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“Excursions into the Sublime”: A Personal Reminiscence of Carol Shields

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY NORA FOSTER STOVEL

I FIRST HAD THE PLEASURE of meeting Carol Shields in Ottawa in 1993 when she read from *The Stone Diaries* just before it won the Governor General’s Award, followed by the Pulitzer Prize, catapulting her to instant fame. When I spoke with her afterward to tell her how much I had enjoyed her work, she was just as friendly and unpretentious as I had heard she was.

When my proposal for a study of her writing was awarded a research grant in the spring of 2003, I screwed up my courage to email her to ask if I might visit. She replied simply, “When can you come?” When I telephoned to arrange a date (they were listed in the phone book as “Shields, Carol and Don”), she said, “You realize that I’m at the end of a long illness. So sooner is better than later.”

When I arrived at their airy home in the exclusive Rocklands district of Victoria on a beautiful day in early May, I could hear children’s footsteps running through the house. A little girl opened the door, saying, “Grandma’s in the kitchen.” Carol Shields emerged from the kitchen and took my hand warmly. She invited me into her sunroom, where we chatted over tea (she apologized for the lunch crumbs on the table), getting to know one another. I had an unfair advantage, as readers do with writers, since I had been reading her novels for nearly twenty years and felt that I knew her in a way.

Then the author of ten novels, four published plays, three collections of stories, three collections of poems and two biographies, and the recipient of many awards and accolades (including numerous honorary degrees, plus the Order of Canada), Carol Shields had reason to be proud. But she was as friendly and down-to-earth as I remembered her being before her fame. Where she had been sunny ten years earlier, she was now luminous.

We talked about many issues of common interest over the three days of my visit, among them family. She had five children and eventually twelve grandchildren, and still managed to write all those books! We

compared parenthood and authorship, producing babies and books. She agreed that there were a lot of “commonalities”: “I remember the birth dates of my books,” she said. She talked about the pleasure of assembling a book, which she compared to forming the character of children — “character-building,” one could say, was her forte in more ways than one. She said she needed parenthood to grow up, because being responsible for “that tiny body” demanded maturity. “I do means I am,” she said, varying Descartes’s rational proof of existence with a practical one. “Children offer you a wonderful window on the world of the young.”

During that first afternoon, we went on to discuss fiction and feminism. What follows, ten years after her death, is a record of our conversation in the form of direct transcripts interwoven with summaries.



NS Who would you say have been your major influences?

CS Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* were important books for me. Recently I’ve been reading Penelope Lively and Lorrie Moore. Updike has been a very important writer for me. I also admire Philip Roth. Just now I am reading Updike and Isabel Huggan.

Carol had a basket overflowing with books on the floor by her bed. Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake teetered on the top of the pile. She expressed great admiration for Atwood’s work, although we agreed that dystopias were not our favourite form of fiction.

NS Would you agree that Canada has an extraordinary number of brilliant women writers?

CS Yes, we have a lot of fine women writers. Munro is my favourite writer. I think she is better than any other writer we have. In our family we refer to her as “the divine Alice.”

NS You wrote an essay about Margaret Laurence’s *A Bird in the House*. Has she influenced you?

CS It was when I read *The Stone Angel* when I was an MA student at the University of Ottawa that I decided to enrol in the PhD program in Canadian literature.

NS Which is your favourite Laurence novel?

CS *A Bird in the House* is my favourite, although I like them all.

NS I enjoyed your essay “Leaving the Brick House Behind: Margaret Laurence and the Loop of Memory.”¹

CS Those are wonderful stories.

NS I sometimes think that some of your novels resemble Margaret Drabble’s fiction. Has she influenced you at all?

CS Yes, I started reading Drabble when we were living in England. I read a review [of *The Ice Age*] that called her “the chronicler of the 20th century,” and I thought, “I can do that.” I realized that Drabble fit into my life.

NS Drabble has been praised for the realism of her novels. Do you think that realism is important to fiction?

CS Yes, I think novels are about the real world with excursions into the sublime.

NS You recently published a study of Jane Austen [*Jane Austen* (2001)], and you have presented papers on Austen at annual general meetings of the Jane Austen Society of North America, where you met “keen-eyed professors from Canada,” including my colleagues Juliet McMaster and Bruce Stovel, as you noted in one of your essays. Is it true to say that Austen has been a major influence on your own fiction?

CS Austen influences all writers. She showed that the novel must have good feet to walk on.

