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“A Man’s Journey”: Masculinity, Maze, and Biography in Carol Shields’s *Larry’s Party*

NINA VAN GESSEL

The Stone Diaries marked a new phase in a literary career already ablaze with achievement. “Carol Shields,” raved *Maclean’s*, “has crafted a small miracle of a novel.” “*The Stone Diaries*,” praised *The New York Times Book Review*, “reminds us again why literature matters.” The *San Diego Tribune* called *The Stone Diaries* “a universal study of what makes women tick.” Now Carol Shields has done the same for men.

— Shields, *Larry’s* (jacket copy)

THE INTENTION BEHIND the opening paragraph of *Larry’s Party’s* inside jacket is clear: to capitalize on the spectacular success of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Stone Diaries*, published just four years earlier. But despite the blurb — and despite thematic and formal similarities between the two novels — *Larry’s Party* has failed to capture the popular and scholarly imagination as its predecessor did. Alongside the other’s dazzling generic innovations, its own engagement with the life-writing tradition seems perhaps paler, less ambitious. But this superficial assessment overlooks narrative subtleties that are, in fact, equally impressive. Recent developments in the relatively new but flourishing fields of biographical studies and masculinity studies enable us to appreciate the significance of Carol Shields’s rewriting of both the biographical subject and text.¹ Bewildered and mistake-prone, the protagonist of this fictive biography lacks the qualities identified with hegemonic masculinity, that “particular idealized image of masculinity in relation to which images of femininity and other masculinities are marginalized and subordinated” (Barrett 79). And in his ontological fluidity and multiplicity, Larry Weller is shaped by postmodernism, not the humanism underpinning conventional biography. Both this postmodern instability and the “unmasculine” confusion of Larry’s progress

are imaged in a radically new form of biographical text: one whose narrative fluidity and indeterminacy Shields models — with a nod to the ancient association between labyrinth and life — on the maze.²

Touring Great Britain, the novel's maze-designing protagonist and his second wife visit the Hollywood stone, "the oldest dateable labyrinth in the British Isles, 550 AD" (214). The stone's inscription warns of "the difficulty of life and life's tortuous spiritual journey" (215). The difficult life mapped by Shields's text a millennium and a half later is that of a man whose struggle to find his place in the world is underlain by a dim awareness that "A man's journey is different than a woman's" (325). But Larry's path deviates too from culturally exalted images of masculinity, notwithstanding his apparently privileged social position. As Michael Kimmel points out, "Within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle-class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting" (271). Larry meets each one of the criteria Kimmel lists; nonetheless, we shall see that his experience of masculinity is characterized by a profound sense of anxious inadequacy. That sense issues in part from his failure to meet standards beyond the broad requirements of ethnicity, class, and sexuality, namely those associated with hegemonic masculinity. Larry, it will become apparent, is not "strong, wilful, controlling, determined [or] competent" (Whitehead and Barrett, "Sociology" 22) — although, to be fair, he does blunder into a sort of competence in his professional life. Occupying a privileged social status, yet failing to make the masculine grade, Larry validates Sidonie Smith's observation that "each of us, in our manifold positions in discursive fields, inhabits margins and centers simultaneously.... Let us not, then, insist on stable centers and stable margins but recognize constant instabilities, constant rumblings at the edges, boundaries, borders, horizons" ("Self" 16).

Heeding those "rumblings," scholars of masculinity studies have argued that "the univalent notion of masculinity [should] be replaced by the idea of multiple masculinities" (Berger, Wallis, and Watson, "Introduction" 3): an idea that acknowledges the multifaceted, fluid, and socially marked nature of male experience. The recognition that "the category of 'masculinity' should be seen as always ambivalent, always complicated" (Berger, Wallis, and Watson, "Introduction" 3) has generated a proliferation of "increasingly heterogeneous representations of men, many of which set out explicitly to subvert older images

of masculinity" (MacInnes 314). Part of this trend, *Larry's Party* is the portrait of a man emphatically not "the master of [his] universe," the trait Susan Faludi identifies as the "very paradigm" of masculinity (14). The maze symbol, which will be shown later to also inspire the text's formal experimentation, metaphorically represents Larry's counter-hegemonic masculinity.

When we first meet Larry, the son of working-class British immigrants now residing in Winnipeg, he has behind — and ahead of — him a series of mistakes that mirror the "half a dozen false turning points" (71) of his first maze design. Indeed, the novel opens with error: "By mistake Larry Weller took someone else's Harris tweed jacket instead of his own" (3). Other false turns include his admission into the Floral Arts Program after Red River College erroneously mailed out that brochure rather than Furnace Repair; the unplanned pregnancy that resulted in his short-lived first marriage to Dorrie; and the similarly doomed marriage to Beth. Even his ultimately most distinguishing feature, his success as a designer of mazes, is dismissed as a "foolishness he's accidentally tumbled into" (152).

