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Carol Shields's "Little Weirdies": Metafictional Magic in *Various Miracles*

NORA FOSTER STOVEL

VARIOUS MIRACLES (1985), CAROL SHIELDS'S first collection of short stories, revolutionized her fiction. Anne Denoon claimed that her writing "changed radically in 1985 with *Various Miracles*" (9), while Harvey De Roo observed that "with the publication of *Various Miracles*, a new author emerged, radically different" (47). Shields published fifty-six stories in three collections — *Various Miracles*, *The Orange Fish* (1989), and *Dressing Up for the Carnival* (2000) — republished in *The Collected Stories* (2004), along with "Segue," based on her unfinished novel.¹ Critics praise *Various Miracles* particularly. Aritha van Herk labels it "one of the most brilliant collections of short stories ever published in Canada" ("Scant" 932), and the *Kirkus Review* critic calls it "A marvelous collection: little sound or fury, but lots of significance."

In *Various Miracles* Shields rejects the traditional realist conventions of her preceding novels — *Small Ceremonies* (1976), *The Box Garden* (1977), *Happenstance* (1980), and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (1982) — in favour of the postmodernist aesthetic that informs her subsequent novels, beginning with *Swann* (1987). She asserts, "the short story is, mainly, a new world form . . . a dispatch from the frontier, news from the edge" ("Canadian Writing" 134), requiring novel techniques, and she recalls "inhaling the pollen of contemporary literary theory," which revealed new creative possibilities ("Narrative" 28).

Postmodernism liberated Shields, giving her "that precious oxygen of permission" to overcome the limitations of "the old realism . . . [that] has failed us" because it was "not real enough," since it omitted so much (Shields, "Narrative" 34). Indeed, Shields's stories "frequently break away from realism, slipping between genders and genres into the surreal and the fantastic," Coral Ann Howells notes ("Tellers" 160). Of postmodernism Shields affirms, "I felt bolder for it, healthier. The range of possibility appeared dazzling — anything was allowed, *everything* was allowed. And I was so late in finding this out" ("A Little" 41). Better late

than never, as her quirky stories illustrate. In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon claims that “In their self-reflexivity, Canadian postmodern novels offer yet another example of the self-conscious or ‘meta-’ sensibility of our times” (x). Shields’s stories demonstrate this sensibility; indeed, Laurie Kruk observes that in “the increasingly self-reflexive form of her fiction . . . Shields writes as a postmodernist” (“Innovation” 122).

Some stories in *Various Miracles* do utilize realism, demonstrating logical causality and employing linear plots: “Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass,” “Dolls, Dolls, Dolls, Dolls,” “Poaching,” and “The Journal.” The majority of Shields’s twenty-one stories, however, beginning with the opening story, are not primarily realistic, although they incorporate elements of realism, combining it with postmodernist techniques. “Shields both innovates change and reflects tradition” (“Innovation” 122), Kruk claims, as she aims to “bring the best postmodernism offers to fiction [by] combining the postmodern language play with a realist’s sense of character and story” (“Inhabiting” 193). Hutcheon observes, “Ever since the birth of the English novel in the eighteenth century, the twin impulses of realism and self-reflexivity have vied for control of the genre. Postmodernism paradoxically tries to incorporate and to question both of these impulses” (20-21). Shields’s self-reflexive stories illustrate Hutcheon’s paradox perfectly, incorporating, yet subverting, realism.

Most stories, however, are miraculous and magical, innovative and experimental, surrealist and metafictional. “Various Miracles” evokes “a feeling of mystery, magic, and myth,” Achim Schulze argues, because its miracles are “not based on a strictly logical system, but rather operate on the level of magic” (177). Shields recalls, “I realized as I wrote those stories . . . that I could get a little bit off the ground and let the story find its own way . . . even if it didn’t make any naturalistic sense” (“Always” 47). Replacing realism, Shields employs “a squint that distorts but also sharpens beyond ordinary vision, bringing forward what might be called the subjunctive mode of one’s self or others, a world of dreams and possibilities and parallel realities” (Shields, “Arriving” 247). As Marta Dvořák affirms, “The writer’s poetics, in which the texture of the quotidian is distorted but also sharpened, takes us effectively into a world of parallel realities in which the ordinary exists extraordinarily” (69). Her ability to find the extraordinary in the ordinary is Shields’s forte.

Shields’s epigraph for *Various Miracles* is, tellingly, Emily Dickinson’s dictum, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant.” Shields acknowledges mis-

appropriating Dickinson's maxim, as Dickinson refers to moral truth, whereas Shields refers to narrative perspective — "all sorts of imaginative angles, or slants . . . approaching stories from subversive directions; my 'slant' involves angles of perspective, voice, and layered perception and structure" ("A Little" 40, 49). Howells comments that Shields "refocus[es] realistic fiction with a deliberate squint, telling her stories through a series of shifting perspectives or different angles of vision in order to release the bizarre, the fantastic, and the randomness of experience" ("Space" 41) — which, Shields says, "struck me as more authentic, more real, than the cause/effect hammering of much 'realistic' fiction" (Shields, "Arriving" 249). *Various Miracles* demonstrates Shields's "slant" or "squint," which slyly subverts realism.