NS Would you agree that Austen redeemed realism and that, by domesticating the novel, she also feminized it?

CS I like that! I think Austen captures the reality of life. She understood the importance of dailiness. You have to believe in the world you’re writing about, and you have to make the reader believe it.

NS Do you think Austen revolutionized the novel?

CS Austen created the idea of marriage as a matter of finding one’s home, of leaving one’s mother. *Ulysses* is about going home.

NS What draws you to fiction?

CS I always felt my own life wasn't enough. That's why I needed fiction. Having just one life is like looking through a venetian blind at a partial, incomplete vision. I remember seeing a man sitting out in front of his house writing something; I wanted to know what he was writing, but I couldn't ask. I needed other people's lives but couldn't ask for it.

NS You have written two biographical studies [of Susanna Moodie and Jane Austen] and two novels structured as biographies or autobiographies [*Larry's Party* and *The Stone Diaries*]. Is any of your fiction autobiographical?

CS My story "Dolls, Dolls, Dolls" was the only autobiographical writing I've ever done.

She recalled the murder of a ten-year-old girl in Chicago. Carol, who was ten herself at the time, got out all her dolls to comfort herself, because she was coming to the age when she had to present a hard shell to the world and so could not talk to anyone about her fear.

NS Although I consider that your fiction is implicitly feminist from your very first novel, *Small Ceremonies*, through *A Fairly Conventional Woman*, to *Swann*, you are more explicit than ever before about your feminism in *Unless*. Would you like to talk about that?

CS I was a very slow feminist. I think I was the last feminist to wake up in the world. But I knew there was something wrong in spite of my love of English literature. I loved it, but I knew that something was missing. And it took me a tremendously long time to find out what was wrong. It was the voice of women — the critical voice and the voice of the novelist or the poet. I began to notice that the list of women writers was far shorter and sometimes didn't exist at all, but I thought that that's just the way it was. Women didn't have a chance. And then I began to see more and more. Women still didn't have a chance.

NS Reta Winters does a lot of what she calls "bean-counting" in *Unless*.

CS We're so used to being left out. When I was writing *Unless*, I didn't think I'd be alive when that book was published. So I thought I could be very brave. You don't want to be the one who's counting the

beans all the time. You don't want to be the one who's always whining. Because if you were a good writer, you would have proven that.

We discussed subversion, indirection, and women's wiles. She realized she was always deferring to men.

CS I remember being struck by hearing a woman say that she realized that she owned her own life.

NS Do you think the novel has played an important role in the liberation of women?

CS Novels have given women a voice to talk back with. Fiction makes women performers, rather than just observers.

NS You have had a number of plays produced and published. Is it harder for a woman to get her plays produced than to get her novels published?

CS Someone told me the story of a woman playwright whose play was being produced, and the producers said that it was good that she was being given the small theatre instead of the big one because it was the one that worked best for women's plays. It took the author a moment to realize the implications of this comment, that women are relegated to the small theatre because their work only draws, or merits, a small audience, and she was furious. It hit her full in the face.

NS Do you see a connection between your drama and your fiction?

CS Yes, fiction is made up of scenes: one has to furnish the scene, establish the web of enchantment, take the reader into this revelation.

NS Do you consider Austen's fiction particularly dramatic? Is that why her novels have so often been adapted to the stage or the screen?

CS Yes, scenes in Austen's novels are like a little play, with dialogue.

NS Have you been influenced by movies in your own writing?

CS I think I have been influenced by the technique of montage with no transitions.

NS Some of your own novels have been adapted for the stage or screen.

CS *Unless* was made into a play before Christmas. I wrote it in collaboration with my daughter Sara. It was an enjoyable experience for both of us. It's going to be produced in England next year and in Canada the year after.

NS You have published three collections of poetry. How has being a poet influenced your career as a novelist?

CS Poetry teaches a love of form: like knitting a pair of socks, you want to get it right.

NS Do you do a lot of revision?

CS I always asked myself the question, "Is this what I really mean, or am I appeasing the reader?" I believe every poem should have an idea, not just soft, unfocused feelings.

After an hour of conversation, her husband, Don Shields, former Dean and Professor of Engineering at the University of Manitoba, escorted her to the hospital for tests. Our meetings had to be fitted in around her demanding medical regimen. Don was hospitable and friendly, yet clearly a conscientious caretaker who cherished Carol tenderly, protecting her from her own generous nature.