Shields's challenge to the "hegemonic ideal of masculinity" as a controlled, "aggressive," and "rational" (Barrett 79)³ march toward personal and professional self-realization continues in the novel's maze-related images of trickery, dead ends, and surprises. Confronted each morning with the "ghostly presence" (25) of his father's reflection in the mirror, a honeymooning Larry wonders, "What kind of trick was this?" (22). Much later, the fog of a mid-life depression lifts to reveal unexpected discoveries concealed, as in a labyrinth, among the "contours" of his life: his "dead-end" job (83) has led him, "much to his surprise," to a position as "qualified landscape designer (honorary) with a specialty in garden mazes" bestowing — "another surprise!" — financial solvency (207). As with his accidental "tumbling" into maze design, there is nothing here to suggest the deliberate "competition for career progress [that] comes to be synonymous with conventional masculinity" (Collinson and Hearn 161).

Informed as it is by error and chance, Larry's life is marked by doubling, reversal, and circularity. These qualities are most evident in his remarriage to Dorrie but are also apparent in, for example, his unwitting return to Saffron Walden fourteen years after his initial visit. This circularity is, of course, again suggestive of the maze form, as the novel's closing poem reminds us. Describing a maze known as "Shepherd's

Race," the final couplet reads, "'Tis not unlike this life we spend, / And where you start from, there you end" (339). Larry's wanderings lead him off the map of hegemonic masculinity, with its idealized insistence upon a linear, focused course; however, the non-teleological nature of his progress (such as it is) does reflect the lived experiences of contemporary western men as documented in Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. Published within a few years of *Larry's Party*, *Stiffed* constitutes part of that same trend towards increasingly diverse and non-traditional representations of men mentioned previously. Struggling to adjust to altered familial and economic roles, Faludi's non-fictional subjects — from shipyard workers to astronauts, military cadets to porn stars — relate to the author "their confusions, their sense of drifting" (606).

Confusion is also Larry's dominant response to the world around him: he manifests the maze-walker's sense of "disorder and confusion — 'amazement' in the literal sense of the word" (Wright 65). The mid-life depression mentioned above is described as his "present confusion" (179). And earlier, his father's inquiries into his uncertain romantic progress had provoked a bewilderment that, even while a source of anxiety, is interwoven with other emotions familiar to the maze-goer: "And yet he loved this confusion, it was so unexpected, so full of thrill and danger" (11). Indeed, throughout the novel, Larry's lack of comprehension is a source of delight, however oblique, as well as angst. He marvels at those "mysteries" he knows lie "snuggled in the corners of the universe" (141); the "unguessable secrets of love and happiness" (68); marriage, so "full of mysteries" (235); "that greater mystery of where he stood on the planet" (131). The novel's frequent repetition of the word "mystery" indicates once again Larry's deviation from the script of ideal masculinity — a script that states that father not only knows all but also knows best. And again the imagery can be traced back to the maze. With its "beguiling shadows" (149) and its "twists through the mystery of desire and frustration" (139), the labyrinth parallels the bewildering route Larry travels.

Above all, however, it is in "the essential lost-and-found odyssey of a conventional maze" (289) that Shields finds an analogue for her protagonist's forays from the culturally approved route of aggressive, "effortlessly confident" (Whitehead and Barrett, "Sociology" 22) masculine advancement. Numerous images of loss document the tentativeness of Larry's progress and the precariousness of his achievements. For

example, the young Larry reflects on his “deficient love for Dorrie, how it came and went, how he kept finding it and losing it again,” which he links to his introduction to the Hampton Court maze, where “getting lost, and then found, seemed the whole point” (35-36). Most frequently, however, those images relate to the instability of selfhood. The Larry who has left Dorrie has “lost his son, his wife, his place on the planet” (110). The depression-burdened Larry senses that “one wrong step would throw him off-course, and that what he would lose would be not money or friendship or intention, but his own self” (164). Echoes of these passages appear in descriptions of *Stiffed*’s disenfranchised subjects. Faludi notes that members of the domestic-violence group she observes “had without exception lost their compass in the world” (9). Elsewhere she cites a member of the Promise Keepers, a Christian men’s movement, who surveys fellow conference attendees with the words, “Guys out there, we’re really lost” (231). The sociological text shares the fictive biography’s implicit critique of hegemonic masculinity, particularly of its readiness to expel men from the “circle of legitimacy” (Connell 40) for failing to manifest the required air of confidence or purpose. (“Are we to say the majority of men are unmasculine?” R.W. Connell has asked in noting the paradox underlying all normative definitions of masculinity (33).)

