THINKING ABOUT GENDER AND NARRATIVE:

The Short Stories of Carol Shields

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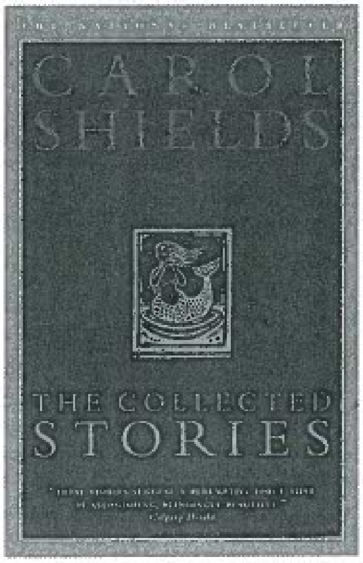
If the world can be divided into hunters and gatherers, Carol Shields was a gatherer. More precisely, she was the storyteller of the gatherers. Storytelling has been too long dominated by the hunters, she told us. It is time to consider the previously hidden, the previously dismissed *gravitas* of the tales of the gatherers. The lives, and the *stories* of the gatherers are just as interesting, just as important as the lives and stories of the hunters. Gatherers, she assured us, are a worthy subject of literature.

I am speaking, of course, of men and women. Shields was part of a broad movement in the late twentieth century that insisted on a reevaluation of literary history through the frame of gender. In a 1996 speech that was later reprinted as an essay, "Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard," Shields reminded readers that storytelling is "probably about 40,000 years old" and likely began with "accounts of fallen heroes or adventures of the hunt." "It was mainly male-narrated stories that entered the literature before the eighteenth century," she noted, an imbalance that feminists were determined to correct:

> Even as late as 1967, Northrop Frye, that good and humane scholar, was able to announce authoritatively that there are precisely four forms of fiction; this, by the way, may have been the last time in our history that such definitive summations were possible. Frye's essay lists dozens of male fiction writers (and one woman named George and another named Jane), a disproportion of writers and women's experience that radically diminishes the narrative pool.

Carol Shields.
(Photo by Neil Graham)



The problem of the lack of female stories having been identified, Shields moved on to related conclusions: "Domesticity has not flourished in contemporary fiction;" "coupledom, especially when seen in an unsparing light, should not necessarily equal boredom;" and "the notion of conflict in fictional narrative may also need reassessment." At the time, she proclaimed remediation well underway. "Women's writing has already begun to dismantle the rigidities of genre, those four basic types of fiction referred to earlier, and to replace that oppressive narrative arc we've lived with so long – what some feminists call the ejaculatory mode of storytelling."

Progress was not so clear ten years later, however, when the *New York Times* polled "a couple of hundred prominent writers, critics, editors and other literary sages" to determine "the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years." On its short list of 22 titles only two books by women featured, one taking top spot: *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. (The other was *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, a book the *Times* hadn't even reviewed when it first appeared.) In an online panel discussing the list, Jane Smiley had this to say:

> I do not think that the last twenty-five years in the American novel was the era of Roth, Updike, McCarthy, and DeLillo. In my world, the last twenty-five years is the era Virginia Woolf predicted in "A Room of One's Own" – the period when women routinely gained a place to be and an education, and put both of these to use and wrote books. In my world, the last twenty-five years is the era

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of, in no particular order, Valerie Martin, Gish Jen, Susan Cheever, Anne Tyler, E. Annie Proulx, Francine Prose, Alison Lurie, Diane Johnston, Alice McDermott, Geraldine Brooks, Marilynne Robinson, Sue Miller, Linda Hogan, Joyce Carol Oates, Barbara Kingsolver, Susan Sontag, Andrea Barrett, Marianne Wiggins, Joy Williams, Urusla K. LeGuin, Alice Hoffman, Alice Walker, Carol Shields, Louise Erdrich, Amy Tan, Anita Shreve, Joan Didion, Octavia Butler, Ann Beattie, Sandra Cisneros, Jamaica Kincaid, Lee Smith, Gail Godwin, Ellen Gilchrist, Cynthia Ozick, Mary Gaitskill, myself, and plenty of others I didn't think of in the first five minutes. To me, it's the women, young and old, who have been doing new and interesting things.

