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DAUGHTERS OF THE NEW WORLD

By Susan Richards Shreve

Nan A. Talese/Doubleday. 496 pp.

The phrase "typical American family" is inherently false. Each family is fiercely unique, with its own triumphs and tragedies, pride and shame.

Susan Richards Shreve follows five generations of women before the realization hits: "They were an ordinary American family, . . . what was extraordinary about them . . . was their survival like that of a lot of families in a country without a past, in a century that moved with the speed of sound."

Amanda Steward, to whom this thought occurs, is the daughter of Anna Jermyn. At 16, Anna arrived in America by boat from Wales in 1890. She rose from Washington, D.C. kitchen maid to physician's wife, and moved with her husband to work among the Chippewa in Wisconsin. It proved a challenging but perilous life for the beautiful Anna. She lost a son to diphtheria. She suffered severe hemorrhaging during Amanda's birth, never regained her health, and died when Amanda was three.

Left with Anna's letters to her own deceased mother but without Anna herself, Amanda doubts a woman's ability to survive. Rather than lean on a man, Amanda develops male skills and independence. Her childhood Chippewa friend Flat Mouth teaches her to ride and shoot and even nicknames her "A Man." When her unstable father kills himself, Amanda returns to Washington but soon leaves for Europe, disguised as a man, to become the first female combat photographer of World War I, getting pregnant by her high school sweetheart before he is killed in action.

Amanda's daughter, Sara, though proud of her famous photographer mother, is her temperamental opposite. Disdaining Amanda's career life and mannish attire, Sara dreams of a husband and many children. If Amanda is the family's heroic figure, Sara becomes its domestic hub. She marries Hendrik March, an Austrian Jew who edits a political journal exposing Hitler's atrocities. Hendrik's political absorption frees Sara to raise four children, including her spirited daughter, Eleanor.

Like Amanda, Eleanor determines to make her mark on the world. In 1964, Eleanor organizes a volunteer center where college students provide creative activities for ghetto children. Eleanor soon acquires fame and heroic proportions as her grandmother had. Out of wedlock, she bears two daughters, Lily and Kat, Lily warm and sensuous like Anna and Sara, Kat scrappy and driven like Amanda and Eleanor.

As usual, Shreve's eighth novel is a gothic saga ideal to curl up with. Its numerous plot twists provide many places for a reader to sink in. They also make *Daughters of the New World* hard to put down (I read it cover to cover in 24 hours).

Shreve is a master storyteller. The victim of polio, spinal meningitis and rheumatic fever all by age five in the pre-penicillin days of World War II, Shreve grew up frequently bedridden with her ear to her radio console's soap operas, acting them out with paper dolls. She loves a good story.

Increasingly, however, she undergirds her tales with substantial themes. In *Daughters of the New World*, that theme unfolds from Shreve's multifaceted probing of the mother-daughter relationship, how, far more than mother-son or even father-son, it's a relationship full of mirrors. At one point, Sara muses that "she could easily forgive weakness in men, in fathers. Expected it even. But with her and Amanda there was no forgiveness, as if they were extensions of each other, more personally related than blood."

Theirs is a relation of reflected identity. "We are the image of our mother's perfect dreams," says Amanda. Daughters receive less indulgence: "Daughters must be raised to a world in which no one will take care of them except themselves. Sons are cared for from birth to death."

Each daughter here reacts against her mother's dreams, becoming in fact more like her grandmother, bringing both joy and heartbreak. Yet each mother, whether by her absence or constant presence, shapes the course of her daughter's life. Each adds to Shreve's intricate portrait of the American woman and her creative centrality inside and outside the home. The novel's many male characters are merely airbrushed onto the background tapestry. For this is a book exploring womanhood, the strength and devotion and anger and wonder of it in a century where time has sped up.