Shields's stories were labeled "Carol's little weirdies" by Kent Thompson, suggesting that even writers were uncertain how to interpret these quirky works that are more poetic meditations on miracles than traditional stories.² "Some of them seemed more like narrative ideas than stories," Shields says ("Inhabiting" 192). In the short story "Scenes" from *Various Miracles*,³ she writes of her protagonist, Frances, "she thinks of them as scenes because they're much too fragmentary to be stories and far too immediate to be memories" (90). Frances's memories are vignettes symbolized by painted Easter eggs, signifying completion — "round like the world," but fitting perfectly into "the hollow of her hand" (9). Shields explains:

"Scenes" also represents an attempt to dislocate the spine of a traditional story, that holy line of rising action that is supposed to lead somewhere important, somewhere inevitable, modeled perhaps on the orgasmic pattern of tumescence followed by detumescence, an endless predictable circle of desire, fulfillment, and quiescence. I was for some reason drawn to randomness and disorder, not circularity or narrative cohesion. In fact, I had observed how the human longing for disruption was swamped in fiction by an almost mechanical model of aesthetic safety. I wanted "Scenes" to become a container for what it was talking about — which was the randomness of a human life, its arbitrary and fractured experiences that nevertheless strain toward a kind of wholeness. ("Arriving" 248-49)

In *Various Miracles* Shields replaces traditional plot with innovative forms, rejecting "the short story as boxed kit" for "new and possibly subversive structures" (Shields, "Arriving," 244) — her characteristic

“sparkling subversion” (*Stone Diaries* 337). “I use my structure as narrative bones, and partially to replace plot — which I more and more distrust,” she explains. Instead, she has “a very physical image,” including “boxcars” or “Chinese nesting boxes” that she employs for this narrative skeleton (Shields, “Framing”). Many Shields stories involve complex structures, with fragments demarcated by double spacing, reminiscent of Alice Munro, who, Shields says, influenced her writing, and whom she refers to as “the Divine Alice.”⁴ Like Munro’s, Shields’s stories resemble puzzles, with pieces disarranged and perhaps one piece missing, because “her stories . . . rest on infinite absence more than absolute presence” (van Herk, “Scant” 932). Neil Besner explains: “Shields is intent on making small plausible worlds with one element gone missing, or gone awry, or recurring variously, miraculously — calling into question our more common understanding of sequence, of causality, of narrative chains, of plot.”⁵ Shields questions the very nature of reality — which is “no more than a word that begins with *r* and ends with *y*,” as her character Sarah Maloney observes in *Swann* (38) — as well as inviting her readers to play her game by filling her gaps and solving her puzzles.

Shields’s fragmentary, digressive style is informed, she believes, by female literary forms such as “diaries and journals and letters” (“Inhabiting” 197), inspiring a “feminine” style rather than the traditional “masculine” trajectory. “Feminist criticism has made much of the fragmentation, deliberate lack of authority and openness of women’s texts,” affirms Simone Vauthier (“Closure” 129-30) — modes that liberated *Various Miracles*, in which, Elke D’Hoker observes, “Shields experiments with different genres and narrative forms [. . . including] anecdote and memoir, word game and Borgesian metafiction, fantasy and magical realism” (151) — creating an intriguing *mélange*.

Shields employs a new principle of structure in *Various Miracles*. Vauthier invokes Todorov’s distinction between “*récits de substitution*” and “*récits de contiguïté*” to distinguish between Shields’s postmodernist stories and her preceding fiction, as her stories “play on the relation, noted by Todorov, between this principle of narrative organization and poetical form, which is founded on symmetry and repetition, hence on spatial order” (“On Carol” 67). Vauthier adds, “The narrative of substitutions has proved very useful to all those — whether ‘post-modernist’ writers or women writers — who seek to eschew traditional plotting and break the grip of linearity” (67), as Shields clearly does.

Such structural experimentation enables Shields to create miraculous moments that distinguish her poetry *and* stories, for the brilliance of her short fiction is influenced by her poetic expertise. Her stories, like her poems, are filled with metaphors, as we see in “The Metaphor Is Dead — Pass It On.” “I think of short fiction as being more closely allied to poetry than to novels,” she explains (“Inhabiting” 194). Abby Werlock admires Shields’s writing particularly for her “original imagery and metaphor” (133). While Shields’s love of metaphor reflects her modernism, her metafictional structures confirm her postmodernism, explaining why “Shields has been recently reassessed as straddling the border between modernism and postmodernism and a realist self and performative subjectivity” (Kruk 124). Shields considers stories as sonnets, as we see in her story “Segue”; thus, the poetic quality of her stories contributes to their appeal.

Shields published three collections of poetry — *Others* (1972), *Intersect* (1974), and *Coming to Canada* (1992) — two before she ever published a novel — and poetic metaphor and structure influenced her fiction profoundly. As the critic in the *Kirkus Review* noted, she often concludes stories with “a poetic image rather than a resolution.” While composing *Various Miracles*, her mind was “crowded with noisy images. Strange images. Subversive images” (Shields, “Arriving” 245) — images that subvert conventional short story structure. Poetry also influenced her stories’ structure, for many poems demonstrate a palindromic structure — “words which seemed to meet in the final verse like a circle completed,” as she writes in “Others” (186) — which she employs to impose closure on her stories, including “Home” and “Others.”

