

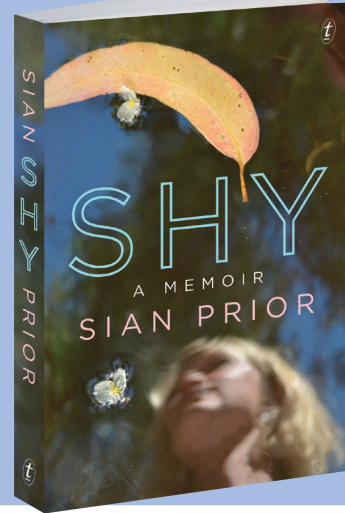
SHY

Sian Prior

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Non-fiction, Trade paperback



Praise for *SHY*

A fascinating meditation on how temperament can shape a person's life.' *Books+Publishing*

'[A] beautiful and confessional memoir...Brave is such a hackneyed word. This could have been indulgent. But brave is what it is.' *Sydney Morning Herald*

About Sian Prior

Sian Prior is a journalist and broadcaster specialising in the arts and popular culture, a media consultant, and a teacher at universities and writers centres. She has a second career as a musician and recording artist.

Sian lives in Melbourne. *Shy: A Memoir* is her first book

A reader's introduction to *Shy*

The word shy 'begins with an exhortation to silence', as Sian Prior points out at the start of her memoir about her own shyness, but in this book, through the very act of writing it, she refuses that exhortation. Instead she speaks to question, to examine, to answer.

And here is the contradiction, one that Prior herself picks apart—how can someone constantly in the public gaze be shy? Or in this case, how can someone who worries about what people think of her and fears the possibility of rejection put a book out into the world?

Perhaps the answer lies in the difference between 'Professional Sian' and 'Shy Sian'. One is able to manage conversations with famous people with ease, to speak or sing in front of large audiences. The other can be so overcome by shyness that she leaves parties without explanation. So separate are they that Prior describes them as 'two different people' (56). So, then, this is a book about identity. Is one persona more real than the other?

Where do these selves come from? From family? Prior looks back at her family life, wonders about the father

she never knew. What about those family members who were and were not shy? Did she inherit her shyness, or learn it? What of temperament? Introversion, self-consciousness, fear, the longing for connections with people—Prior asks how they all fit with shyness.

Shy is also a memoir of a relationship. With Tom, her partner for ten years, Prior's shyness usually dissipated. He gave her connectedness, but in the end justified her deep fear of rejection.

It is this fear of rejection that Prior sees at the heart of shyness. But where does that fear come from?

Questions for discussion

1. 'In my family, mysteries were simply things about which you hadn't yet asked enough questions' (10). Prior sets out to solve the mystery of the 'affliction' of shyness. Does she solve this mystery?
2. Is memoir an effective genre to explore a subject such as shyness?
3. Are you shy? Have your levels of shyness changed over the years as Prior's did? What made your shyness recede or advance? How do you conceal your shyness, or are you unable to? If you're not shy, can you understand shyness, or do you, like Prior's extroverted friend, 'roll your eyes and say "Shyness is SUCH a waste of time"' (9)?
4. Which of Prior's descriptions and explanations of shyness resonate most strongly with you?
5. Do you think that, at its heart, 'shyness is fear of rejection' (92)? What other fears does Prior talk about and how do they relate to shyness?
6. Where do you sit on the 'nature versus nurture' debate on the cause of shyness?
7. Do you find small talk tedious and unoriginal, or do you think it is a 'valuable part of human communication' (55)?
8. Prior often draws a distinction between the two different identities of 'Professional Sian' and 'Shy Sian'.

But towards the end of the book she lists the variety of women she was for Tom, so what does this mean for Professional Sian and Shy Sian? Are the other identities part of them or separate? Did you come across any other personas in the book, perhaps some Prior has not explicitly acknowledged or even recognised herself? And with all these different identities, who is the 'I' who is narrating the memoir?

9. 'If I wrote a whole book about my shyness, would anyone believe I was shy?' (111). Did this question occur to you? The last discussion point asked which identity narrates the book; in the light of this quote, which identity wrote the book?

10. Prior says that she didn't use Tom's real name because fame 'draws attention towards itself and away from everything else' (247). If you knew Tom's identity when you read the memoir, or have since found it out, did this knowledge distract you from the memoir and its topic?

11. 'I longed for someone like Tom so I imagined him into being' (249). Are all our significant others imaginary?

12. Prior began to write the book before her separation from Tom. How does the story of their relationship and its end tie in to Prior's exploration of shyness? Do you think Prior would have reached the same conclusions about shyness if she and Tom were still together?

13. How does the story of Prior's drowned father fit into the memoir's themes?

14. Lists are a feature of Prior's life. How do they work in the memoir?

15. Does the last chapter, 'The Final Interview', ask the questions you still had about Prior and the memoir itself? Why do you think the memoir ends with this 'interview'?

16. 'Why do we remember our failures and sufferings so much better than our pleasures and triumphs' (84)? Is this true for you? Discuss how memory works, especially when it comes to someone telling the story of their life in a memoir.

17. 'Sometimes the truth slips away between the gaps in the stories we tell about ourselves. Sometimes we push it through the gaps ourselves so we can make better stories. Reshape the characters. Make them more interesting, more heroic, more lovable. More deserving of sympathy. Less likely to be rejected' (238). How close do you think a non-fiction author can get to the truth? What is their duty to the truth?