

A Student of Living Things

Contributed by Editor
 Wednesday, 13 June 2007
 Last Updated Monday, 20 August 2007

An Interview with Susan Richards Shreve

Penny Sansevieri: Hello! And welcome to the Fascinating Authors radio show. I'm so excited – this is Penny Sansevieri with Author Marketing Experts, and today we have Susan Richards Shreve, and she is the author of *A Student of Living Things*. This book is just out from Penguin, May, I believe, of 2006. Susan Richards Shreve has published 12 novels, 26 books for children and co-edited five anthologies. She is a professor of George Mason University; founder of Master of Fine Arts program and has received several grants for fiction, including Guggenheim and a National Endowment for the Arts; a current founder and current member of the board of directors of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, and a former visiting professor at Princeton and Columbia University. Susan Shreve lives in Washington, D.C., and Susan, what an amazing background you have! Welcome to the show, first off.

Susan Richards Shreve: It's great to be here! (Laughter)

Penny Sansevieri: What an amazing background! You have 12 novels and 26 books for children.

Susan Richards Shreve: I do! I have – I started to write books for children when I had four children, and you learn to – you learn a balancing act with four children.

Penny Sansevieri: I bet you do. Now, your 12 novels, are they – what – are they in the same – similar genre as *A Student of Living Things* or?

Susan Richards Shreve: They are. They're – essentially, most of my novels – each novel is quite different then the last.

Penny Sansevieri: Right.

Susan Richards Shreve: But each one – it's really very concerned with family. At the center of almost everything I've written is a domestic novel. But each of them, also, takes on some sort of metaphor; as in this one, a political metaphor.

Penny Sansevieri: Right, because *A Student of Living Things* also, at its very core, is a family struggle that just – will just break your heart, and it's a fabulous book.

Susan Richards Shreve: Thank you.

Penny Sansevieri: You're welcome. Tell me a little bit about this book and the struggle that these characters are facing.

Susan Richards Shreve: Well, the book begins – actually, its just slightly in the future, post 9/11, post the moment we're in, and presumes the Washington that could be – not a Washington, D.C. that is. But the precipitating action of this book is the assassination of – the teller of this story, whose name is – Claire's brother, whose a law student at George Washington University, and they're standing together on the day he has a – an opped piece – a political attack on the immigration laws and the government, and on what might be, assumed to be, the Patriot Act. He's standing on the steps of GW Law School; it's pouring rain and he is – a shot comes, and he is killed on the steps standing next to his sister. And it's his sister who's leveled by grief – who tells this story of this family; which is a little immigrant family – immigrant to the extent that the mother is Jewish and escaped the Nazis and then, escaped Pinochet in Chile where her parents relocated and is a highly neurotic, quite imaginative, over possessive mother. And a very, sort of, distant removed Welsh father who's a physician. And then an uncle who's a failed concert pianist, and an aunt who works for the government and a slighted demented cousin and these two kids who are in their 20s; the one who dies and the one who lives. So it's an odd putting together of the family in suburban Washington, D.C., and they're, sort of, locked together out of a fear of, both, not belonging and in the end, a fear of the danger; perhaps, even a fear of fear.

Penny Sansevieri: And this family is – I mean, this family is just so – they have so many layers to them. They're so, you know, three-dimensional and quirky that, you know, I found as a reader, you just – you keep wanting to dig into the layers of this family, and even though, you know, my background is not at all like your characters, I found similarities. Do you get this a lot from people who read this book and say, "Oh my gosh! My

mother – she kinda reminds me of my mother,” or “There is a piece of this that I, you know, resonate with.”

Susan Richards Shreve: I do. I think that you scratch the surface of any American family and it is that putting together of a life – which you have to do in this country. Generally, of some kind of mixed background and very often, cleaving together because they’re a small family in a large complex multi-cultural country.

Penny Sansevieri: Right.

Susan Richards Shreve: And so I think of this – I’ve had many people say that, particularly, about the mother. But many people say that it reflects, if not the actual lives that they lived, the mental lives that they lived.

Penny Sansevieri: Right.

Susan Richards Shreve: And it’s a family that loves each other very much and is in, many ways, totally dysfunctional.