I belabour the point because to read the work of Carol Shields outside of the context of feminism would be to misunderstand her. This does not take us away from the fact that the extent to which Shields' short stories succeed (or fail) depends on their literary merits. But what literary merit consists of, and its relation to gender, is a dialogue that continues. Consider, for example, Barbara Kay slamming Lisa Moore's *February* in the pages of the *National Post*:

> Welcome to the unrelenting self-regard of CanLit, where it's all about nobly suffering women or feminized men: men immobilized in situations of physical, psychological or economic impotence (that is when they're not falling through the ice and nearly drowning), rather than demonstrating manly courage in risk-taking or heroic mode.

Oh, that oppressive narrative arc. Give me more!

But literary achievement isn't about being true to one's gender. Nor is it about rehabilitating lost, forgotten, or suppressed stories, as valuable an exercise as that may be. Much of the complexity of Shields' work has to be found elsewhere. One place to look is in the relationship between fiction and reality, or "reality." (In her "Narrative Hunger" essay, Shields quotes Nabokov advising that "reality" is "the only word in the language that always needs a pair of quotation marks around it.")

In her writing, Shields wasn't representing reality. Reality isn't the subject of literature; the subject, rather, is the intersection of reality and language. Shields was well versed on the problematic relationship between fiction and "reality;" her short stories brim with that knowledge. Telling women's stories was her oft-stated goal, but thinking about narrative engaged her, arguably, in a more universal purpose. In Shields, the two ends are always linked, but they are also distinct. Her feminism engaged her deeply with the world; her fiction problematized any possibility of engagement with "reality."

Shields' "Narrative Hunger" essay includes a self-portrait that expands this theme into the area of gender:

> Someone asked me not long ago what I did when I was not writing or reading. A good question, I thought, and naturally I pondered it. Of course, much that I do can be filed under the title of what Isak Dinesen calls "this business of being a woman." I cook, shop, write notes, keep in contact with my family. Other than that, I mostly walk around and think about narrative, about the telling of stories, what they mean, these stories – and why we need them.

Later, she continued:

> This sorting out of "reality" and invention is not a new problem but a very old one, and it has to do, I think, with the inability of fiction to stare at itself. So many questions arise. Is there such a beast as truth? Can we set aside our attachment to truth-telling? Who makes the rules? Who is telling the story, and how does the teller relate the tale? Exactly how far can a teller take a tale? . . . Do we accept the fact that fiction is not strictly mimetic – that we want it to spring out of the world, illuminate the world – not mirror it back to us?

Readers may find Shields' fictions to be "believeable" and "empathetic," but their closeness to "reality" is not Shields's particular gift. In fact, her own theorizing emphasized the artifice of fiction: "We need to remember that the labyrinth of language stands beside reality itself: a somewhat awkward, almost always distorted facsimile or matrix." Shields was not just telling women's stories or trying to capture "female reality." Her short stories in particular are marked with an intense curiosity about narrative possibilities. That is, they are often odd and playfully bizarre.One of her stories was written entirely without using the letter "I," an Oulipan construction that draws attention to itself as a product of fantasy.

Of course, playing narrative games, as Stephen Henighan reminds us, does not a good writer make. "Shields' forays into postmodernism are facile and desultory," he writes. "Planting a recipe in the middle of a chapter does not an Italo Calvino make. Postmodernism is not simply structurelessness; it has its own vigour and discipline."

And, to be sure, some of Shields' work has a feeling for randomness that weakens it. The story "Keys," for example, follows a succession of characters, each appearing briefly, never to return. The binding element of the story is that each character has a key or keys. The story, therefore, consists of a series of moments, but it does not have a central, binding (ejaculatory or otherwise) plot. The technique seems modelled on a workshop assignment she gave students. Wayson Choy described it thus: "She tore up pieces of paper, each marked with a colour, and set the rule: whichever colour you picked, that colour had to be a major part of your next short story assignment."

The reviews of Shields' *Collected Stories* (2005) highlighted complaints similar to Henighan's. The reviewers groused that the author would have been better served by a slimmer selection. "These stories can be oddly disappointing," sighed Ann Hulbert in the *New York Times*:

> The cumulative effect of these 56 stories is to conjure up a very writerly writer honing her technical and theoretical skills and paying little attention to conventions of plot and character. There's not much traditional suspense here; in fact, a surprising number of Shields's stories are fancifully essayistic treatments of items as disparate as keys and dolls, even a bready food called a "flatty."