In *Various Miracles* Shields creates a world that Atwood calls “various, ordinary, shimmering, evanescent but miraculous” (“Introduction” xvii). Shields’s miracles recreate the “transcendental moment” wherein we glimpse a “pattern in the universe,” she explains, bringing about “illumination, clarity, revelation or extraordinary coincidence” (“A Little” 46). Vauthier’s title declares, “‘They Say Miracles Are Past,’ but They Are Wrong.” Van Herk claims that “The real miracle is that there are miracles. And Carol Shields stories this wonder” (“Extrapolations” 108). She praises Shields’s “infinite variety . . . , eureka moments . . . [and] astonishing feats of magic” (“Introduction” 1-3). In *Various Miracles*, Shields’s feats include “the magic of places” (33), “the artifice of coincidence” (5), and the “miracle of transcendence”

(36) that Besner terms “crafted revelation.” Critics agree on Shields’s miracle-working: Mary Eagleton asserts, “It is the miraculous as chance coincidence, unexpected insights or connections that can fuel the creative process” (74), and Herb Weil affirms that “The ‘miracles’ lie in the power of the creator’s imagination and skill” (173).

Shields’s ability to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary delights readers, who admire her “bright, casual, and airy descent and incarnation of the miraculous to street-level, where it lingers, half luminous, as a kind of counterpoint to, as well as a sanctification of, the banality of everyday living” (Besner). This union of the transcendent and the quotidian creates Shields’s miracles, which she frequently illuminates with light imagery: “Sailors Lost at Sea,” “Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass,” and “Home” all conclude with illumination. In “Scenes,” Frances feels “suffused with light” after she learns to read (85). In “Love So Fleeting, Love So Fine,” the narrator views his love for Wendy as being “like light spilling through a doorway” (126). No wonder Atwood titled her tribute to Shields “To the Lighthouse”: “She knew about the darkness, but — both as an author and as a person — she held on to the light. ‘She was just a luminous person . . .,’ said her friend and fellow author Alice Munro” (Atwood, “Lighthouse” 5).

The miraculous, suggested by the book’s title, is introduced in the eponymous story, “Various Miracles” (1-6), which features six events displaying Shields’s “artifice of coincidence” (5), or “Jungian synchronicity” (Vauthier, “They Say” 95). This emphasis on miraculous coincidence has been variously described by critics as a “satisfying pattern and maddening mystery” (Uglow), a “miraculous synchronicity” (Besner), and an “exultant artifice” (Weil 173). This variety of miracles, including a queue of seven women all named Emily (recalling Dickinson), contravenes the laws of probability, revealing Shields as “a strongly manipulating author” (Weil 172). Like Stoppard, whose coin-tossing scene establishes at the outset of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that the laws of probability are in abeyance, these coincidences indicate that Shields is writing about a different “reality” — the only word in the English language, she observes, that always requires quotation marks — and that her characters inhabit a different dimension from the naturalistic one.

The magical element is evoked most explicitly in “Dolls, Dolls, Dolls, Dolls,” as the narrator’s friend Roberta writes a letter about “a

curious mystical experience” during her “pilgrimage to the heart’s interior” in Japan (130-31). Geisha dolls, “a miracle of delicacy,” inspire a “mystical experience” (131-32), implying “animism,” as they appear to be “*alive*,” to have hearts, and to possess magical powers — like the pre-Christian icons the narrator’s family views in a Paris museum (133-34). “*Tough as nails*” as a teen, the narrator nevertheless was terrified when a murderer reportedly entered a girl’s window in the narrator’s hometown, plunged a knife into her heart and dismembered her (144). Feeling “powerless,” the narrator discovers “a strategy for survival” (Shields, “Arriving,” 249) in retrieving her baby doll, Nancy Lynn, “an extension of [her] hidden self,” with “power to protect [her],” causing “malevolence [to drain away] like magic” (146-47). Shields “reveal[s] the extraordinary — be it synonymous with magic, myth, or mysticism — contained in the ordinary” in “Dolls, Dolls, Dolls, Dolls” (Lorre 80). The title reflects the story’s four interwoven narratives interconnected by memory: “The looseness of structure in ‘Dolls,’” Shields comments, “mimics, I hope, the jumble of memory, its contradictions, its tentative linking of experience and awareness” (“Arriving” 249) — psychological realism, in effect.