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) And this is really – this really had – even though this starts and circles around the tragedy that this family is dealing with, this also had a lot to do with Claire, who is discovering things about herself.

Susan Richards Shreve: It does. Claire is a young girl; she’s the typical younger sister who never had to grow-up because her brother took care of her. She’s quite an innocent – a sexual innocent; really, an intellectual innocent, and she has a little bit of a whimsical approach to the world. She keeps dead animals in her room and I –

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) –

Susan Richards Shreve: I thought of that, in a sense, since dead animals don’t change, and Claire is terrified of change; she’s terrified of growing up. And Steven – her brother’s death, throws her into, really, a state in which she has to grow-up, and her perceptions of the world are a skewed and she falls in – with the wrong guy.

Penny Sansevieri: And it is such a, you know – to me, again, it’s such an impactful story, and I wondered, as I was reading through it, what was the genesis of this? Where did the – you know, I think everybody wants to ask, you know, a writer, “Where did these” –

Susan Richards Shreve: “Ideas come from” –

Penny Sansevieri: “Come from?” Yeah –

Susan Richards Shreve: Well, the actual very beginning of this book was when I was reading a piece in The New York Times, tiny little piece about a young Palestinian girl who was 19, I believe, who’s father had been killed by these – the Israelis. And she is persuaded by the PLO to lure a young Israeli boy to his death; he’s young than she is. She lures him through email – provocative email, and she puts him in harms way, in short, and I kept thinking, “These are two kids torn by war. They – it – I mean, it certainly wasn’t the boy’s fault, but in a certain sense, she lost her way. How you make this story come out right?” And that’s – that was the real way – was an effort to make that story make some sense to me. So the girl – the 19-year-old girl – Palestinian girl, didn’t seem like such a terrible human being, and I think that all of us, when our backs are to the wall, behave in ways we – that surprise ourselves and – so I put Claire’s back, really to the wall. And then the other thing that gave rise to this story was it – I was writing it – just beginning to write it at the time that the snipers were circling Washington –

Penny Sansevieri: Oh –

Susan Richards Shreve: D.C.

Penny Sansevieri: Right.

Susan Richards Shreve: And it was extraordinarily terrifying and mind altering because it didn’t make sense that any one of us was going to be a target of the snipers. But there was something about these unknown people; we didn’t know if they were terrorists, we didn’t know who they were. But from here to there to the other place, shots rang out – somebody dies at a gas station at the Home Depot, and one time I was at the Home Depot with a friend, shortly after – I mean, the day after, someone had been killed there by the snipers. And I simply – terror overtook me, and I climbed into the backseat and tried to crawl under the front seat in order to be – not in the scope of the sniper, I sure had me in mind and I got stuck there. And I thought on the way home – when my

friend came back from Home Depot to unstick me – I thought on my way home, “This is what being completely overtaken by fear is all about.” It’s about the unreasoned way in which we behave and the sense that we begin to have that everybody, and particularly, everybody who doesn’t look like us is the enemy. I think we’ve got a lot of that in America.

Penny Sansevieri: We really do. You know, that – and it’s such a fascinating topic because we live, you know – the fear lies, sort of, just beneath the surface, and I think, you know, we live, sort of, in this white tower, and when something like what happens to your character in this book, it rocks us.

Susan Richards Shreve: Exactly! I mean, the fear does – it sort of is though the fear is always there, so that when it does happen, it unleashes even more than it might otherwise.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah, it really does. That was one of the things that I was so fascinated about this because this is, you know – despite their quiriness – I mean, an average family, and this rocked their world. And you think, we’re living in a time when it could happen to any of us.

Susan Richards Shreve: Exactly! Exactly, and that’s – I think that’s really what I was thinking of was – yes, it’s Washington and Washington is kind of an unreal city, but we are living in a time – of a different kind of war in which there is simply an atmosphere of danger but it’s so smoky.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah, yeah. That is absolutely true. Now what was – now this is in the material that I got, you know, with the book, it talked about how this your – sort of your comeback to adult fiction. What – was there something that made you wanna make that transition back again from children’s books –

Susan Richards Shreve: Well, no, I always knew I was going back. The truth of the matter is, that I – my last adult novel was published in 2000. It was a book called Plum and Jagers, about a comedy team – a family comedy team – brothers and sisters, and I wrote a book in between that book and this book. So it wasn’t that I hadn’t been writing adult fiction. It was the book that I wrote in between, for whatever reason, when I finished it and sent it off to my editor, and read it over, I thought, “This is – this book doesn’t have a heart.”