Paul Bailey, writing in *The Independent*, recorded that "Shields' forays into parable and whimsy don't have her customary lightness of touch. The humour courts facetiousness and the fell hand of contrivance can be detected." David Thoreen, in *The Boston Globe*, was blunt: "a volume of Carol Shields's *New and Selected* would have made a better book." Thoreen found three types of stories in the collection, a useful classification system: domestic realism, serial character fiction, and epistemological parable.

Thoreen praises the stories in the first category, singling out the story "Salt" as a prime example. I prefer "Mrs. Turner Cutting The Grass," which is a sly satire of (male) literary pretensions, and an impassioned defence of existential peculiarities of a certain generation of housewives. It is also a well-structured, conventional short story, beginning and ending with Mrs. Turner pushing a mower across her Winnipeg lawn. "Oh, what a sight is Mrs. Turner cutting her grass," the narrator tells us in the final line, "and how, like an ornament, she shines." The irony here is intense and complex. The narrator has just finished telling us how Mrs. Turner, an otherwise unremarkable retiree, became the subject of a satirical poem. She travelled with two other culturally naïve women ("white trash," is the idea here; though that goes too far) to Asia, visiting ancient shrines. Also along on the trip was an English professor, who wrote a poem poking fun at the historical cluelessness of the women.

The question of who, ultimately, ends up begin satirized in the story is a question of some complexity. The story begins with teenaged girls passing Mrs. Turner, knowing nothing about the older woman's not uninteresting personal history. Yes, Mrs. Turner isn't sophisticated in some contexts, but she has a complicated history that the teenage girls would never guess, and the English professor never bothers to find out. This story illustrates well Shields' critique of Frye and how a limited engagement with women's experience "diminishes the narrative pool."

Thoreen's second category of stories includes some of Shields' narrative experiments. Thoreen describes Shields' serial characters' stories as tales "in which three or more disparate characters enter, stage right, reveal an elbow or collarbone, and exit, stage left. Most of these fictions are without plot or consequence; their tone that of an obituary page." "Keys" is an example.

Thoreen's final category – epistemological parables – cause him "post-structuralist stress disorder." Here is the beginning of one, "Ilk."

> By now everyone's seen the spring issue of Ficto-Factions, page 146, in which G.T.A., whoever he/she may be, summarizes the various papers that were presented at the recent NWUS Conference on Narrativity and Notation. Put your finger on the third paragraph of the summary, move it halfway down, and you'll see that the astute and androgenous G.T.A. refers to me by name. The bit about "the new theory of narrative put forward at NWUS and how it illustrates the atemporal paradigms of L. Porter and his ilk."

Here we couldn't be further from Mrs. Turner cutting her grass in Winnipeg. If Mrs. Turner was unselfconscious about her own (lack of) cultural awareness, this narrator couldn't be more hyper-self-conscious. The target here, however, remains the same: the male literary establishment. L. Porter is Lucy Porter, feminist academic and our narrator. If she's serious about getting tenure, she tells us, "I'd better sign my published articles with my initial only. In these days of affirmative action, Lucy Porter gets interviews, plenty of them, but L. Porter gets people to read her 'ilkish' ideas about narrative."

At this point, I want to return to my claim that to read Shields outside the context of feminism would be to misunderstand her. As "Mrs. Turner" and "Ilk" illustrate, feminism was an animating force in Shields' short stories, in a variety of ways. For Shields, feminism and postmodern playfulness are conjoined. In 2000 she told *READ Magazine*, the "postmodern discussion . . . has opened up certain forms of playfulness in language and in structure. That old narrative line of ascending action – what some feminists call the ejaculatory mode of storytelling – does not work particularly well for women writers; they have had to find other patterns." So here we return to the ejaculatory mode of storytelling and the need to free women writers from the "old narrative" and enable them to pursue modes of storytelling that work "well."