In the quotations from *Larry’s Party* cited above, the loss proves to be reversible. Larry ultimately resumes his interrupted relationship with Dorrie, and the chapter chronicling his depression concludes with the reassuring announcement that he is “back to being Larry Weller again, husband, father, home owner, tuxedo wearer” (181). But elsewhere images of loss are unmitigated by recovery. Like others with nicknames, Larry has “relinquished a little morsel of [his] DNA, [his] panic and [his] pride” (250). The chapter entitled “Larry’s Living Tissues, 1996” offers a sorry list of body parts eroded by time. And his circumcision at birth resulted, poignantly, in “a little piece of himself missing, thrown away, returned to dust” (124).

Thus, if the maze “speaks to the contemporary human torment of being alternately lost and found” (313) — or even the threat of irreversible loss — it expresses by extension the self’s instability. Irrevocably gone is the humanist essentialist assumption that “each individual possesses a unified, unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature” (Anderson 5). The novel offers a postmodern understanding of (male) identity as fluid, provisional, and multifaceted.

In so doing, it supports David Gutterman's claim that "postmodernism's focus on instability, multiplicity, and contingency ... provides an extraordinary basis for interrogating the cultural scripts of normative masculinity" (61). And, as we shall see in this paper's final section, *Larry's Party's* dismissal of ontological coherence and stability constitutes a subversion of the fundamental ideals underpinning the biographical genre.

The apparently trivial incident that opens the novel vividly establishes the instability of identity. The twenty-seven year old Larry has — mistakenly — left his local coffee shop with someone else's more expensive tweed jacket. As he commences his walk home, his new apparel assumes the character of an alternative, protean self. The deluxe fabric was "shifting and reshifting.... It seemed like something alive. Inside him, and outside him too. It was like an apartment. He could move into this jacket and live there" (11-12). With this promise of a new identity comes a new bearing — "Here comes the Big Guy, watch out for the Big Guy" (4) — a new language, as he suddenly thinks of the word "quadrant" for the first time in years (4), and new emotions, with the realization that he loves Dorrie. But by the end of the chapter Larry, fearing discovery, has deposited the jacket in a trash bin. Having lost the sureties attached to the old garment and rejected the possibilities hovering in the folds of the new one, he is poised between selves.

This representation of identity's mutability recurs in the subsequent chapter, where a new haircut finds Larry "in front of the bathroom mirror working on new expressions" (17), and those that follow. Coral Ann Howells points out that the novel presents "a postmodern performative concept of identity as shifting, relational and subject to endless refigurings" (6). The word "performative" underscores the extent to which Larry's subjectivity is dramatized through the imagery of attire and staging; for instance, "under the [new] moustache is the old Larry and also Larry's sense of touring in his own life adventure: The Larry Weller Story" (245). Life comprises a succession of parts to which he struggles to adapt. Thus, confronted with the "new role" (20) of spouse to Dorrie, Larry clamps his jaw in a "husbandlike way" to "keep panic at a distance" (21). A mere ten pages further on, Dorrie's unexpected pregnancy is leading him to reflect that "It was hard enough to remember that he was a husband, much less a father" (31).

Howells's use of the term "performative" to describe identity in the novel points to the work of Judith Butler, a theorist whose insights have proven valuable to scholars of masculinity studies. As Butler has famously argued, "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25-26). Masculinity studies scholarship has been able to employ this performative conception of gender to explore "how and why masculine identities are constructed, socially and personally" (Berger, Wallis, and Watson, "Introduction" 3), as well as, for example, the possible implications for alternate masculinities.⁴ For Larry, it is certainly true that gender is "continually unfolding as a complex enactment of self-representation and self-definition" (Berger, Wallis, and Watson, "Introduction" 4). His manoeuvrings with moustache and haircut — not to mention his Butler-esque donning of Beth's nightgown, which he accompanies with a "lewd wink" (240)⁵ — can be understood as his negotiation with a masculinity that he vaguely recognizes as "a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct [or perform] through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world" (Kimmel 266). Sliding uneasily between roles, Shields's protagonist thus evinces the "multiplicity of identities" (Guterman 57) characteristic of the post-modern subject.⁶

The processes of transformation and regeneration shaping and reshaping Larry's being are periodically accompanied by a flash of awareness, an experience suggestive — once again — of the maze. At the maze's centre,

one has the opportunity to discover something so basic that it demands a fundamental change of direction. To leave a labyrinth, the walker must turn around and retrace his or her steps.... Yet, one should not view this as simply a negation or a rescinding of the journey to the center.... Turning around at the center does not just mean giving up one's previous existence; it also means a new beginning. A walker leaving a labyrinth is not the same person who entered it, but has been born again into a new phase or level of existence. (Kern 30)

In the novel this conjunction of revelation and rebirth occurs not once but recurrently. Instances include the jacket passage, which Larry much later recalls/reinvents as offering a vision, "perhaps for the first time,

[of] the kind of man he could be" (331); the "transformative experience" (217) of his first visit to the Hampton Court maze; the coma from which he emerges intuiting that he is "about to wake up fully" to life (284); and his dinner party, where the resumed relationship with Dorrie represents both a reversal and a beginning. This image of a maze comprising multiple transformative centres, figuratively suggesting Larry's decentred, ever-evolving identity, appears not to correlate to a literal counterpart. Interestingly, however, while we assume mazes to be necessarily single-centred, more eclectically designed contemporary mazes may in fact contain more than one goal (Wright 207).