Magic dominates in “Home,” a story that “rest[s] on a framework of coincidence” (Shields, “Arriving” 246), because, by “some extraordinary coincidence,” all one hundred passengers are filled with “perfect happiness,” making the aircraft “translucent” and “incandescent” — a surrealist “luminous transformation” (165-66) witnessed by Piers in Greenland. The “image of the transparent airplane suspended in the sky of his childhood,” now “metamorphosed into the incandescence of pure light,” makes Piers’s life seem “a centrifugal voyage around that remembered vision — the only sign of mystery he had ever received” (166-68). This “*phenomenon*” becomes Piers’s talisman, his gold ring (167-68) — like the one mediaeval women used to pull their silk gowns through to test their quality — by which he judges all subsequent experiences. Similarly, all 109 passengers en route to Acapulco, identically clothed in blue jeans — thus undermining the “transitory power” of the agent, who is unnerved by such “statistical unanimity” (169) — are “oblivious to the million invisible filaments of connection, trivial or profound, which bind them one to the other and to the small planet they call home” (170). Suggesting the theory of six degrees of separation, the last sentence creates a palindrome, for each story “rest[s] on its own

complex micro-circuitry” (5) — as the last word of the story echoes the title: “Home.”

Shields’s metafictional magic stems from her focus on literature and language, causing most stories in *Various Miracles* to reflect her subversion of literary genres, especially her favourites, poetry and fiction, but also biographies and dissertations, plus marginal forms that challenge definitions of literature. Three stories focus on poets: “Purple Blooms,” “Sailors Lost at Sea,” and “Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass.” “Purple Blooms” derives its title from a collection of poetry by the fictional Mexican poet Mario Valeso, perhaps gesturing towards Pablo Neruda. Valeso, “by coincidence” (43), lives in the narrator’s city, where he gives a reading. His collection has a transformative effect on readers, ironically connecting the narrator’s boyfriend Edward with her girlfriend Shana. It inspires the narrator’s mother — who never reads books and whose life has gone downhill since she was crowned “North America’s Turkey Queen at Ramona, California” (45) — to declare, “Letting go of the past means embracing the present” (47). As the narrator reads a new book of poetry, “a celebration of the randomness and disorder of the world” (a feature of Shields’s own writing), reality fades, “until all that’s left is a page of print, a line of type, a word, a dot of ink, a shadow on the retina that is no bigger, I believe, than the smallest violet in the woods” (47) — a phrase that echoes the title “Purple Blooms” (as well as Wordsworth’s lyric “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways”), creating a palindrome. Concluding the story with print suggests that the printed word is equally real as the purple blooms and may outlast “reality,” just as Shields’s stories have outlived her.

“Sailors Lost at Sea” features a Canadian poet from St. Vital, Manitoba, who is spending a year in St. Quay in Brittany with her daughter Héléne, whose schoolmates are impressed because “Héléne’s mother was a poet, a real poet, who had [like Shields herself] published three books. *Trois livres? Vraiment?*” (29).⁶ After drifting through France, Héléne is trapped in a fourteenth-century church where an annual spring festival is held for sailors lost at sea. Lost on land, Héléne, viewing herself from without, like a novelist, imagines possible fates — “two versions of her death,” including a “miracle of transcendence,” wherein she is transported to the sea and preserved like a relic (36). Héléne remains truly lost, however, until she discovers a candelabrum,

shaped like a menorah, and, lighting the candles, calmly awaits rescue in the luminous church.

In “Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass,” which won the Canadian National Magazine Award in 1985 (Hammill 287), an egregious poet writes his “crowd-pleaser” poem, “A Day at the Golden Pavilion” (15), sardonic verses about Girlie Fergus of Winnipeg and her two sisters — “the three furies, the three witches” who defile the poet’s transcendent mood (16). But Shields emphasizes that it is Girlie Fergus who is luminous, concluding with the simile, “how, like an ornament, she shines” (18). Just as Girlie Fergus shone a light into the Brooklyn theatre, so Mrs. Turner illuminates humanity in Shields’s “wonderfully imprinted sparkle of the last line” (Thomas 103) — “a fragile incandescence glowing against the dark” (Uglow).

“Mrs. Turner” illustrates Marilyn Rose’s theory of “*cool empathy*” or “sympathetic identification” in Shields’s stories (204, 208), for it measures the distance readers travel — between the ludicrous “sight” of Mrs. Turner in the opening, cellulite and all, and the luminous “sight” of her shining in the conclusion — in empathy for Mrs. Turner in this palindromic structure. “By the end of the story, most of us will agree that Mrs. Turner is an ornament, for Shields has transformed this initially unattractive character through a final vision without mockery or condescension . . . so that in the vision of the whole, mockery and condescension give way to compassion and celebration” (Weil 175) — a development that confirms Shields’s desire for resolution.

“Various Miracles” introduces Shields’s metafictional mode, continued in “Others” and “Flitting Behavior,” as it focuses on a novelist, Cuban-born writer Camilla LaPorta, whose manuscript is torn from her hands and scattered across a Toronto streetscape by a violent gust of wind. Her publisher, viewing her chaotic manuscript, assumes she has become “a post-modernist [who] no longer believe[s] in the logic of page numbers” (5). Ironically, he criticizes her novel for relying on “the artifice of coincidence” (5) — a criticism Shields’s editors likely leveled at her work. “Coincidence,” Shields asserts, “was one of the strands of existence; synchronicity might even be said to be a sort of force in the world. Why couldn’t I write about it, use it? Why couldn’t I, in fact, write a story that was nothing more than a tissue of connected coincidences?” (“Arriving” 246), and she does in this opening story. Ironically,

although the pivotal page is missing from the reassembled manuscript, the editor considers the novel better without it.

