



Stella Bain, by Anita Shreve
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, November 2014

The Centennial of World War I—"the war to end all wars—" was observed in 2018. As reflected in the spate of books, movies, and television mini-series, there's been a renewed interest in stories about the Great War. This month's novel selection, *Anita Shreve*, also has WWI as its backdrop.

The book begins in Marne, France, in the middle of the war. A young woman wakes up in a battlefield hospital, unsure who she is or how she ended up in the hospital. She's dressed in the uniform of a British war nurse, but she speaks English with an American accent. All she recalls about herself is that she can drive an ambulance and is skilled at drawing. She calls herself "Stella Bain."

Returning to the front, Stella hopes by helping transport wounded soldiers she will somehow regain her memory. In her dreams and in her drawings, she tries to confront her past. She keeps picturing the form of a mysterious man, but his face is always blank.

Stella sets off for London, hoping to find some clues to her identity at the Admiralty, a military instillation. Exhausted from her travels, she rests on a park bench. A kind woman named Lily offers to take Stella to her comfortable home. Lily's husband, Dr. August Bridge, has a keen interest in the new field of psychoanalysis, especially in the treatment of soldiers suffering from shell-shock. Dr. Bridge thinks that Stella's amnesia is related to something terrible in her past.

At the Admiralty, Stella encounters a man who helps her remember her former life. The story, moving from England to America, ultimately becomes a love story. The plot at times is a bit contrived, but the author's authentic attention to historical detail makes it a worthwhile and satisfying read.