Of course, Shields's adaptation of the conventional maze is not limited to an increased number of centres: she also problematizes the very concept of revelation. As we have seen, whatever moments of insight Larry may achieve are undermined by subsequent bouts of incomprehension and confusion. And anxiety: the maze-goer's anxiety, born of "frustration [and] a feeling of inadequacy" (Wright 227).⁷ While Larry's awareness of his ontological instability occasionally provokes a sense of playful possibility, as with the "lewd wink" that accompanies his cross-dressing,⁸ his response is more often apprehensive. "Sometimes at night," for example, "he woke from bizarre dreams and whispered to himself, 'Careful, careful.' Be careful of chaos, of silence, of words, of other people, of myself, that stranger Larry Weller. Sometimes, too, he felt he needed lessons in how to be a grown-up man" (112). As that final sentence indicates, his angst issues in part from a concern that his performance(s) of masculinity will be judged wanting. That concern, which was evident too in the earlier quotations about his roles as spouse and father, calls to mind Michael Kimmel's observation that "What we call masculinity is often a hedge against being revealed as a fraud, an exaggerated set of activities that keep others from seeing through us, and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves" (277). And so the impostor Larry "prepares himself for exposure and ruin" (208).

Two destabilizing elements of his identity generate particular unease in Larry: his ordinariness and his class mobility. Painfully aware of his lack of distinctiveness, he perceives that ordinariness as threatening an already shaky selfhood with total dissolution. Thus his adolescence he sums up as "an unmemorable smudge in the 1968 yearbook" (103), and he later fears that his "freakish profession is the only thing that keeps him from disappearing" (180). The danger conformity poses to the survival of a distinct identity is apparent too in the scene where he discov-

ers that he and Dr. Eisner are adorned in identical shoes, raincoat, and umbrella. As the boundaries between self and other become transparent and permeable, the self threatens to leak away: "This was frightening, a grotesque doubling of images, and he felt himself suddenly drained of blood, a tattered, thready garment of a man, snagged in a beveled mirror" (241). Humanism's "unique selfhood" (Anderson 4), mentioned earlier, has shattered like glass.⁹ But it is symptomatic of the postmodern subject's "internal conflict and contradiction" (Gutterman 57) that even as Larry bemoans the fact that his name's "most conspicuous rhyme" is "ordinary" (253) he continually seeks assurances that "he's a man like any other" (152). As Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett note, "'belonging' is not an automatic process, and so for most men masculine performance is central to achieving entry to, and being accepted within, any particular 'community' of men" ("Sociology" 20). And thus Larry whistles as he dresses, "as though assuring the striped wallpaper and full-length mirror that he is an ordinary man after all, and one who isn't the least intimidated by important threads" (239).

As this last quotation suggests, Larry's anxious sense that he is at once too distinctive and not distinctive enough is intertwined with the insecurity induced by his shifting class identity. Although ignored by the few existing critical studies of *Larry's Party*,¹⁰ class is central to this tale of the bus upholsterer's son who becomes a respected and affluent maze designer. Larry's movement from the eclectic individualism of working-class Winnipeg to the leafy complacency of suburban Chicago engenders the same "hope[less] disorient[ation]" that triggers a farmer's anxiety attack in one of his mazes (150). "How had this happened? Was this the life that Larry Weller signed up for?" (165), he wonders at one point. R.W. Connell argues that "new information technology became a vehicle for redefining middle-class masculinities at a time when the meaning of labour for working-class men was in contention.... Both [middle- and working-class masculinities] are being reshaped, by a social dynamic in which class and gender relations are simultaneously in play" (41). It is little wonder, then, that Larry experiences confusion in his journey between two points which are themselves each in a state of flux. Nor is it surprising that, marvelling at the schedule of prestigious social events requiring him to don a "penguin suit," he can only muse, "The fact is, he can never quite believe in his tuxedoed self, cousin to that phantom presence that lurks in his dreams, the guy watching the action, suffering, scared, and greedy in his borrowed, baggy clothes, but never

actually stepping on stage and exposing his face" (165). Once again, clothes — and, more broadly, the imagery of performance — signify the fluidity of identity, here an identity destabilized and debilitated by social mobility.

Thus, Larry's ordinariness and upward mobility further imperil a selfhood already unsettled by mutability and multiplicity. The narrative form Shields adopts to chronicle her protagonist's life reflects not only that multifaceted fluidity but also the counterhegemonically masculine qualities discussed earlier. Modelled on the ancient maze structure and inspired by conventional biography, that narrative form nevertheless represents an entirely new genre of "the book of life" (331).