Despite her illness and manifest weakness, Carol was as enthusiastic as ever about discussing literature in general and her own writing in particular. Accordingly, she invited me to come the next morning at eleven, following an interview for Shelagh Rogers's radio show. Since she had by then retired to bed, I was invited to pull up a white wicker chair beside her bed to chat with her. (A CBC TV crew had set up an interview in her bedroom two weeks before.) As we talked, she faded out occasionally, as if listening to inner voices, but then rallied and continued the conversation. She agreed to speak into a tape recorder, but her voice was so weak that I had to play the tape over and over again to catch her exact words. At some points I had to paraphrase or summarize her views.

NS Did you fear the labels "women's writer" or "writer of domestic fiction"? Was that why you have written two novels [*Happenstance* and *Larry's Party*] from the point of view of a male character?

CS I wanted to explore the way men think. I believe men and women are essentially the same in their needs for intimacy and tender-

ness, but they have been conditioned to meet those needs differently. But I could only get so close to the male character: I couldn't get inside the male body.

She said she loved Jack Bowman of Happenstance. She thought men compartmentalized their lives more than women did. This may be biological. "Killing bison" was her example: men are out hunting while women are considering all the issues, such as, did I remember to take the butter out of the fridge. That compartmentalization may have dictated the structure of her chapters in Larry's Party.

NS I was surprised that Larry Weller got back together with his first wife, Dorrie, at the end of *Larry's Party*. I wasn't expecting that.

CS I regret concluding *Larry's Party* with the traditional "happy ending" of marriage. I wish I had ended it differently. I was enchanted with the idea of coming back to the place where you started. But I think that the published ending doesn't work because it hasn't been led up to. The logical ending for Larry is a general misalignment with women and the contemporary world.

NS *Swann* is a much more daring novel than your previous novels.

CS *Swann* is my little darling. I wrote half of it in France and half in Canada. After *Happenstance* I made three different starts on *Swann*. I wrote one hundred pages and threw it away into my box, because it wasn't working.

She said she then took a year off and wrote Various Miracles, as creative writing improvs, experiments or assignments, using different kinds of narrative approaches, such as starting the story from a child's viewpoint, writing a piece all in one sentence, etc. When she returned to Swann, she was braver about her experimentalism.

CS I had a wonderful sense in this book that I could be more daring, braver. It is my favourite book. I realized that the novel is a big commodious bag. It gave me a sense of freedom.

NS How did you plan the innovative structure?

CS I planned *Swann* as four independent novellas with a play at the

end. The play format seemed too confined, so I switched to screenplay format.

NS Structure is very important in *The Stone Diaries*, too. How did you conceive of that?

CS I had an image of Chinese boxes: I was writing the outer box, and Daisy was writing the inside box. Daisy is thinking her own autobiography from which she has been excluded.

NS You play with the traditional biography form in *The Stone Diaries* — birth, childhood, adulthood, work, marriage, parenthood, and death — but you leave out Daisy's education, sexual initiation, childbirth, and so on. You seem to take a subversive attitude to inverting forms, as you do in *Swann*.

CS *The Stone Diaries* is a family saga turned upside down. As an autobiography it's very selective, picking up Daisy's life every ten years or so and leaving out huge swatches.

NS So she captures the marginalia of her life in a way. Is Daisy afraid to confront her life head-on?

CS Well, the novel has lots of parentheses, as my British editor pointed out, as if the narrator is afraid to speak outright.

NS Some of those parenthetical expressions are the most important expressions of Daisy's self.

CS Yes, the last important sentence is "I am not at peace."

I had lost track of time, and to my surprise, Don entered bearing a tray with French bread, cheeses and wine and said, "Let's pretend we're in France."

Don recalled that, when they were on holiday in France, they rented a small apartment in a chateau. Carol needed the apartment to herself to write in the morning, and so Don absented himself. Because it rained every day, he sat and read in the car, where he had plenty of time to plan lunch!

Carol invited me to return to her Victoria home the next morning at nine o'clock. When I suggested that we could talk about morality, Don responded, "Oh, morality! I thought you said mortality. Morality is all right. We don't talk about mortality in this house." Carol laughed.

So the next day we discussed narrative method and the question of ethics and the novel.

NS How do you decide what narrative method to use and how to structure the narrative?

CS A book feels ready to come in a certain direction. The writer has no choice. So much writing is unconscious, and yet it's all conscious.

NS In *Unless* you return to the first-person narrative, the form you employed in your first novel.

