

Good 'Fortune'

Hard on the heels of her last bestseller, Anita Shreve is poised to top the charts again

By MICHAEL GILTZ

When writer Anita Shreve was a little girl, she'd curl up on the floor of her Dedham, Mass., library and devour the "Oz" books of L. Frank Baum.

"They were these big, thick, dusty books," remembers Shreve, who believes, "Everybody has a key that opens up [their interest in books] and that was it for me."

That key love of books has led Shreve far — from submitting poetry, when she was in grade school, to the kid's magazine Jack & Jill (she was always turned down) to her seventh novel, "Fortune's Rocks."

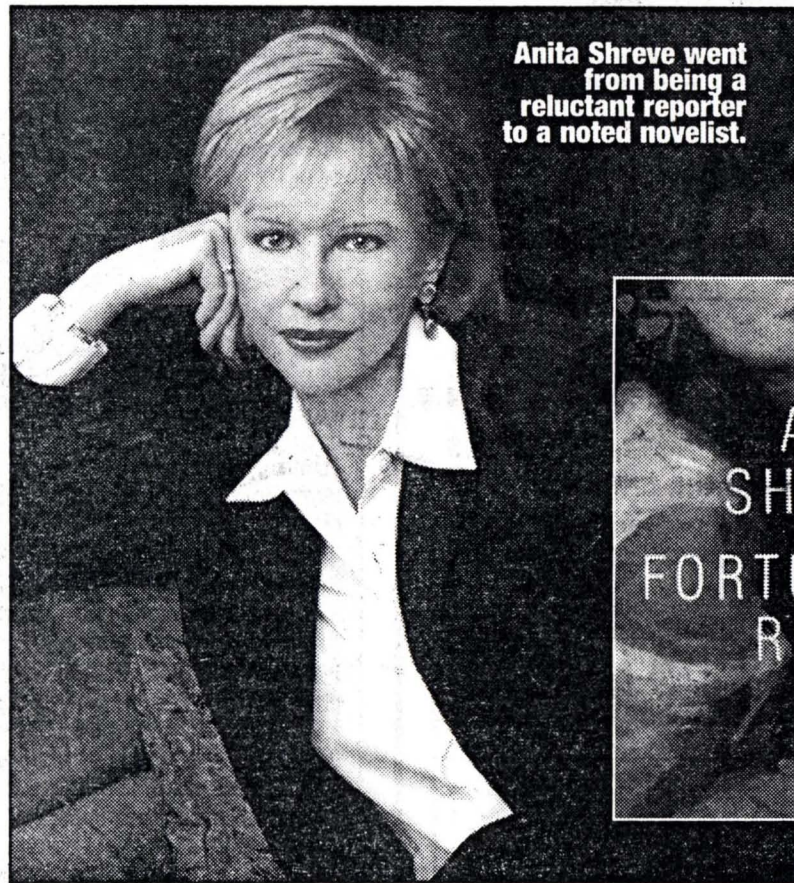
Coming on the heels of Shreve's last novel, "The Pilot's Wife" — an Oprah Book Club selection that's sold more than 2 million copies — her latest is poised to become her biggest.

A fearlessly romantic story,

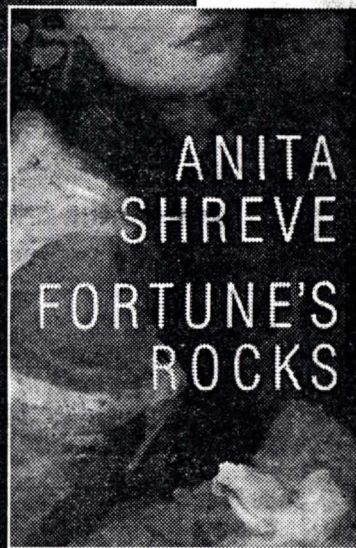
it tells the tale of Olympia, a mature-beyond-her-years 15-year-old growing up in New Hampshire in 1899. Educated by her father, Olympia is only dimly aware of how privileged and unique her life is until it's all destroyed by a reckless affair with John Haskell, a 42-year-old married man and friend of the family.

Like most of Shreve's books, "Fortune's Rocks" has a compelling narrative. Still, critics seem leery of Shreve's accessibility. They know her work is too well-written to dismiss, but can't shake off the notion that important fiction should be more difficult to read.

Regardless, Shreve is more interested in the many readers who tell her they stayed up all night with one of her novels. "I love a good story," says the 52-year-old author, adding, "I want to be lost in a story. I want



Anita Shreve went from being a reluctant reporter to a noted novelist.



it to be something that during the day I think, 'I can't wait to get back to that.'"

But giving fans sleepless nights seemed unlikely when Shreve began. "I started out writing short stories in obscure literary

journals," she says modestly, failing to mention that one of her first stories snagged a prestigious O'Henry Award. "Yes, I did do that. But it quickly became apparent you couldn't make a living [writing short

stories]. So I became a journalist."

She still remembers her first byline, some 25 years ago. "I wrote a piece for the Boston Phoenix and I was paid \$60. The story was about this experience I had being a plant consultant and having no idea what I was doing. I can remember to this day when they called to accept the story. I hung up the phone and literally jumped off the ground."

She later wrote for an English-language magazine in Nairobi, where her then-husband was attending graduate school, and returned to the States to write for several magazines. Shreve realized her shortcomings, though, as a reporter. "It made me uncomfortable to ask people questions they'd rather not answer. And that was key," she laughs.

Other journalists, however, aren't quite so shy. Many leapt to conclusions concerning her last novel, "The Pilot's Wife" about a woman whose husband dies in a plane crash. When the airline suggests he might have committed suicide, she finds out the truth — he had had another wife and family. Shreve was perturbed when reporters asked her if the book was based on her own

father, a former airline pilot. (It wasn't, she says.)

Nevertheless, the similarity between her book and the unfolding suicide theory linked to EgyptAir flight 990 has left the writer "shaken, really upset," she says. "It's one thing to imagine it and quite another thing to hear that it's actually happened."