In her discussion of *Larry's Party*, Coral Ann Howells employs the phrase "postmodern biographical fiction" to describe this new (sub-)genre (81). Literary and extra-literary devices typically associated with biography shape the novel, beginning with the frontispiece black-and-white photograph of a baby boy and continuing with the chronologically dated chapter titles covering assorted aspects of the subject's existence. Also included are the genre's customary documentary evidence of a life, such as copies of Larry's business card and, in a late twentieth-century nod to conventional epistolary content, transcribed emails and a facsimile.

This play with biography undoubtedly signals the author's personal interest in the genre. Much of Shields's work explores "the pleasures and perils of biography" (Eden 4), and she herself claimed, "Biography is my consuming passion" (qtd. in Roy 113). But her exploration of the genre in *Larry's Party*, and specifically the postmodern and "unmasculine" attributes of its fictive subject, is also informed by a political awareness. Shields substantiates claims by Linda Hutcheon and others that postmodernists rewrite the literary traditions they borrow from in order to contest their underlying ideologies or assumptions. That is, through her "use and abuse" of tradition (Hutcheon 8), in this case biographical tradition, she questions the humanistic and masculinist ideals that have historically shaped the biographical subject.

Conventional biography, after all, insists on treating its (historically male) subject as an "integrated 'individual' self, with a coherent persona" (Evans 23); it assumes, to quote Sharon O'Brien, that "character and the self are knowable" (qtd. in Pope Eden 152). And by "structuring the confusions of daily life into patterns of continuity and progress"

(Nadel 9), the genre “convey[s] the impression that lives are lived in ordered and coherent ways” (Evans 134). Biography has, then, held up a mirror to humanism’s “conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject” (Weedon 21), a subject — so unlike our Larry Weller — “endowed with purpose and initiative” (Abrams 239). But our earlier discussion of masculinity studies enables us to recognize that the subject reflected in biography’s mirror is hegemonically masculine as well as humanistic. The genre’s favouring of decisive, rational, and linear progress and its implicit emphasis on confident control over self and environment correspond to admired models of western masculinity.

Biography’s role in the representation of selfhood is not merely a passive one, as Sidonie Smith points out. Smith has argued that “for three centuries now, traditional autobiography and biography have ... both reproduced and consolidated the West’s notion of the self” (“Who’s” 393). Thus, Shields’s revision and interrogation of the conventional biographical subject can be understood more broadly as a critique of that subject’s complicity in the formation of a “universal human subject” (Smith, “Who’s” 393) that is both humanistic and reassuringly masculine. Phyllis Rose has noted that, “in starkly political terms, biography is a tool by which the dominant society reinforces its values” (qtd. in Kineke 259). Through her muddled and unstable protagonist, Shields exposes and questions those values.¹¹

Complementing Larry’s unconventional profile as biographical subject is his unusual function as narrative focalizer. The traditional “stability of the omniscient biographical voice” (Pope Eden 157) is here replaced by “an anonymous recording voice that is elided into Larry’s indirect interior monologue” (Howells 92). That monologue is, more precisely, a dialogue. It is the “long, uncut, internal and endlessly repeated dialogue” that Larry’s young son experiences as voices in his head and that Larry recognizes as a nascent form of his own self-consciousness (194). *Larry’s Party* is the transcription of Larry’s inner dialogue, rendered in third-person narration, in which he fills “in around the known bits with his imagination” (48).¹²

Shields’s choice of Larry as, in essence, his own biographer allows her to develop a narrative technique that evokes the meandering trajectory and unstable contours of his existence. In conventional biography, the chronological and causal structure, shaped by the biographer’s controlling and “magisterial” presence (Backscheider 18), functions to “suggest that things as difficult as human lives can — for all their obvious

complexity — be summed up, known, comprehended”: such biographies “reassure us that, while we are reading, a world will be created in which there are few or no unclear motives, muddled decisions, or (indeed) loose ends” (Worthen 231). In *Larry's Party*, the absence of a stable, organizing biographer means that no such reassurance exists. Here, causality and chronology yield to reversal, circuitousness, and repetition — formal features of the maze, and qualities that reflect Larry's lack of understanding and linear progress and his ontological instability. Although several commentators have recognized the novel's usage of a form based in “the backward and forward loopings of a maze” (Howells 100), I should like to look, however briefly, at the more specific workings of this form in relation to Larry's postmodern and “unmasculine” subjectivity.

The novel's many instances of narrative reversal severely undermine the neatness of the chronologically dated chapter titles. Like the maze, which “doubles back on itself, relishing its tricks and turns” (139), *Larry's Party* repeatedly arcs backwards. At times it conveys us back to terrain encountered previously, as in the repeated references to the tweed jacket. Elsewhere, we are deposited on unfamiliar ground, belatedly supplied with hitherto missing information. Thus, it is only in the chapter entitled, somewhat ironically, “Larry's Party, 1997” that we learn the details of Beth's departure three years earlier. A third form of reversal is the telescoping effect created as over several paragraphs we are carried incrementally backwards through Ryan's life from his lacklustre appetite at age six right back to Dorrie's discovery of her pregnancy.