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah –

Susan Richards Shreve: And that’s the center, for me, of any book, and you can’t just insert a heart after a book is done. So I put it aside and wrote A Student of Living Things, and in the course of that period of time, I’m quite sure I will not go back to this book. For whatever reason, it simply was not a book I wanna see have the light of day –

Penny Sansevieri: Right –

Susan Richards Shreve: Behind it. So I’ve never left adult fiction; I do one and then the other. And adult books takes me longer to write because it’s longer.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah.

Susan Richards Shreve: Among other things.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely, and we have a lot of aspiring writers who do listen to the show and are always very intrigued when we have published authors on because the industry has become so difficult to navigate.

Susan Richards Shreve: It –

Penny Sansevieri: And you know, with your – you know you have an extensive background in this. What would you – is there any piece of advice that you would give to aspiring writers who are looking to see their book in print, as you have so successfully done?

Susan Richards Shreve: Well, I think at the heart of it is something that I was told when I was a young and unpublished writer; which is that, so much of it is, you have to be so determined and so dedicated to doing it in the first place because you don’t have a cheerleading squad out there just waiting for what it is that you have to write next. So you really have to love your own work and that’s – it sounds like a, kind of, piece of fluff to give a young writer, but in fact, it’s really important and I – it was what made it possible for me to put aside the book that I didn’t love and to know the difference. So that’s the first thing and secondly, I think, move in to a writers world; it’s a small world. I teach a lot of writing students; I’ve been teaching graduate writing students for 25 years. And it’s a small world and you know each other, and that kind of networking really makes a difference because you have to find – each of us, as writers, have to find our own way in, and part of finding your way in

– I published my first book because I sent it to someone who had been my teacher, and I knew what kind of writing that he did and I imagined that that would be the kind of writing that I was hoping to do or was, at least that was my hope. And I think that everyone should look very carefully at their writing: go to the bookstores; see who is publishing that they admire; whether that’s the kind of writer they’d like to be, and then follow it backwards. Who is that person’s editor? Who is that person’s agent? Find yourself a little place to be. I fall a little bit between – I’m sort of a guy writer writing as a girl.

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) –

Susan Richards Shreve: I follow – I write books that have ideas connected to them as well, as domesticity, and so if I were to look now, for the kind of writer finding my way in, I would be looking at writers – many of them who are men, some who are women, who do that. Who are writing about ideas from a domestic point-of-view.

Penny Sansevieri: Right.

Susan Richards Shreve: And I think that’s the best way for a writer to really find his place, but company makes such a huge difference. A gathering of writers makes such a huge difference because you do share ideas; you give each other confidence. I’m a real believer in writing groups, actually.

Penny Sansevieri: Well, and that’s a very – you know, you hit on two really big points, and writers do tend to sort of live, you know, a little bit in a vacuum behind their computer with their characters. And the power of networking and getting out and talking to people, and just knowing that, you know, everybody else is struggling with the same issues that you are and, you know, they’re going through the same thing so you don’t feel so alone. But also, writing what you love because I think that there’s a lure these days to write things that –

Susan Richards Shreve: Or write what somebody else just wrote –

Penny Sansevieri: Right or just to jump on some kind of bandwagon that’s going on right now. But if you don’t love it, you won’t stick with it!

Susan Richards Shreve: Absolutely, Penny! That is just – you won’t stick with it, and that whole business that I was saying about having – my book lacked a heart. Your heart doesn’t belong every place; it only belongs where you are, and I think that to really love your work, to really be committed, you’re so right. You have to love what you’re doing.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah –

Susan Richards Shreve: I tried – at a point that I had young children and was not making enough money, I decided I would be a popular writer. And I wrote a book called *The Abortionist* and sent it in to my editor and – who laughed heartily.

