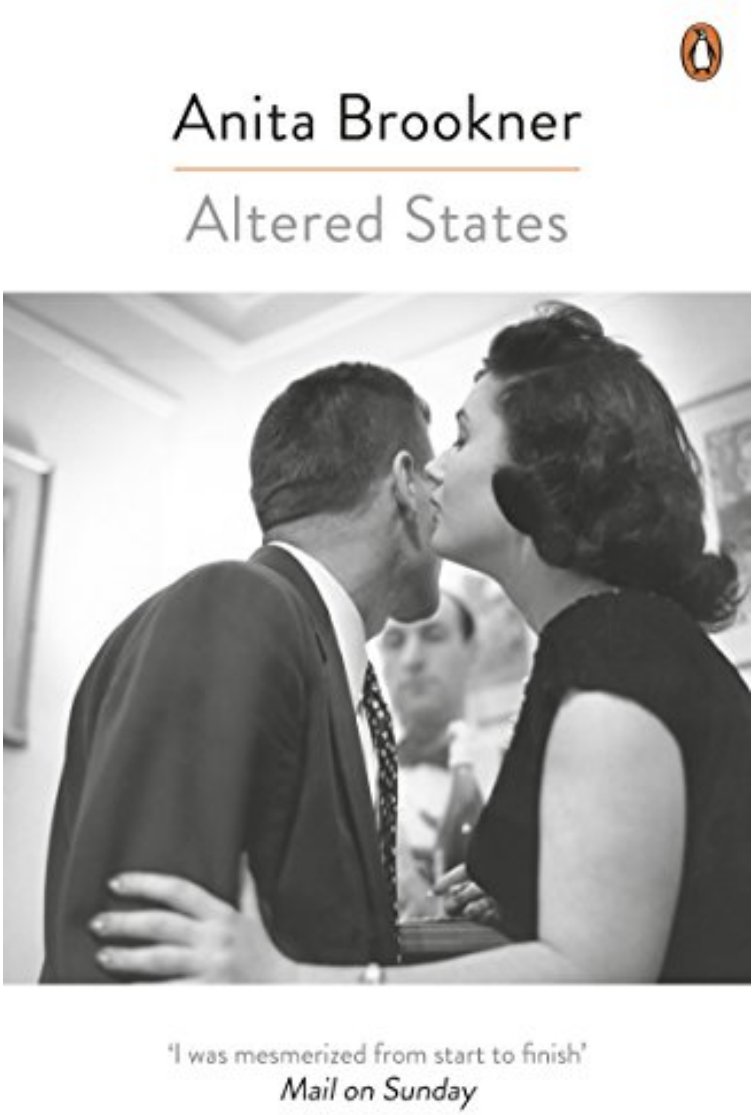
Altered States



Par Anita Brookner
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Par Anita Brookner : Altered States before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Altered States:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'I was foolish enough to think that I was strong enough, and cheerful enough by nature, to avoid unhappiness. I was not yet old enough to see that I was in error.'Alan Sherwood is a cautious, solitary London solicitor who finds himself obsessed by his glamorous cousin Sarah. But Sarah is self-seeking and predatory and their short-lived affair leaves Alan desolate. He finds distraction in Angela, a homely, needy acquaintance of Sarah and they drift into marriage. Alan, however, is haunted by his memories of Sarah, and, attempting to recapture the wordless passion of their time together, he arranges a final meeting. It is an act of betrayal that changes his life for ever.ExtraitThe woman on the station platform had her back to me. If she had turned round I would have been able to satisfy myself that she was not

someone I had once known. Even at this distance of time and place I should have known that other woman anywhere. As it was I could only contemplate this particular back view and once again return my memories to the oubliette to which I had consigned them. I was in any case reluctant to proceed to an identification. The woman on the station platform was smartly but not fashionably dressed in a sober chestnut-coloured suit and the sort of brown felt hat still favoured by certain middle-aged middle-class women in Germany. I doubted whether this woman was German, although she certainly looked European. This much was attested by her shoes, which again were smart without being fashionable: narrow brown brogues, with a medium heel. I noticed that they were brilliantly polished.That I was able to contemplate this woman at such length no doubt says something about myself, but I am averse to falsely intelligent summaries, such as seem to be prevalent nowadays, and prefer long moments of reverie and speculation, which seem to me more conducive to satisfactory conclusions. We were the only two people on this particular platform, and I was only there because I had come down to the station to buy the English papers, which usually arrived at about four o'clock. The light was already going: it was a misty dusky afternoon, still quite mild, but with that particular stillness that speaks so eloquently of the decline of the year, and with it all hopes one had had in the spring, season of false promises. Behind me, in the town, I had left the subdued comfort of the English Tea Rooms: beyond, at the end of the main street, at the foot of the steep path leading up to the hilly suburbs where all the more prosperous villas stood, was the Hotel Eden, and my small and dreadfully quiet room. This was too like a monastic cell to convey any prospect other than that of austere rest, such as might be appreciated by those who had spent the day walking, as I was supposed to have done. Sometimes I managed to coax some whispery music out of the bedside radio; that, if I were particularly tired, was generally distraction enough. But on this quiet afternoon I was bored, and had felt the need of some human presence, or at least of newsprint. If I lingered on this station platform it was because it seemed an appropriate place to be at the end of an uneventful afternoon. And because, for one shocking moment, I had thought the woman with her back to me, with her sensible hat and shoes, might be Sarah Miller, or Sarah de Leuze, as she now presumably was, who had the gift of turning up when least expected. It was part of her ravaging charm to disarm one with her presence when one had thought her lost for ever, only to disappear again when one's need had turned to the most intense and hopeless longing.I felt that longing now. That was why I lingered, in the misty half light, in my bulky English clothes: Burberry and tweed cap, woollen socks and walking shoes. I tend to wear everything when I travel, so as not to carry much. With my small bag I can pick up and disappear quite easily. I had nothing much to do with my time, and no one was expecting me, which was why I lingered, a substantial English ghost, haunting the woman in the German hat, until it became borne in on me that she was not at all like Sarah, was older (though Sarah would now be nearly my age), was more settled, with a fantastic air of capability conveyed by her back.A housewife, I concluded, although that term is anachronistic these days, or perhaps just a wife, married to one of those silent substantial peaceable men in whom this region abounds. The woman too had an air of peaceable worth about her, and in my fantasy I endowed her not only with an excellent digestion but a good conscience, the one usually contingent upon the other, in no particular order. Then the woman shifted her weight from one ankle to the other, and the way her knees came together reminded me again of Sarah, and her habit of swaying from one foot to the other, a mocking smile on her face, as if enjoying one's too fervent gaze. If this woman were Sarah I would fold my arms around her, as I had always