Mimicking the recursive motion “inherent in every labyrinth” (Wright 113), the narrative's instances of doubling back and reversal suggest Larry's non-linear, lost-and-found progress: the unwitting return to Saffron Walden, the witting one to Dorrie. The narrative reversals suggest further his baffled response to events unfolding around him. Thus, the three-year lag reflects his ongoing attempt to process Beth's departure. And Larry's experience of fatherhood, which fuses a “fire-cracker madness” love (193) with feelings of guilty inadequacy in a brew as complex as his own relationship with his father, can be fathomed only by probing ever further into his son's past. As the tweed jacket references reveal, the reversals mimic the workings of memory as it “doubles back to previous experience like a unicursal maze. Memory does not repeat experience but traces a parallel path in order to find meaning in experience” (Goertz 234).

As well as folding “back on itself,” the maze or labyrinth “fills the entire interior space by wending its way in the most circuitous fashion possible” (Kern 23). This circularity is replicated in *Larry’s Party* through the use of the “CAT-scan” structure: the slices — “his work, his friends, his family, his son, his love for his two wives, his bodily organs” (138) — into which Larry’s life resolves itself under scrutiny and which structure the novel. In fact, this structure is considerably more fluid than the dated table of contents suggests. This is in part because, as in the case of Beth’s departure, the narrative refuses to confine itself to the relevant chapter. But the fluidity is also evident *within* each chapter, due to the narrative’s tendency to circle back to the topic identified by the chapter title, heedless of that title’s chronological marker. (Shields claimed that she “wanted to design each chapter as a little maze in itself” (qtd. in Goertz 253).) For example, the chapter headed “Larry’s Penis, 1986” brings together the details of his sensuous life, regardless of date. Key to our introduction to Beth here is her theory of the traits of “penis owners” (122). Twelve pages (and several sexually-flavoured narrative turns) later we have moved back to 1975 and Larry’s first meeting with Dorrie at a Halloween Party. The episode had been mentioned earlier in the novel, but the focus now is on the more carnal aspects of that encounter; similarly, we learn for the first time that the ensuing honeymoon flight included a mid-air indiscretion.

In other words, the chapter designations to which the narrative repeatedly loops back function not as impermeable narrative boundaries but as filters through which to read Larry’s life. The same essential facts (the Halloween Party, the transatlantic flight) are viewed from a new perspective (sexuality): the resulting alternative life narrative is that of another of Larry’s various selves. Most of the chapter titles (“Larry’s Folks, 1980,” “Larry’s Work, 1981,” “Larry’s Penis, 1986,” etc.) thus name the multiple subject positions he occupies (son, professional, lover and so forth) and remind us of the assorted discourses that collectively, though not necessarily harmoniously, shape his multifaceted identity.

On occasion the narrative’s compulsion to repeatedly circle back to the chapter title verges on the obsessive. The first, abridged, account of Beth’s departure appears in “Larry’s Threads, 1993–4,” a sartorial overview of Larry’s existence. The inventory of shoes includes the tasselled loafers he was wearing when Beth “leaned across her plate of grilled polenta and Dover sole and announced that she didn’t want to be married anymore” (242). Beth is briefly permitted to explain her motives

before the narrative veers off towards his ten-year old Nikes. The ironic tension between the tragic and the banal works to deflate Beth's speech, rendering her mildly absurd — and by extension her reductively essentialist theories of “penis owners,” so at odds with the text's vision of gender fluidity and constructedness. But the passage's abrupt change of register also suggests Larry's helpless confusion at her decision to leave, a confusion that reveals how removed he is from his society's ideal man, “controlling his environment ... in the driver's seat” (Faludi 10).

A third maze-inspired narrative technique involves the use of accretion and repetition. The novel periodically retells incidents from the past by supplementing existing material; like the maze-goer, the narrative re-traverses an earlier path, the progress informed now by accumulated perspective or knowledge. The initial account of Larry's Hampton Court experience is extended two chapters later with the information that that experience was the highlight of the honeymoon and that it triggered his fascination with mazes (71). Another chapter further we learn that the memory of Hampton Court inspired Dorrie to give her husband a book about mazes as an anniversary gift (91). The original narrative accretes detail in layers that evoke the tiered “ring[s]” of Larry's first maze design (92). Re-presenting specific material as though for the first time — such as the repeated explanations that England was the site of the couple's honeymoon — the text periodically enacts the maze-goer's literal and Larry's figurative processes of beginning anew in response to dead ends and mistaken choices.