This story, which Shields calls “an unsettling mélange of fantasy and realism” (“Arriving” 246), introduces metafictionality in the concluding vignette, wherein a woman buying zucchini picks up the keystone page of the manuscript and reads about a woman buying zucchini in a striking example of Shields’s “microcircuitry” (5). Shields wanted her story to constitute “a fiction that formed a sort of pocket for its own exegesis” (“Arriving” 246) — a “mirror effect” or “triple *mise en abyme*,” as Vauthier labels it (“They Say” 89), wherein “[f]iction and reality have been conflated” (“Closure” 126) — a mode Shields favours: “Most of the short stories I loved . . . were shaped from their own material, and from the mystery and allusive language that hovered over that material” (Shields, “Arriving” 247) — an ideal definition of metafiction. Shields’s editor for *Various Miracles* and *The Orange Fish*, Ed Carson, organized her collections well, as the title story “represents the collection *en miniature*” (Schulze 177), introducing Shields’s postmodernist aesthetic.⁷

In “Others,” Lila’s grandfather publishes temperance novels: “*Journey to Sobriety*” and “*Tom Taylor, Battles and Bottles*” (184). Meershank, the prolific novelist of “Flitting Behavior,” author of “*Sailing to Saskatchewan*” and “*Ten Minutes to Tenure*” (57, 59), becomes even more prolific as his wife Louise — his “Canadian rose” (58), formerly his editor, his virgin bride reflected in the character of Virgie Allgood — capitulates to cancer. “What a joke she has played on him in the end” in this, her final chapter (58). Inspired by the concept of “Mortality” (48),⁸ Meershank, a perpetrator of outrageous puns, who is struck by the oncologist’s word “*terminal*” (51), writes as if his life depended on it. This prolixity, to his shame, is hardly “*fitting* behavior for a grieving husband” (53; emphasis added) — a phrase that clarifies the title, despite its persistent misprinting. Embodying “the myth of the sad jester” (54), Meershank takes his new editor, Maybelle Spritz, to bed on the day he receives Louise’s diagnosis. Maybelle’s visit on Victoria Day, signaled by fireworks, may precipitate Louise’s death. The story concludes with metafiction, as Louise’s (possible) final words, “The mock orange is in bloom” (61), in Maybelle’s interpretation, echo the last words of the matriarch in Meershank’s recent novel, *Malaprop in Disneyfield*, suggesting life mirroring art, rather than the opposite. Shields emphasizes interpretation, as illness imposes “a rainbow of distortion” on Louise’s final utterance

(61), leaving Meershank uncertain about her last words. Thus, “[t]he metafictional ending ironically reflects our own longing ‘for interpretation’” (Vauthier, “Closure” 121).

Some stories, including “Home” and “The Journal,” feature biographers and journalists — roles Shields enjoyed because “[j]ournalists and biographers may be given special privileges, allowed to ask their Nosy Parker questions” (Shields, “Carol” 29).⁹ The journalist in “Home” specializes in interviews, “writing profiles of the famous” (164). Shields portrays journalists as intrusive in *A Fairly Conventional Woman* and *Unless*. In “Flitting Behavior,” Meershank identifies himself as “a correspondent for a newspaper” to avoid calling himself a “*journalist*” (56).

“The Journal” employs “a double narrative device” (Shields, “Arriving” 250), embedding Sally’s diary, quotations by “H” framed in parentheses, as she and her husband Harold travel through France. Her parenthetical précis of Harold’s comments are cryptic, even telegraphic, usually concluding with ellipses. Shields plays with various narrative methods in these stories, enjoying the “act of ventriloquism . . . the artful positioning of narrative stance” (Shields, “Arriving” 250). She wanted “to experiment with different points of view, and in particular, with shifts of gender” (Shields, “Same” 257) — “to find an angle of vision that renews our image of where we are in the world” (Shields, “Narrative” 21).

Sally’s journal chronicles a series of sexual failures, until the pair “achieve one of those rare moments of sexual extravagance that arrives as a gift perhaps two or three times in one’s life” — “the sudden moment of communication when love breaks through habit” (Uglow). Sally’s journal, however, merely records enigmatically, “H and I slept well and in the morning . . .” (175). Ironically, the couple’s sexual climax also provides the structural climax of the story. Concluding the story with ellipses implies continuation — perhaps another episode of rapturous lovemaking.

Frances, in “Scenes,” keeps a diary (82), and Milly, in “Pardon,” kept a diary that she later forgives her brother for reading (66). Ironically, Shields, who embeds diaries in *Small Ceremonies* and *The Stone Diaries*, unbeknownst to her family, kept a journal, now housed in the National Library but restricted until 2028, twenty-five years after her death.

