ways does she actively determine her own fate?
2. Shreve clearly draws on a tradition that emphasizes the importance of selfknowledge, but devotes more time to Kathryn's examination of what she knows about others than her examination of what she knows about herself. How much self-knowledge does Kathryn finally gain as a result of the novel's events?
3. While containing many elements of a mystery/thriller, *The Pilot's Wife* skims over many of the specifics of the disaster in favor of focusing on Kathryn's reactions. In what ways does the novel resemble a thriller, and what other genres does Shreve draw from? How would you categorize this novel?
4. Though Kathryn never fully examines her own past, we learn about many parallels: Mattie is named after Jack's mother; Kathryn's parents were alcoholics as is Robert; Kathryn and Jack both considered themselves "orphans"; and Kathryn's husband and father both prove to have been unfaithful. Why does Shreve mention these details but choose not to develop them? How do they add to or detract from her thematic concerns?

# Literary Precedents

The Pilot's Wife is a contemporary bildungsroman, detailing a protagonist's movement toward greater self-knowledge.

The novel falls into the tradition of the female bildungsroman, which differs from the male version that concentrates on a male hero becoming initiated into adulthood and finding his place in the community. Instead, like many female heroines, Kathryn experiences a disillusionment that teaches her about her separation from her society. Also like many other female protagonists of novels in this category, Kathryn is the nurturer, the one who stays home and has created a life there rather than embarking on adventures like classic male heroes such as Goethe's prototypical Wilhelm Meister, Fielding's Tom Jones, or Twain's Huck Finn.

The Pilot's Wife shares much in common with one of the cornerstones of the female bildungsroman, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre.

Bronte's novel traces its title character's development from dependence to independence; along the way she discovers that others are not what they seem, particularly Mr. Rochester, who is leading a double life, intending to go through with his marriage to Jane even though he is already married.

Loosely similar to Jane Eyre in its plot elements, The Pilot's Wife also resembles Bronte's work in its emphasis on self-examination and its imagery surrounding blindness and vision. Jane, who comes of age and gains self-reliance by the novel's end, only reunites with Mr. Rochester after he has been blinded in a fire that also killed his first wife. Jane and Mr. Rochester are able to come together on more equal terms than their previous master-of-the-house/ governess relationship partly because of the self-knowledge both achieve due to his loss of sight and both characters' new insight.

Of course, symbolism involving sight and wisdom are at least as old as ancient Greek characters such as the blind seer Tiresias and the proud Oedipus, whose blindness results from a lack of self-knowledge but whose loss of sight parallels his increased insight. Like The Pilot's Wife, Sophocles' Oedipus centers on a character who must pursue a mystery at all costs, even when it destroys him. Though Shreve's work loosely draws from this tradition, Kathryn avoids such dire consequences, her renewed sight opening the door for a probable happy ending.

## Related Titles

Shreve tends to use similar New England coastal settings in her other work, and her 1999 novel *Fortune's Rocks* takes place earlier in the twentieth century in the same house Kathryn now occupies, a converted convent. That *Fortune's Rocks* deals with marital infidelity from a completely different angle—the point of view of the other woman—creates an interesting interplay between the two novels.



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