More significantly, the novel's layering technique images the methodology by which Larry himself constructs his life narrative(s) in his ongoing, ultimately fruitless quest for (self-)comprehension. We learn that,

The history of Dot Weller, and how she killed her mother-in-law, came to L in small pieces, by installments as it were. He can't remember a time when he didn't know at least part of the story, and he's not sure, in fact, if he's ever been presented with a full account, start to finish, all at once. (47)

If the creation of narrative is a matter of subjectively assembling and reassembling installments, or strata, of information, the resulting narrative is as dynamic, contingent, and provisional as Larry's restless identity. (Hence, as in *The Stone Diaries*, there is no conclusion conferring closure, only a last unruly heap of textual fragments. And the tempta-

tion to read Larry-the-dinner-host as the definitive, final self, as the maze's ultimate centre, is undermined by Charlotte's ebullient but distinctly indefinite assessment of the party: "We did it! Whatever 'it' is" (337). The narrative is an indeterminate construction: in "restarting the narrative time and again [Shields] suggests that there is no one truth" (Goertz 234–35).¹³ Indeed, the text foregrounds its own indeterminacy, as glimpses of "truth" are, like Larry's selfhood, found only to be lost again. For instance, the claim that his childhood was "inexpressibly uneventful" is immediately followed by the disclaimer "though perhaps no one's childhood can be described in such terms" (207). This admission of ambiguity into the text destabilizes the narrative that follows, reminding us that this version of youth and adulthood is simply the one produced by layering the installments in a particular configuration. The effect is comparable to that produced by the use of chapter title as filter, which we saw worked similarly to contest the referentiality of the narrative — and by extension all life writing.

The text's refusal to privilege the truth claims of any one narrative version occurs too in Larry's reading of Beth's parting letter:

Heartbrokenly he read this letter, at the same time feeling his face ease into a smile.

Wait a minute. Whoa there. *Heartbrokenly smiled?* Surely not. Perhaps he smiled *around* his heartbreak. *Under* it, *through* it.

Larry, more and more the observer, the critic, stepped back and watched himself picking up his wife's letter and attacking it with a surgical red pencil. C-minus. And that was being generous. (297)

The multiple, epistemologically unstable narrative possibilities (*around, under, through*) reflect Larry's equally multiple and unstable selfhood, here so dramatically apparent in the fracture into observer and observed, subject and object. The passage reads as a direct response to Sheila Kineke's appeal for a new kind of biography: a "feminist biography" deploying a

methodology of contrast, of contradiction, of different and inconsistent versions of a life positioned side-by-side without trying to tie up all the loose ends; a method, in other words, that writes the possibility of irreconcilable differences both within and among portrayals of the subject. (265)¹⁴

Of course, *Larry's Party* is not entirely biography, nor perhaps, given its male protagonist, entirely feminist. But the novel and the emerging

field of scholarship are united in their questioning of the conventional biographical subject and the narrative that constructs "him."¹⁵

Biography has historically chosen as its subjects "publicly lauded, typically male, individuals" (Parke 93). Larry Weller was never destined to receive public acclaim, and not simply because he did not, in fact, exist. Measured against the "hegemonic ideal of masculinity in current Western culture" as "independent, risk-taking, aggressive, heterosexual, and rational" (Barrett 79), Larry scores a mere one out of five. But if his low grade here, combined with his postmodern ontological instability, ensures that he has no place among conventional biographical subjects, his story occupies a unique place in the development of life writing. In creating a narrative whose dynamic indeterminacy reflects the bewildered complexity of its protagonist, Carol Shields has pointed the way towards a future of biographical writing as rich in possibilities and choices as the path through a maze.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ Although Paula Backscheider could argue as recently as 2001 that biography is "the least studied and understood of the major literary genres" (xiv), a number of valuable studies in the field (some of which are cited in my bibliography) have appeared since the early 1990s. Masculinity studies has burgeoned in the same period: "The last decade alone has seen over 500 books published, the introduction of two specialist journals, and a proliferation of websites all providing a particular slant on the condition of men at the turn of the millennium" (Whitehead and Barrett, "Sociology" 1).

² A note on terminology: "Although some twentieth-century observers insist on a distinction between the multicursal maze (involving choice) and a unicursal labyrinth (a one-way path), the great English writers from Chaucer to Milton to Defoe did no such thing" (Wright 4). While the novel does briefly acknowledge the difference (81), Shields can otherwise be added to this list; I too will use the terms interchangeably unless the context specifically demands otherwise.

³ Barrett broadly acknowledges as source here R.W. Connell's *Masculinities* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995), the text widely credited as having introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity to academic discourse.

⁴ Berger, Wallis, and Watson note the potential for "an essentially optimistic under-

standing of masculinity, since what is performed — what is, in a sense, fluid and temporal rather than socially fixed and static — can be reevaluated and even changed.... If the rigid social constructions of the masculine have resulted in political and cultural forces of oppression, repression, and denial, can masculinity be rehearsed in a way that alters its ideological boundaries? In other words, can masculinity be performed so as to render it less repressive, less tyrannical?" ("Introduction" 5).

