Home Truths

Reviewed by Laura Ciolkowski
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COLLECTED STORIES

By Carol Shields

Virginia Woolf knew how things would be for a writer like the late Carol Shields, a housewife and mother of five who published her first novel in 1976 at the age of 40, and performed the miraculous magic trick of writing fiction from within the elusive open spaces of her harried and overflowing domestic world. In a literary climate in which the minutiae of daily life are too frequently seen as a distraction rather than as the raw material for fiction, a so-called miniaturist like Shields, Woolf understood, would be written off as a lightweight, mired in the trivialities that great writers ostensibly must overcome. Woolf mocked the high-Victorian arbiters of taste and the stuffy, patriarchal style-makers of her time: "This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop -- everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists."

Like Jane Austen, a master chronicler of the depth and psychological weightiness of the apparently ordinary world of women (and the subject of Shields's prizewinning 2001 biography in the Penguin Lives series), Shields was not able to dodge charges of a lack of literary seriousness in her work, in spite of her impressive collection of honors and prizes, including a Pulitzer, a National Book Critics Circle Award and the Orange Prize for fiction. The critics "said that I wrote 'women's books,' 'domestic novels,' as if that were a lesser thing," she confessed in an interview conducted just three years before her death from cancer in July 2003. "But I knew then as I know now that the lives of women are serious and interesting."

Shields's Collected Stories, a magisterial compilation of her three published volumes of short fiction (Dressing Up for the Carnival, The Orange Fish and Various Miracles) together with "Segue," her last finished piece of fiction before her death, is a career-long literary record of her preoccupation not just with the "serious and interesting" lives of women, but with the subtleties and everyday miracles of human life as well. The young woman of "Scenes" is drawn to such subtleties and everyday miracles, studying languages as a university student and later traveling to London to examine old manuscripts at the British Museum. But, in spite of her work, the woman comes to understand that her life -- life itself -- is not an ordered and elegant tale that can provide answers to the grand questions of the universe like those she comes across in the margins of the materials she studies. Rather, the fragmentary scenes out of which her life is made -- "sometimes she thinks of them as little keys on a chain, keys that open nothing, but simply exist for the beauty of their toothed edges and the way they chime in her pocket" -- inspire in her what Shields elsewhere has dubbed a kind of "narrative hunger," the fundamentally human desire for story, a primitive urge to stitch together random bits and pieces, pungent moments and brief flashes of color into living fictions.

The characters in Shields's short fiction are a motley crew -- writers, artists, travelers, a Kitchen Kult cookware demonstrator, an inventor of the "steering-wheel muff," a southern Ontario nudist. What they share is the drive to create narrative, either to keep the disruptions

of an untamed universe at bay by giving a "reassuring, measurable weight and volume" to the flightiness of the world around them, like Elizabeth in "Dying for Love," or, like so many of the lovers and married couples who arrest Shields's artistic attention, to break apart the genteel coverings of a life that has succumbed to sameness and dull compromise.

In "Segue," one of the strongest stories in the collection, a 67-year-old "aging woman of despairing good cheer" sustains for her husband of 40 years, the great novelist Max Sexton, the stale and cordial façade that keeps his world in order, shielding him from the mundane details of their earth-bound and cluttered domestic life together. That Jane is herself an artist, a tireless sonneteer who has for the last 30 years attempted to write one sonnet every 14 days, has made her no less of a muse and amiable protector in the service of her artist-master. But where Max's art must be carefully and delicately detached from life at all four corners, enabling the great artist to think big thoughts and to labor for "hours of self-denial in his blank cell," Jane's poetic life is overflowing with the unacknowledged treasures of her domestic interior. Her feminine aesthetic -- "the iambic grasp of knit/purl" in her poetry -- is like a "small thread clinging to my sweater's sleeve, always there, waiting to be picked off." Jane's self-styled shopping list of subjects for future sonnets, kept hidden in a tiny spiral notebook squirreled away in her desk drawer, is full of bite-sized poetic possibilities: the texture of bread, the smell of taxis, "brooms and brushes and dustpans and the concept of debris," cabbage, chewing gum, sleep.

Like most things in Shields's world, Jane's quaint and diminutive sonnet, her beloved 14-line "splash of noise," is not what it seems. It is, in fact, a disruptive and powerful force far more dangerous to the delicate balance of the world she inhabits than the plodding rhetorical bulk of Max's New Manuscript. Jane's sonnet bends and tears the comfortable fabric of her life with Max, laying bare the strangeness beneath the familiar shape of her husband and the harsh tones and jagged edges beneath the "healthy, seasoned, amiable" outlines of her own aging body.

Intrigued by the play between surface and depth, and drawn to the tumultuous underside of commonplace scenes (like a woman mowing the lawn in June in "Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass" or a seemingly happily married couple as they drive on the interstate to a wedding in "Milk Bread Beer Ice"), Shields insists not just upon the occasionally comic dishonesty of outward appearances but on their ultimate fragility. While flying over the Rocky Mountains, a woman muses over how "a dozen words carelessly uttered can dismantle a marriage"; in "Mirrors," a middle-aged man wants to tell his grown son and daughter "that other people's lives are seldom as settled as they appear. That every hour contains at least a moment of bewilderment or worse. That a whim randomly adopted grows forlorn with time, and that people who have lived together for thirty-five years still apprehend each other as strangers."

At heart a hopeful writer, Shields had a stubborn faith in the possibility of human connection. This is exemplied by the man in "Mirrors," whose story ends late one night as he unexpectedly catches the eye of the intimate stranger who is his wife and wordlessly, in a flash, understands that they are soul mates; and by the couple in "Hinterland," who find in each other the strength to keep from sinking beneath the weight of the present moment and to "recognize but resist the details of the future." Shields has left us with an intricate literary map of human relationships and with certain proof that the radiant strangeness of ordinary people is always hidden within plain sight.

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