But do Shields' stories work well for readers? Are they worth re-reading? I've already quoted some reviewers who reported the *Collected Stories* would have benefited from a cull. How do we separate her best (which are very good) from the others (which feel "contrived" and "facetious" and "have the tone of the obituary page")?

First, both Shields and Smiley are wrong to draw such hard lines in the fictional sand. "Postmodern playfulness," for example, has been available for hundreds of years; its arrival didn't coincide with the women's movement. Furthermore, not all conventional realism has the "wham, bam, thank you ma'am" quality of a James Cameron screenplay. As we assess Shields' short stories, we might benefit from sage John Barth: "Traditionalist excellence is no doubt preferable to innovative mediocrity (but there's not much to be said for conservative mediocrity; and there's a great deal to be said for inspired innovation)." To paraphrase, feminist narrative playfulness is no doubt preferable to ejaculatory convention (but there's not much to be said for feminist mediocrity; and there's a great deal to be said for inspired innovation). Inspired innovation transcends feminism, as it transcends any ideology. Shields' innovations are worthy of close reading and critical attention.

Her reputation as a "Gentle Feminist," however, often clouds the true nature of her work. ("Gentle Feminist" is the title given to the short biography of Shields in the end notes of the paperback edition of the *Collected Stories.*) I would have preferred to call her "The Radical Innovator." What is exciting about Shields' best stories is that they go beyond the bounds of the safe and well-worn; they are not "gentle." Her speculation, quoted earlier, that "the notion of conflict in fictional narrative may also need reassessment," for example, is bold – and risky. Her stories with low fissure are failed attempts to chart new paths.

"Segue" is an example. This 20-page story is placed at the beginning of *Collected Stories*. It is the only story that didn't appear in one of her earlier collections. Placed where it is, it offers an introduction to what is to follow, yet it is also one of Shields' final works, and so a kind of summation as well.

The story is set in post-9/11 Chicago. Its two primary characters are a married couple. Both are writers. She, the narrator, writes sonnets, an under-appreciated form. He, a novelist, has had much commercial success, though his new novel came out the week before the terrorist attack on New York City and isn't doing well. The world has changed. Or has it? Perhaps attention to the smaller, sonnet-like, details of life would enable us to experience a new, refreshed reality. The story is quiet, reflective, and perhaps it provides some readers with "crinkly feelings." It also echoes various Shieldsian theses, among them: "Domesticity has not flourished in contemporary fiction," and "coupledom, especially when seen in an unsparing light, should not necessarily equal boredom." But "Segue" *is* boring. The weight placed on the post-9/11 context is overplayed, the story's tone leaden and uninviting.

Or is there another way of reading it that brings out a better reading experience? In remarks she gave at Harvard in 1997, Shields spoke about her reading habits growing up – and what she values in the reading experience. What she wanted from reading, she said, was the "crinkly feeling" described by Anne Shirley of Green Gables fame. "How different this is from Emily Dickinson's insistence that a poem must take the top of your head off," she went on to say, before speculating that this was perhaps a good articulation of "the difference between American and Canadian sensibility: decapitation, the big bang, versus the mere vertebral crinkling."

Does this mean Emily Dickinson is an "ejaculatory" writer? Are Shields and Kay in agreement, is Canadian literature dominated by a feminine sensibility? Whatever the answers to these questions, it will pay dividends to be reminded that, while, yes, the past decades have not *exclusively* been "the era of Roth, Updike, McCarthy, and DeLillo," the work of those writers and the narrative line of ascending action remain vital and full of astounding quality. Arguments about aesthetic approaches ought not to proceed by denying other points of view.

The short stories of Carol Shields perpetually open up into questions about narrative, its purpose, its uncharted possibilities, its struggles and limitations, the socio-cultural expectations that influence what may or may not be able to be said. We would do well to remember that Shields never let up questioning; we shouldn't either. In her *Collected Stories*, Shields left us 56 fictions. A carnivalesque playful lightness invigorates the best of these, among them: "The Orange Fish," "Family Secrets," "Invention," and "Dressing Down." Beckett's famous phrase offers conclusion and consolation: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better." Shields' short stories have left a legacy of experiment and failure. No matter. She tried. Again and again. Until the end, she kept thinking about narrative. Never settling. Sometimes failing, but then failing better.

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