Certain stories feature translators and abridgers — marginal literary professions. In “Accidents,” the husband, a professional abridger,

recovering in hospital from a minor flesh wound inflicted by his wife's earring — called "*Les accidents de la vacances* [sic]" by the attending physician — shares a room with a young Englishman encased in plaster, his legs and vertebrae shattered by a motorcycle accident — a rather more serious example of "*Les accidents de la vacances*" (26). The husband defines abridging as "inverse creativity" that demands "seismic sensitivity for the fragile, indeed invisible, tissue that links one event with another." Abridging sometimes requires an "inconspicuous act of creativity" that may tamper with the truth (26). "Why did people insist that honesty was the only way of coping with truth?" wonders Meershank in "Flitting Behavior" (51). The husband in "Accidents" comments, "this, luckily, is my *métier*, the precise handling of words" (26). Accordingly, he omits for the benefit of his wife, a translator of Paul Valéry's poetry, the fact that the young motorcyclist died during the night. His "abridging" the truth underscores the parallels Shields perceives between life and literature.

Hutcheon claims, "contemporary Canadian fiction is full of examples of a post-modern challenge to the boundaries of specifically 'high art' genres [with] 'contaminating' popular cultural forms infiltrating postmodern Canadian fiction today" (5). Some Shields stories feature marginal literary forms, such as signs, postcards, letters, greeting cards, song lyrics, and even dissertations — postmodernism challenging boundaries between high and low art. In "Taking the Train," Gweneth McGowan composes a doctoral dissertation that she calls her "baby" (159). "Love So Fleeting, Love so Fine" features hand-painted signs — "WENDY IS BACK!" crayoned on cardboard in the window of an orthopedic shoe store in Winnipeg (123), "So long, Louise" written with icing on a cake (127), and "HANK LOVES SHERRI" spray-painted in three-foot red letters on a rock face (128) — blazoning "love's ingenious rarification" (127) and triggering imaginary narratives in the mind of the protagonist, plus giving Shields opportunities to invent multiple miniature biographies. In "The Same Ticking Clock" she suggests "a single name scratched on a wall [has] the power to call up the world" (256-57) — as when a sign reading "Joyce is Back" inspired her to write this story. In "A Wood," Elke Wood sees a sign in a Paris bank with the appealing message, "*DEMANDEZ-VOUS DE LA LUNE*" (113).¹⁰

Encyclopedias are included in Shields's liberal categorization of literary genres. In "Taking the Train," Gweneth McGowan and Northie

McCord have each read an entire volume of an encyclopedia: Northie read “Maximinus-to-Naples” (157), leading her to *mustard*, and Gweneth read “Carthusian-to-Crockroft” after the word “*coitus*” led her to “all those lovely C’s,” including John Clare, who led her to Disraeli, on whom she wrote a thesis (156-57). In “A Wood,” Elke Wood ruffles through volume R to S of encyclopedias given to her by her dead Papa in a dream (112).

Shields includes greeting cards in her marginal literary genres. In “Pardon,” Milly, who wishes to purchase a “*mea culpa* card” apologizing to her father-in-law, whom she apparently insulted, finds there has been a rush on “I’m-sorry card[s]” at “Ernie’s Cards ‘n’ Things” (62). Everyone is sorry these days, it seems. Of course, “sorry” is “the magic word” in Canada, as Margaret Laurence observes in *A Bird in the House* (90). People let greeting cards, such as “Forgive me, Dear Heart” (62), apologize for them. Newspapers headline apologies by presidents and prime ministers (65). Even cumulus clouds appear to Milly to apologize (66). Inspired by a cleansing storm, when people trapped on a bus swap stories about storms, Milly forgives those who injured her, including her brother, who read her diary, until she feels euphoric. Anticipating her father-in-law’s phoning to beg forgiveness, Milly, planning to accept, is transformed into Molly Bloom: the story concludes, like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, with a repeated “yes” (66).

Even postcards are not beneath Shields’s inclusive literary perspective. In the last story, “Others,” Nigel, an Englishman who asked Robert to cash a cheque for him while Robert and Lila were honeymooning in France, continues for twenty-five years to send Christmas cards to them in twenty-five segments cataloguing the lives of himself and his wife Jane, inspiring feelings of envy and even love in the other couple, until they learn Jane has fallen into a coma. As the cards contain no return address, they can never be answered. Ironically, however, this one-sided correspondence actually chronicles the marital relationship of Robert and Lila, who separate and then reunite, and illustrates connection, “that curious human contrivance that binds [people] together,” as well as love, which is “capricious, idiotic, sentimental, imperfect and inconstant, and most often seems to be the exclusive preserve of others” (201) — clarifying the import of the title: “Others.”

Besides metafictionality, metalinguistics informs certain stories, including “Words,” which focuses on “the miracle of language” (van

Herk, “Extrapolations” 107). A conference on global warming, caused, apparently, by a surplus of hot air — “[m]ultilingualism,” “[w]asteful antiphonic structures” and “elaborate ceremonial metaphor” — despite the compulsory “*temps tranquilles*” and “curfew-lingua” (69-70), leads to the protagonist, Ian’s, vow of silence. While Ian forgets the words for *wife* and *fidelity* (72), his wife, grown garrulous, growls “*betrayal*” and “*martyr*” (71). Following her to an abandoned school, where he hears her “gilt-edged contralto” amid “a waterfall of voices,” a stone forms in his throat until he gasps her name, *Isobel*, inspiring her and their children to teach him English words — “face, mouth, breath, tongue” (72-73) — reflecting the words Ian taught Isobel when they first met — again forming a palindrome.

