

# 'Obituary Writer' pays visit

■ Visiting author Porter Shreve is spending winter term at the University to share his "expert" advice

By Christopher Arnold  
for the Emerald

After promoting his debut novel, visiting professor Porter Shreve received several e-mails from funeral directors and obituary writers asking for his "expert" opinions.

Shreve earned these fans when his novel "The Obituary Writer" landed him a spot as an honored guest at the Second Great Obituary Writers' Conference. Shreve's novel about a young journalist's search for his first big break has been well-received by readers and critics. The New York Times mentioned "The Obituary Writer" as a Notable Book of 2000.

"I would insist I was never an obituary writer," Shreve said. "I have some obituary writer friends, but it's not like I'm drawn to it."

Readers have been drawn to Shreve's book, though, and as a result he has become something of an obituary authority.

"It's very funny how you can accidentally take on an expertise," Shreve said.

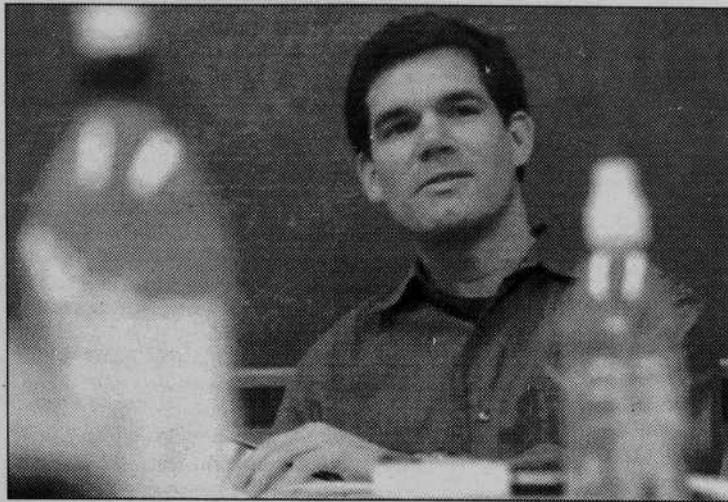
The 34-year-old has also attracted attention as a writer, though he admittedly courted failure.

"You have to have the absolute belief that you're going to write a notable book," Shreve said. "But at the same time, [you need] complete humility, this belief that you're actually sort of a loser and you'll be lucky to eat a solid meal in the next week."

Shreve said he always imagined himself as a writer.

"I convinced myself I wasn't good at anything else," he said.

Shreve grew up in Washington, D.C., the son of novelist Susan Richards Shreve. He said growing



Tom Patterson Emerald

Assistant professor Porter Shreve is visiting this term to lead a seminar and a workshop.

up around writers influenced his view of the profession.

"I thought of writers as flawed," Shreve said, "perhaps the most flawed human beings walking the earth."

Shreve spent the bulk of his undergraduate years studying journalism at the University of Missouri at Columbia before graduating from American University in Washington, D.C.

While at American University, Shreve worked at The Washington Post as a rewrite reporter and, later, as an editorial assistant. Working the night desk left his mornings open for writing.

"I knew I would never be a good journalist," Shreve said. "I wrote some nice 'grandmother crosses the street' stories, but they were never hard-hitting."

Shreve's decision to leave the Post led him to the University of Michigan's master of fine arts fiction program, where he worked on "The Obituary Writer" with Nicholas Delbanco, Charles Baxter

and Lorrie Moore.

Now Shreve teaches at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is spending winter term at the University as a visiting writer and assistant professor.

"Porter is a terrific addition to our program," said Ehud Havazelet, director of the program in creative writing. "As a new and much-praised voice in American fiction, he's brought a welcome vitality to our students."

Shreve leads a graduate seminar and a fiction workshop. He is currently writing a collection of short stories called "A Brief History of the Fool." He is also under contract for a second novel.

"The graduate students at Oregon are an extremely intelligent group," Shreve said. "I'm just curious to hear what they say."

His students have come to appreciate his sense of humor.

"He's very personable and very straightforward," said Tina Eskes, a student in the seminar. "We'll be sad to see him go."

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