# Shy by Sian Prior

## Synopsis

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, selfconsciousness, fear, the longing for connections with people—Prior asks how they all fit with shyness.

## Discussion questions

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. Are you shy? Have your levels of shyness changed over the years as Prior’s did?
3. Do you find small talk tedious and unoriginal, or do you think it is a ‘valuable part of human communication’ (55)?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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’?
8. ‘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.

*Synopsis/Discussion questions from https://www.textpublishing.com.au/books/shy*