⁵ Butler discusses the practice of cross-dressing, which parodies "the notion of an original or primary gender identity" (137). "In imitating gender," she argues, "drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency.... We see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (137).

⁶ However, Melissa Pope Eden's observation concerning Shields's biography of Jane Austen that Shields does not "abandon Austen completely to the potentially nihilistic post-modern notion that there is no self to identify" (149) is equally true of the novel's fictional protagonist. *Larry's Party* repeatedly evokes a core identity submerged, however distantly and elusively, under Larry's shifting subjectivity. This is most obvious in the photograph of the young Larry (and the various textual allusions to it) but also in such passages as "Winnipeg was still his here and now, the black sphere that enclosed the pellet of his self" (154) and "Being called Larry means that a part of Larry is always going to be that boy hanging around the house on a summer day, waiting in the stopped August light for something to happen" (250).

⁷ Wright vividly describes the Hampton Court maze as "a seventeenth-century roller coaster on a two-dimensional plane" (227).

⁸ See too the retrospective account of his Hampton Court experience, when Larry remembers he felt a joyous rising of the spirit that was related in some way to the self's dimpled plasticity. He could move beyond what he was, the puzzling hedges seemed to announce; he could become someone other than Larry Weller, shockingly new husband of Dorrie Shaw, non-speculative citizen of a former colony, a man of limited imagination and few choices. (217)

⁹ Faludi might explain Larry's vertiginous reaction to the incident in terms of the fashion world's objectification of contemporary men. She discusses at length the "subversion of individual expression by commercial interest" (517) in an "ornamental" or "display" culture that increasingly commodifies the male as well as the female body.

¹⁰ Even so astute a critic as Coral Ann Howells is guilty of this oversight. She perceives gender identity as central to the novel, and not "sexual, racial, or even national identity," which are unproblematic for Larry (92). The issue of class remains unmentioned. It deserves greater attention than I am able to give it in this article.

¹¹ I have focused on Shields's use of a postmodern and counterhegemonically masculine protagonist to subvert the genre's humanistic and masculinist underpinnings; however, the novel offers other important examples — the analysis of which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper — of the ab/use of biographical tradition to interrogate that tradition's assumptions. Larry's unexceptionality raises questions about biography's contributions to cultural designations of masculine achievement, for instance. And unconventional chapter titles, such as "Larry's Penis, 1986," and the inclusion of such everyday materials as a menu draft and party seating plan interrogate the chapters of male existence deemed socially significant or peripheral and, relatedly, the equation of masculinity with public rather than private concerns.

In redefining the biographical subject as unremarkable and quotidian, Shields has created a text recent scholarship might describe as feminist biography. This sub-genre "makes a different kind of person eligible for examination, an obscure or minority figure" (Parke

93); it devotes attention to the "private, domestic, or intimate sphere" (Backscheider 155); and also demonstrates "recognition of new kinds of [documentary] evidence" (Backscheider 155).

¹² Like *The Stone Diaries*, which moves dizzyingly between first- and third-person narration in its telling of Daisy Goodwill's life, *Larry's Party* dramatizes recent scholarly claims that "the boundaries between autobiography and biography are not always so distinct as their definitions imply" (Bell and Yalom, "Introduction" 5). "Few critics today," for instance, "would subscribe to the long-held belief in the dichotomy between the inherent 'objectivity' of biography and autobiography's innate subjectivity" (Kuhn 13). Further, the fact that the (fictional) Daisy Goodwill is as prone as Larry Weller to imaginatively "[enlarge] on the available material" of her life story (*Stone Diaries* 282) underscores Shields's questioning of both genres' claims to referentiality. See Backscheider 7, Parke 19 and Evans 24 for recent discussions of the porousness of the border between fiction and biography.

¹³ Compare Melissa Pope Eden's comments regarding the biography of Jane Austen, in which Shields "suggests that any biography not only invents a fiction, but also bases that very fiction on a substructure of the numerous fictions that precede it. The core event of the story is stratified, overlaid with a palimpsest of its later versions, and an understanding of the true nature of the event or the individuals who took part in it is at times deferred indefinitely" (159).

¹⁴ *Larry's Party* answers Kineke's call not simply through narrative techniques that foster indeterminacy but also through its questioning of referentiality in language and photography. Larry's recognition that "words can slip loose from their meanings" (90) is a recurrent motif, while various textual allusions to photos remind the reader that "photographs are never 'us' [and] that there is no essential 'I' that can be represented in photographs" (Gudmundsdóttir 23).

¹⁵ While tangential to my own argument, much remains to be said about the issue of *Larry's Party* as feminist biography; I hope that future scholarship on the novel will be able to explore the subject further.

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