Shields highlights specific words in *Various Miracles* — “*fond*” (33), “*foundling*” (11), “[f]ragility” (92), and “*phenomenon*” (167), plus “*secularized*” (30), “*synecdoche*” (178), “*coitus*” (156), “[m]ortality” (48), and “*irony*” (17) — sometimes italicizing words for emphasis, such as “*journalist*” (56) and “*terminal*” (51), or including the French translation, as in “[i]cône” for “icon” (139).¹¹ In the title story Vauthier notes “the dissemination in the place-names and proper names of the first two letters of the word ‘miracle’” (“They Say” 90). Meershank’s *Swallowing Hole*, wherein “Phyllis of the phyllo pastry and philandering nights” employs a “phallic pun” (53), exemplifies Shields’s wordplay. “Language has always mattered more to me than the ‘aboutness’ of fiction,” she asserts: “As human beings we carry patterns of language and experience, these patterns are what I find myself trying to bring together” (“About Writing” 262). She affirms, “there’s nothing about existence that interests me more than language does. I think it’s what makes us human and embodies us in a way that physicality doesn’t” (“Inhabiting” 197).

Shields extends her focus on metalinguistics beyond English. In “Scenes,” hearing people speaking a foreign language makes Frances feel she’s been struck by “a bolt of good fortune,” because she realizes that “the world was bigger than she’d been led to believe” (88). The hitchhiker in “Poaching,” who is “in love with the English language because every word could be picked up and spun like a coin on the table top” (78), reflects Shields’s own love of language — “the precise handling of words” (26) and the “idiosyncrasies of grammar or lexicon” (Shields, “Segue” 17).

While the metalinguistic story “Words” illustrates Shields’s love of language, her quirky story “The Metaphor Is Dead — Pass It On,” wherein a gargantuan, walrus-mustached professor proclaims the metaphor’s demise in language riddled with metaphor — including metonymy, simile, synecdoche, personification, oxymoron, and kennings — illustrates her love of imagery. He rejects “the adulterous communion” of similes: “Banished is that imperial albatross, that dragooned double agent, that muddy mirror lit by the false flashing signal *like* and by that even more presumptuous little sugar lump *as*” (105), the professor trumpets. He condemns metaphors: “The dogged metaphor, that scurfy escort vehicle of crystalline simplicity, has been royally indicted as the true enemy of meaning,” yet it forms “the button and braces that held up the pants of poesy” (105-06). Although he acknowledges that “language itself is but a metaphoric expression of human experience,” he detests “the inky besmudged midnight of imagery” (107). Preferring “the unweeded, unchoreographed vacant lot of being” to “moth-eaten mythology,” he prefers “*is*” to “*as*,” condemning imagery as poetic pretension, “the toy of the literati” (106-08). In “Arriving Late, Starting Over,” Shields notes that “The Metaphor Is Dead — Pass It On” expresses directly

this melding of form and substance, the story-as-container notion, since its discussion of the richness and the debasement of metaphor is pocketed in a larger, more ironic metaphor which is the story itself, a metaphorical professor giving a metaphor-filled lecture about the death of the metaphor. (249)

The story thus illustrates Shields’s melding of medium and message.

Reading as well as writing relates to metafictionality, and both are featured in *Various Miracles*. In the title story Shields writes of a character, “Print is her way of entering and escaping the world” (6). Shields recalls, “For me, learning to read was the central mystical experience of my early life. Realizing that those symbols meant something . . . was like an act of magic” (“Always” 31). In “Scenes,” Frances recalls, “Learning to read was like falling into a mystery deeper than the mystery of airwaves or the halo around the head of the baby Jesus” that brought a “rush of revelation” that suffused her with light, for “books could take you on magic journeys” (84-85). In “Fragility” the husband debates whether to interrupt his wife Ivy’s reading to alert her to the

Rockies visible beneath their aircraft. She “reads” his mind when he considers that the snow on the mountains resembles the abstract design of a Jackson Pollock painting (93). Shields emphasizes reading in “Scenes” by having a librarian describe the desecration of books by weird bookmarks, including the “porky abomination” of a strip of bacon (85). In “Home,” a Toronto high school teacher flying to England to visit the Lake District envisions her name inscribed in a book at Dove Cottage as an antidote to the unmannerly adolescents who will never appreciate Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, a poem Shields memorized. “Invitations” portrays a woman who turns down five appealing invitations, all for the same evening — including one inviting her to a buffet supper to meet a biographer who has written a biography of a biographer (who will also be present), and another inviting her to a gala in her honour — to stay home to read Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (for which Shields wrote an introduction) — perhaps reflecting a bumper sticker of the Jane Austen Society of North America (to which Shields belonged) that states, “I’d rather be reading Jane Austen.”