CS Yes, the first person is supposed to be second-rate. Women's voices develop a "whine." But I have always liked the woman's viewpoint and woman's voice and women's digressive form of storytelling, suggesting that everything in life has value and fits into a larger structure.

NS Ethics is a major consideration in *Unless*. Do you think the novel has a moral function, especially in the face of the weakening of religion in the modern western world?

CS Yes, I think we learn from fiction. Novels make us better people. Dickens believed that novels make for a better society. I am always amazed at intelligent people who don't read novels.

NS Have you read any enlightening studies about morality and the novel?

CS Martha Nussbaum at the University of Chicago has written two or three little books on social ethics and literature.

NS Do you consider Austen to be an ethical writer?

CS Yes, Austen's characters are committed to being good people. I think most people have good intentions, but things get in their way.

NS Do you consider yourself religious?

CS Well, I was brought up a Methodist, and then I became a Quaker for a time, but now, I'm nothing. I believe in spirituality, in synapses, like *déjà vu*.

NS That's interesting because I am always struck by the importance of the transcendent moment in your short stories and novels. "Hinterland" is about this idea of the existential moment.

CS Really? That's interesting. I remember being struck by Robert Browning's phrase "everlasting moment," the moment when things

come together. But we must be able to recognize them and have the vocabulary to discuss them. There are moments when we recognize the patterns in the universe, and the vision of such meaning is a gift.

When I left on the second day, I gave her my proposal for my monograph on her work, “Sparkling Subversion”: Carol Shields’s Vision and Voice. When I pulled up the white wicker chair beside her bed the next morning, she told me that she approved of my project. That has meant a great deal to me through the following years in which I have been writing about her work.

CS I like your phrase, “sparkling subversion.”

NS That’s your phrase.

CS Is it?

NS Yes, it’s from *The Stone Diaries*. I think it represents your work very well. The “Vision and Voice” part is a reverse of the title of your study of Susanna Moodie: “Voice and Vision.”

CS Yes, I always thought I should have reversed those words. After all, vision comes before voice.

On the last day we discussed her teaching career — including her years as Professor of English at the University of Manitoba and as Chancellor at the University of Winnipeg. She started teaching at Ottawa after completing her Master of Arts degree with a thesis on Susanna Moodie under the direction of Lorraine McMullen, her supervisor, filling in for someone in a creative writing night course on the short story. (Carol explained that Lorraine was in a hospice in Victoria, dying of a degenerative neurological disease, and that she and Don visited her regularly. Later, I was struck by her correspondence with Elma Gerwin, who was also dying of cancer, as recorded in The Staircase Letters [2008] edited by Arthur Motyer.)

NS Did teaching influence your writing?

CS I loved teaching. Teaching was very good for me. Teaching teaches you. That’s when I grew up. Teaching and writing go well together, even though they belong to separate worlds.

We agreed that one's real education occurs when one has one's first experience of teaching. We compared notes, as I had the same experience when I began teaching at a small, exclusive prep school in Boston.

In her first class, a night course in creative writing, she had a class of "mature" women and "puerile" men, so different that she thought the room would overbalance. Her story "Chemistry" was inspired by this class, although she altered the course subject matter from a creative writing class to a class in playing the recorder. She remained friends with some of the women who kept in touch with her and also kept on writing. She said she was rather "schoolmarmish" at first. She also taught creative writing one year at the University of British Columbia.

She taught at the University of Manitoba as a sessional, one course a term — a creative writing course and an introduction to literature. She enjoyed teaching introductory courses and younger students. She taught communications, including grammar and composition, to Engineers at 8:30 in the morning, however, and hated it. The students were first-year recruits and had expected to leave "English" back in high school. Carol looked up one morning from explaining comma blunders to find that most of the class had pulled down the visors of their baseball caps to cover their eyes so they could drift off. Don said that he was co-opted from time to time to teach the class, since he was one of "them."

The introduction course covered prose first and then poetry. She taught all short stories in the prose section: Chekhov, Munro, Gallant, Canadian and contemporary women's stories. English 200 was a writing course involving a dozen non-fiction essays and included twenty students, so it involved heavy marking. Her method was to divide the classes into groups. That helped their writing as they critiqued each other's work. Creative writing was offered at three levels and in three genres: poetry, prose, and plays. Ian Ross won the Governor General's Award in drama for a play written for Shields's class.