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) –

Susan Richards Shreve: Said, “This is really a terrible popular book,” and it was that I – that’s not what I did; I didn’t know how to do it. But there are plenty of people who do, and they do it wonderfully well.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah.

Susan Richards Shreve: So I do think you’re so right about that.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah, you do have to – you do, absolutely, do have to stick with what you love. Now, what is the one thing that you think about being – you know, having multiple books published. Being a published author, what is the one thing that you think would surprise people about you? You know, people – it’s interesting –

Susan Richards Shreve: In a personal way or in a –

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah, yeah, sort of, in a personal way. I think people associate being a published author with immediate and instantaneous success.

Susan Richards Shreve: Right, of course!

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) And that’s – it still is a, you know, a challenge, and many times, the same challenges that you face with your 26th book as you faced with your 1st one.

Susan Richards Shreve: Right! It is always and ever is the same, and especially in today's publishing world, which — publishers, they're looking at each book for itself, and not for publishing an author so much as for publishing a book.

Penny Sansevieri: Right.

Susan Richards Shreve: So it's just the way of the world. I think, probably, people would be most surprised by the fact — who don't know me, by the fact that I'm very — that I'm casual and don't — that wasn't — that I was a writer would not be what you'd immediately think.

Penny Sansevieri: Really!

Susan Richards Shreve: I seem neither particularly interior — although I am interior, and certainly not — I don't know, I don't think you can get — you can be in this field for a long time and be full of yourself.

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) —

Susan Richards Shreve: (Laughter) Truly full of yourself —

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) —

Susan Richards Shreve: Everything out there, mitigates — to correct that problem —

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) You can't really have an ego and be successful.

Susan Richards Shreve: No, I mean —

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) —

Susan Richards Shreve: I think the ego helps while you're writing the book in the privacy of your own room. I think after that, it's a real sense of yourself and who you are and what place you wanna have in your social context.

Penny Sansevieri: Absolutely. It strikes me, too — you know, it's interesting, when you read a lot — people who are avid readers who listen to the show know what I'm talking about. What when you read a lot, you get a sense of the person — you know, the name on the cover of the book.

Susan Richards Shreve: Absolutely!

Penny Sansevieri: My sense of you — and maybe this is incorrect, is you have this amazing level of detail. Or maybe the details and things seem to really struck me in this book. Is that something —

Susan Richards Shreve: Good —

Penny Sansevieri: That?

Susan Richards Shreve: I — you know, I think people wouldn't call me a detailed person in terms of, you know, the knives and forks and the way I —

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) —

Susan Richards Shreve: Keep my —

Penny Sansevieri: Right —

Susan Richards Shreve: My house. But, in fact, in terms of — I'm very visual and so when something — I'm both visual in my background with theater and so when I'm writing a novel, I'm very conscious of that sort of sense that it be a little painterly that it — that things would be recognized. And also, in my head, it's always on a little stage in my brain.

Penny Sansevieri: Right —

Susan Richards Shreve: The story is, so that I'm looking at every part of it. One of the limitations of a novelist is that you have to put it all down on paper in order for your reader to see what you're seeing. You know, you can't have a set design.

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) Exactly, exactly. It's one of the most challenging things. What is — so, Susan, what's next for you?

Susan Richards Shreve: What's next for me is, actually, a book that I have coming out — which, probably, is more connected to my writing than anything. It's coming out next April, and it is about the two years — between the ages of 11 and 13. I had polio when I was a baby, and it's about the two years that I lived in the Warm Springs Polio Foundation — which Roosevelt started when — in the '20s actually. And when I was 11, I went there and lived there for two years which — off and on, but — which seemed to me at the time, unremarkable and when I left, I shut the door on it. But in retrospect, it — and as all these polio books have come out because it's the 50th anniversary of the shot vaccine. I thought, "That was really very different to be away from my parents having, you know, your first flirtatious experiences, your first period, your first this, your first that." I converted to Catholicism — which I left promptly thereafter. But I did all of these things — nobody watching me, nobody, sort of, concerned about my social wellbeing and that it was a very interesting time, also, in terms of being a writer. I did not go to school in those years; I could have, I chose not to. I mean, what sensible child wouldn't?