Reading in the British Museum inspires Gweneth’s epiphany in “Taking the Train,” as she realizes, “such moments keep people from flying into pieces” (159). Many stories build to epiphanies that Besner calls “the crafted revelation, often surprising, of isolated characters in isolated moments.” Shields recalls how *Various Miracles* helped her “swerve away from the easy comfort zone of so-called epiphanies that accounted for the traditional rondure of short stories, those abrupt but carefully prepared-for lurches toward awareness, the manipulative wrap-up that arrived like a hug in the final paragraph” (“Short Story” 100), as many stories, such as “The Journal,” which concludes with ellipses, remain open-ended. Van Herk claims that “Shields’s short stories propose sudden and intimate moments without burdening them with time’s epiphanic baggage” (“Scant” 932). Nevertheless, Shields’s ability to dramatize magic moments creates the miraculous quality of her stories.

Shields’s miracles pivot on the magic she performs with literature and language, as she aims to create “an inquiry into language held in an envelope of language” (Shields, “Arriving” 251) — an ideal definition of metalinguistics: “I noticed how every story turned on some variable of language, the failure of language, its excess, its preciousness, its precision or distortion, its gaps and silences, its blustering and sometimes accidental ability to arrive at clarity or at least to disturb the air with its

rhythms and colours, putting a kind of torque on ordinary discourse” (“Arriving” 250), as “Words” illustrates particularly well. Language, both its successes and failures, is the subject of *Various Miracles*: “Some of the stories in *Various Miracles*,” Shields explains, “are about the failure of language, the abuse of language, the gaps in language, and others are about the sudden ways in which language releases our best instincts by connecting us one to the other” (“A Little” 45). She succeeds, even when writing about failure: Werlock praises her “astonishing and seemingly unabated versatility as well as her ongoing fascination with the nature of language, of gender relations and differences, of the process of creating art and culture” (139).

Various Miracles proved Shields’s turning point, offering opportunities to subvert traditional conventions of realist fiction that she employed previously and experiment with innovative modes. Stuck on *Swann*, her “stalled novel” (Shields, “Arriving” 246), she turned to “a book of experiments,” *Various Miracles* (Shields, “Inhabiting” 193): “I wrote these stories, one after the other,” she recalls, “in a mood of reckless happiness . . . with a spacy sense of abandon” (“Arriving” 245). She composed all but the title story that year, publishing fourteen of the twenty-one in journals and anthologies.

Swann demonstrates the influence of that “year of experimentation,” for “[w]orking on *Various Miracles* gave me room to try out different approaches” (“Arriving” 250). Just as the manuscript of Camilla LaPorta’s novel in “Various Miracles” is scattered by the wind, suggesting the fragmentation of the traditional linear novel, so *Various Miracles* explodes the story form. Similarly, *Swann* explodes the novel form, fragmenting the narrative into multiple perspectives — “four characters in search of a subject,” Shields quips — and into her three favourite genres: fiction, poetry, and drama (Shields, “Framing”). Indeed, Shields recalls that she she suffered “pre-publication jitters” because *Swann* was so “different” from her previous novels and mainstream fiction (“Inhabiting” 205).

Various Miracles revolutionized Shields’s fiction because she never published another plot-driven novel like *The Box Garden*. *Swann* influenced her future fiction by demonstrating “how accommodating the novel form is . . . a big, baggy thing that I could put anything into” (Shields, “Throttled” 118). After *Swann* she experimented with further postmodernist techniques in composing *The Orange Fish*. *The Stone*

Diaries demonstrates the results by exhibiting postmodernist narratology that plays with (auto)biographical conventions, attracting more critical attention than any other Shields novel and winning both the Pulitzer Prize and the Governor General's Award. After experimenting with more postmodernist techniques in *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, Shields composed her final fiction, *Unless* (2002), her most metafictional novel. Shields's first narrator in *Swann*, Sarah Maloney, boasts, "I can postmod along with the best of them" (60-61), and *Various Miracles* demonstrates that Shields can, too.

NOTES

¹ See my "Fragments on My Apple": Carol Shields's Unfinished Novel."

² Carol Shields told me that Kent Thompson made this comment. Anne Giardini quotes her mother referring to a subset of her short stories as her "little weirdies" (xix).

³ Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical citations will be to this text.

⁴ See my "Excursions into the Sublime."

⁵ I wish to thank Neil Besner for sending me his excellent essay, "The Short of It," an unpublished paper presented at the Carol Shields Symposium, University of Ottawa, in May 2012.

⁶ *Fond* (33) is the key word in this story, related to the French phrase, "*au fond*." Given that Shields sent all her drafts to the National Archives, her emphasis on this term seems ironic.

⁷ Schulze records the existence of five drafts of this story in the Carol Shields Fonds.

⁸ Ironically, one of Shields's last compositions, a multi-media presentation, was titled "Mortality." I wish to thank Don Shields for sending me the typescript and Peggy Baker, who performed as "Peggy," for giving me the program.

⁹ Shields published a biography of Jane Austen, although she could not ask Austen her "Nosy Parker questions."

¹⁰ Shields recalled that seeing a Paris street person with a sign reading "*J'ai faim*" inspired her creation of Norah's situation in *Unless* ("Narrative" 19).

¹¹ Shields employs the French language for emphasis in *Unless*. See my "Women's Ink."

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