She enjoyed having "an office of one's own," as she put it, to work in, although she did not have it until she was fifty and teaching at the University of Manitoba. She decorated it and made it attractive and homey. In fact, she made it so attractive that, while she was on an extended tour, a senior male English professor claimed it for himself. Although she was an eminently tolerant and kind person, she never spoke to that colleague again.

I subsequently had the opportunity to review her teaching files in the Shields Archives at the National Library, and the student evaluations of

her teaching positively glowed with superlatives. Her papers are all at the National Library in Ottawa — drafts, clippings, letters, teaching materials, calendars with appointments. She said that she kept a box under the desk and shipped it off when it was full.

She did not do any teaching when she was Chancellor of the University of Winnipeg from 1996 to 2000. Carol and Don had bought a condominium in Victoria in 1994 to retire to, but the walls leaked and it was under repair. In the interim, Carol was diagnosed in December 1998 with stage three breast cancer. They decided in the spring of 2000 to purchase a lovely, spacious house in which Carol could live out the remainder of the three-year prognosis that she had been given. In fact, she lived five years following that first, devastating diagnosis. She said goodbye to her English editor, Christopher Potter, so many times that it became a running gag, she said.

*Carol said that she wanted the last sentence of *Unless* to read, “Everyone in the house was alive.” Her British editor talked her out of that, but she thinks she will conclude *Segue* with that sentence.*

*Carol said that she deliberately made *Reta Summers* forty-three because she had once thought that was the last age when a woman could still exert sexual allure. She had succumbed to the prejudice that older women cannot be interesting. Now she would extend that age. Friends asked why she had not written a novel with a protagonist of her own age, which was sixty-five at that point. So she decided to do that.*

CS With *Segue* I wanted to write about age, about a woman my own age, about aging.

*The heroine of Carol’s incomplete final novel, *Jane Sexton*, is sixty-seven, the author’s own age, and a poet, as she used to be: Jane is a sonneteer who writes a sonnet every fourteen days. So the novel is structured in fourteen chapters. Carol said she was currently trying to write a sonnet for the novel.*

CS I loved being a poet. I’ve lost my way into writing poems. I save ideas that might become poems for my novels.

NS *Segue* sounds like it has your best structure yet.

CS Well, it’s in fragments on my Apple.

NS What gave you the idea for this novel?

CS I was absorbed by the war in Iraq and the concept of fourteen

days. I was struck during the Iraq war that life goes on, despite the war. Therefore, *Segue* is about going-on-ness.

I had brought Carol a violet because I thought she would appreciate its literary associations. When I returned the next day it was on a little white wicker table by her bed. Later, her daughter Anne sent me a thank-you note because, as she said, her mother was becoming too weak to write herself. I was astonished, upon reading "Segue" — the short story that introduces her posthumously published Collected Stories (2004), a revision by her youngest daughter, Sara, in consultation with her father, of her novel-in-progress — to discover the violet used as a symbol of nurturing. That suggests that Carol was still working on her novel only two months before her death. It may also demonstrate her ability to amalgamate reality into her fiction and to employ the most mundane details of daily life metaphorically.

Then she left to buy little dresses for two of her granddaughters who were visiting for Mother's Day brunch.

I continued to telephone her from Edmonton, and we talked about many issues of common interest, such as our admiration for Margaret Laurence. Eventually, Don and her daughters explained that she was becoming too weak to converse.

I had intended to spend that summer completing my book on Margaret Laurence,² but I was so profoundly affected by Carol Shields's situation that I could focus only on her. When I learned of her death on 16 July 2003, I devoted the rest of the summer to writing an essay on Unless.³ For me, it constituted both a celebration of her work and a way of mourning her death.

As I was leaving, Carol asked Don to fetch a copy of the British edition of her Jane Austen from the basement, which she then inscribed to me. When I reached out my hand to say goodbye at the end of my third and last day, Carol pulled me to her and kissed me on the cheek, saying, "Thank you for coming, Nora, dear. Good luck with your project." I did not expect to see her again. As Canadian writer Jane Urquhart said after her death, "She leaves an empty chair at all our tables, one that can never be filled."

NOTES

¹ “Leaving the Brick House Behind: Margaret Laurence and the Loop of Memory.” *Recherches Anglaises et Nord Américaines* 24 (1991): 75-77. Print.

² *Divining Margaret Laurence: A Critical Study of her Writings*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2008. Print.

³ “‘Because She’s A Woman’: Myth and Metafiction in Carol Shields’s Last Novel, *Unless*.” *English Studies in Canada* 32.4 (2006): 51-73. Print.