tried to do, and sometimes succeeded in doing, before she escaped. There was of course no question of my touching this utterly respectable woman, whose face I still had not seen. It was simply that the combination of dull weather and grave silence, the thin white mist that so often descends without warning here and seems to lay delicate fingers on the skin of one's face, and the benign emptiness of this quiet little town might have emboldened me, not to embark on any crude adventure, but to remember the woman for whom I had been searching, and not only metaphorically but in pursuit of a mission. That was the fruitless task which I had undertaken in order to pacify a poor sick woman, not quite a relative, on what was too obviously her deathbed.I felt that this person on the platform might hold the key to the mystery, might in some extraordinary way enlighten me as to where Sarah might be, for although I tended to see her everywhere I had not yet laid eyes on her in ways that might be construed as physical, verifiable, even disappointing, as the end of certain stories sometimes turns out to be. This woman in the brown hat, this very real woman, would no doubt have a settled existence and many friends: she could ask questions, might already know a certain amount. The fact that her presence, or rather what I could intuit from her back view, was so compelling, awoke in me the suspicious feeling that if she were not Sarah herself, restored to me in this strange manner after an absence of fifteen years, then she might possibly know where Sarah might be.

My desire to address her, so that she would turn and show me her face, was negated by my immobility, my inability to move, and by the weight of memory that I allowed to overwhelm me for a brief moment. I felt that even if I managed to open my mouth no sound would come. Besides, the silence of that still afternoon laid a kind of enchantment on the scene which was not unpleasant to me: to break it would have seemed unmannerly. I felt that the woman and I were contained in this enchantment, and that the station of this little town was the setting for some drama that would eventually unfold, and in which we would both be bidden to speak, although our lines had not yet been written.Then the guard came out and posted the sign for the Geneva train, and within seconds people arrived from nowhere, some of them dragging suitcases on wheels, and I lost sight of the woman who was probably-undoubtedly-not Sarah. When the train disappeared and silence was restored she was nowhere to be seen. In an hour's time she would be in Geneva, perhaps in an apartment in the rue des Bains-the last address I had for Sarah-drinking a cup of coffee, raising a forkful of cake to her mouth. I stood for a few minutes, feeling heavy in my raincoat, feeling too a regret that nevertheless had something anticipatory about it, a very small dawning of excitement that was less like an ending than a beginning. Then I turned, and with my papers under my arm, began the long and by now chilly walk back to my hotel.I usually take my holiday late in the year, leaving current matters in the capable hands of my partner, Brian Smith. I am, as ever, beguiled by the prospect of a golden October, trees still full but changing colour, thoughts of the vintage occupying one's mind. In my politically incorrect way I like to think of smiling inhabitants ready to welcome me. These people would once have been described as peasants, though if peasants still exist they are mostly indoors watching television. What I invariably encounter is this curious sense of withdrawal, this intermittent mist, and trees a sullen but darkening green. I do not altogether dislike this, although sometimes I straighten up from unpacking my bag with a sigh, knowing that long walks and the English papers are to be my only distractions. There is no one who expects me, no one to whom I might telephone, but I have always been reasonably content with my own company. My mother always commended me for this, taking it to be a sign of character. Her values were old-fashioned, somewhat austere. I can hardly blame her for her reticence over my choice of the woman I was to marry, although she was very kind to my wife. As it turned out her kindness was needed.I now feel that this interval, which I describe to others as a holiday, is peculiarly suited to one of my temperament, which is stolid, and my history, which is not. I accept the solitude, the routines, as old people do, and although not technically old-fifty-five is not old these days-I begin to anticipate a time when small landmarks, such as my mid-morning coffee at the Grand Caf? de la Place, and my walk to the station to pick up the English papers, will be appreciated. My old age will come as no surprise to me, and something tells me that I might spend it here, in this little town of Vif-a misnomer, for no place could be more somnolent-on the Franco-Swiss border. I come here every other year in October; it is healthy, and monumentally dull. In the spring I spend a week or ten days at a small cottage I own at Shoreham, on the south coast. I am always glad to get back to London and the office, which casts my plans for later life in a rather illusory light.It is just that when I am here, with nothing at all likely to happen, I feel incapable of leaving, as if under some sort of sedative. And although the place has little to offer except tranquillity, this tranquillity has become fraught with consequences, owing to the burden placed on me, and which I was only half minded to discharge. Old Mrs Miller, with her strangely changing name and identity, had been lying on the sofa when I had last been to see her, her ugly feet protruding from under the shawl she had taken to wearing in the house. 