Penny Sansevieri: Right —

Susan Richards Shreve: But I didn't, so that left me a lot of alone time, and I think that I had a, sort of, overactive imagination; it was a muscle that got used a lot. So that book comes out next April, and then I'm gonna be doing — I have a children's book coming out called Kiss Me Tomorrow.

Penny Sansevieri: Oh!

Susan Richards Shreve: In September.

Penny Sansevieri: That sounds wonderful! I look forward to your next book, and I had read a little bit in the information about the two years that you spent there. Did that influence *A Student of Living Things* as well?

Susan Richards Shreve: I think it just — I didn't think about that before, but I think it's influenced of — all of my writing in particular ways. Not — I wouldn't say, specifically, that book. But I will say this about that book, I have never written an adult book in the first-person; all of my adult books are in the third person. This was my first-person — first, first-person book, and somehow, by writing an imagined book, in the first-person, enabled me to take on my own voice and write this memoir in the first-person.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah.

Susan Richards Shreve: And I think of Claire. I really — Claire doesn't look like me, and she doesn't act like me. But I think of myself, in many ways, as very identified with Claire.

Penny Sansevieri: Right, and she was — that was a very unique take on it, as well with — you know, having it in first-person.

Susan Richards Shreve: It was very different, and it didn't start in first-person, but once I thought, "Who really changes in this book?"

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter).

Susan Richards Shreve: Claire's the girl.

Penny Sansevieri: Right.

Susan Richards Shreve: She is the one who — who is — she doesn't change, is gonna be pretty doomed.

Penny Sansevieri: Right, right, absolutely. Yeah, that was a — I really — I loved the first-person in it. I mean, I thought it gave her voice such clarity.

Susan Richards Shreve: Good, I'm glad —

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah —

Susan Richards Shreve: It was very — it was hard for me to do because the limitation of the first-person is, "Oh my God, how do I talk about this person if my first-person always has to be in the room?" But once I

got over that limitation, it was really – I really enjoyed finding a voice for a character that was so dominant.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah, and she has a very – she really has a wonderful voice. I encourage everyone to go out and get a copy of A Student of Living Things –

Susan Richards Shreve: Oh now thank you!

Penny Sansevieri: Susan, how can they find more information out about you? What’s your website address?

Susan Richards Shreve: My website address is “Susan Shreve” dot com.

Penny Sansevieri: Okay.

Susan Richards Shreve: And I have to – if it – find my webmaster who needs to put some things up on it.

Penny Sansevieri: Okay, wonderful –

Susan Richards Shreve: (Laughter) –

Penny Sansevieri: Wonderful, yeah – I was up on your website earlier. Its got some events that you’ve got coming up, and it’s got a whole list of events that you have coming up actually –

Susan Richards Shreve: Right, but it doesn’t have much else.

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) –

Susan Richards Shreve: (Laughter).

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) Now tell me something, and we always – we ask this of everyone who comes on the show, who is your fascinating author?

Susan Richards Shreve: My fascinating author?

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah.

Susan Richards Shreve: I suppose that my – that – there are two of them. My fascinating – both Russian, and one is Chekhov, who I don’t identify with, but I’ve learned so much from – in his – absolutely simple way of saying something so profound and then the broad energy of Tolstoy.

Penny Sansevieri: Yeah –

Susan Richards Shreve: In terms of contemporary living authors – I read all the time. I’ve – I try to keep up with my peer. I think you always need to know your own time ‘cause it’s the time you’re living in.

Penny Sansevieri: Yes.

Susan Richards Shreve: But I would never be so insane as to mention one of them and not the other. So there are a whole lot! (Laughter) –

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) –

Susan Richards Shreve: I know what sorority I’m in. (Laughter) –

Penny Sansevieri: (Laughter) Exactly, exactly! Susan, thank you again, so much. Susan Richards Shreve, her book A Student of Living Things; in the bookstores now. It’s a beautiful book – exceptionally well-written, and thank you so much for being on the Fascinating Authors radio show.

Susan Richards Shreve: Thanks so much for having me.

Penny Sansevieri: And we’ll forward to your next book.

Susan Richards Shreve: Good! Thank you –