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A Country of Strangers

By Susan Richards Shreve

Simon & Schuster, 288 pp.

From the appearance in 1974 of her first novel, *A Fortunate Madness*, Susan Richards Shreve has been a master storyteller, and when her *Queen of Hearts* came out two years ago she at last made it clear she was a good deal more. That novel, which earned her comparison with Gail Godwin and Anne Tyler, showed Shreve to have a serious literary voice probing with keen psychological insight the secret lives within her characters. *A Country of Strangers*, because it focuses more narrowly, achieves greater depth and intensity and is an even better book.

Set on a Virginia farm during the middle years of World War II, the novel tells the story of Charley Fletcher, a young idealist denied a place in the Army because of flat feet but newly hired to help run the federal Office of Censorship. He brings his wife, the beautiful Danish actress Lara, and her 13 year-old daughter Kate to live on a farm previously owned by a John Spencer, who seven years earlier had disappeared, just "fell off the world." During those seven years, two married black couples--Moses and Miracle Bellows, and Moses's brother Guy Bellows and his wife Aida--whose ancestors had been slaves of the Spencers, lived in the main house. With the Fletchers' arrival, the Bellows and Miracle's pregnant 13 year-old niece Prudential move back into their tenant shacks on the Spencer farm.

What could have been a peaceful living arrangement never for a moment becomes so, however, for the air on the Spencer farm is filled with mystery and conflict. We never learn conclusively why Spencer had disappeared, but the disappearance came five months after Moses suspected, correctly, that Spencer had made love to Miracle, and Moses more than once says he killed Spencer. As each new character is introduced, Shreve plants ominous seeds of foreboding, some of which sprout. When Moses first sees the new farm owner, "something about Charley Fletcher made the hair rise straight up on his back," and when Moses meets Lara Fletcher the sexual tension is immediate and relentless.

Each of the eight principal characters is, in his or her own way, distinctly sympathetic, and most are outright likable. But Charley has hopes that move the course of events inexorably toward a tragic turn. He grew up caught in a pinch between his father's low expectations and his mother's certainty that Charley had some "great gift," and so he "inherited in the fabric of his genes unquestioned faith that a single person in the small experiment of his life can change the course of history."

Charley's goal is to mold out of the blacks and whites on the Spencer farm a colorblind utopian society. Admirable, but this is Virginia, 1942, and Charley's hope is doomed. Moses feels crowded by Charley's overtures of friendship, and Guy thinks Fletcher "a man who didn't know his place and had to be watched." When the usually placid Guy, who "wasn't bothered by much in the world except hay fever," gets fired by a boss who accuses him of "smelling like a nigger," a violent quarrel flares between Guy and Aida. Fletcher gets caught in the middle, a poor location, as Guy is holding a shotgun at the time.

If this sounds like the ingredients of gothic melodrama, it is. Shreve's plots are mesmerizingly gothic. This writer, who had polio, spinal meningitis and rheumatic fever all by age five in the pre-

penicillin days of World War II, grew up often bedridden with her ear to her radio console listening to soap operas and acting them out with paper dolls. She loves a good story, and her mind brims with them; even the stories behind minor details in this novel are engrossing. Shreve is a wonderful natural storyteller, and here she tells one based more than a little on fact, as her own father had been head of Radio Censorship during World War II, and on his farm a black tenant tried to kill him after he stepped into a domestic quarrel.

But *A Country of Strangers* is not merely a "good read." In this, her eighth novel, Shreve continues to deepen her tone, her insight into human nature and what we fear and how we struggle to retain what we love and what we hope for. Susan Richards Shreve is now far more than a superb teller of tales; she is an important literary novelist.