'Find Sarah for me,' she had said, and her eyes were still trustful. I assured her that I would try, knowing that the whole thing was an impossibility. I had nothing to go on apart from two addresses on a piece of squared paper: the pencil was faded and the paper limp from much folding. One address, the one in Paris, I already knew about; the other, in the rue des Bains, in Geneva, is almost certainly unreliable.I have my own reasons for searching for Sarah, reasons I am careful not to admit to, even to myself. Grand passions are no longer the order of the day; divorce has replaced fidelity in the gardens of the West. I am not even sure that my memory of her is exact, for I frequently winced at her cruelty until I learned to laugh at it. What is needed, I tell myself, is a certain pragmatism. I shall not find her, but I shall have been in her vicinity, and the impression I shall take away from my quest will be precisely this dullness, this inconclusiveness, the peace of this little town, an apt comment on my inadequacy, but not a harsh one. Maybe all lifelong searches end like this, I tell myself, as I begin the steep climb back to my hotel, and the only verdict on all my activities, on my life, in fact, contained in the withheld kindliness of the slowly and inexorably descending night.2My name is Alan Sherwood and I am a solicitor, as were my father and grandfather before me. By a pleasing coincidence my partner, Brian Smith, is the grandson of the original Smith: we are thus the true inheritors of the firm of

Sherwood Smith, founded nearly one hundred years ago. We have our offices in Gloucester Place and we pride ourselves on our effectiveness, although the premises are not imposing and by no means extensive. There is one office apiece for each of us, while our clerk, Telfer, who is into Eastern religions, has to share a rather pleasant room overlooking the back garden with Mrs Roche, who is more of a hostess than a secretary and who knows more about the business than any of us (or so we tell her). Mrs Roche in her turn commands-and that is the right word-the services of Amanda, Julie and Anne and their computers; they share an adjacent room, also overlooking the garden, and have charge of the coffee machine. Brian and I, soberly dressed in dark suits and white shirts, look out on to Gloucester Place and its curiously bleak Georgian fa?ades. In all the years afforded me for study of this particular architectural style I cannot view it as anything better than town planning of the cheapest kind, guaranteed to confer a deadly conformity on the urban landscape. Gower Street is another example. I am a Victorian myself, or better still an Edwardian. In my opinion Lutyens should be our national architect and afforded all the respect normally given to Christopher Wren. He too has his boring moments.Brian is my oldest friend. We have known each other all our lives, were at school and university together, although our paths diverged for a time after we came down. Brian went to Hong Kong to stay with an uncle, a prominent lawyer there, while I spent three guilty but hedonistic years in Paris, supposedly studying international law but in fact doing very little. My memories of Paris in those years are not of Sartre and Camus but of the nightclubs to which I took my French girl-friend Simone. We went to the Rose Rouge, the Vieux Colombier, the Cabane Cubaine, and believed for a time that we need never grow up. But family pressure extended itself imperceptibly, and when I received news from home that my father was ill I said goodbye to Simone and left Paris, never willingly to return. I had been happy there, but I knew that this particular form of happiness could not be sustained. I also knew that once I reached home-and it was always home-I should become what I was always meant to be, a respectable member of the middle class, affectionate towards my mother, reliable in an emergency, but unsentimental. Emotional clients think me too severe; I tend to say nothing and watch them impassively while they reach for their handkerchiefs. Oddly enough this does not put them off. The women tend to come to me, the men to Brian. 'You appeal to the masochists,' Brian says. 'The sadists know I am one of them.' Actually he has a kind heart, as he has shown me over the years.Revue de presse"Engrossing-- a brilliant X-ray of obsession." -New York Times Book "Brilliant.... In a category of its own." -The Globe and Mail"Altered States -- is among [Brookner's] best. Its spare, gripping narrative and sombre, yet illuminating look at the power of passion is extraordinary." -The London Free Press"Brookner's vision of human behaviour is scrupulously honest, without ever being cruel-- a gem of revelation." -Chicago Tribune