

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF CAROL SHIELDS

Reviewed by Clara Thomas, Books in Canada

Carol Shields's *Collected Stories* was published, with the cooperation of her family, one year after her death. "Segue", a chapter from the novel she was working on when she died, is included along with the complete collections, *Various Miracles*, *The Orange Fish* and *Dressing up for the Carnival*. Her daughters Anne and Sara were actively engaged in the book's preparation and made themselves available for interviews. The finished work is a handsome collection, her family's memorial to the writer whose remarkably diverse talents leave us a shining legacy. New readers as well as long-devoted readers will be captivated by its largesse: we expect from Shields a large generosity, a questing intelligence, an acute wit, an eye for the deceptively ordinary and above all a constant word-enchantment; in these pages we will not be disappointed.

Years ago in Swann, Sara Maloney, feminist writer and teacher, gave us a powerful statement of the redemptively ordinary, one of the most important of Shields's themes:

"God is dead....the sixties are dead, John Lennon and Simone de Beauvoir are dead, the woman's movement is dying-checking its inventory, let's say-so what's left?"

The quotidian is what's left. Mary Swann understood that if nothing else.

"A morning and an afternoon and
Night's queer knuckled hand
Hold me separate and whole
Stitching tight my daily soul."

The epigraph for *The Collected Stories* is a passage from *The Stone Diaries*, making its statement about dailiness as well: "Life marches right up to the wall of that final darkness....A person can go on and on tuned in to the daily music of food and work and weather and speech right up to the last minute, so that not a single thing gets lost."

For Shields there is an actively redemptive quality in dailiness which anchors and reassures us in the midst of the bewildering world around us. Chance, coincidence, accident, luck, miracles, all these are constants in our lives: the title story in *Various Miracles* relates several bizarre examples. To Shields individuals are amazingly strong in the face of such buffeting. She is not facilely optimistic, but she is resolutely life affirming. In "Segue", defined as "an uninterrupted transition from one melody to another", Jane Sexton, an "ageing woman of despairing good cheer" orders her universe through writing a sonnet every fourteen days. She has done this for thirty years, living an ordered, secure life with Max, her husband, a successful novelist. Her enveloping sense of unease is kept at bay by the reassuringly ordinary rhythms of their life, shopping, visiting their daughter, the fortnightly chairing of the meetings of the Sonnet Society. Yet when the day ends, her last thought is not a contented packing away of the day but a stubborn questioning of her place in the universe: "the reply comes promptly, mocking my tone of high seriousness: if it weren't for my particular circumstances I would be happy."

In many of her stories Shields has the skill of a hypnotist in sketching dailiness. "Hazel", for instance, is a recent widow who takes a job demonstrating household gadgets, much to the disapproval of her family and friends. She becomes good at it, finds increasing success and pleasure in new-found skills and finally becomes her company's most prized saleswoman. Readers could happily go on and on and on simply savouring Hazel's daily adventures and

growing self-confidence were it not for the necessity of closure. In fact, when it comes it seems forced and awkward, two short sentences moving from Hazel's consciousness to the narrator's summing up: "Everything is an accident, Hazel would be willing to say if asked. Her whole life is an accident, and by accident she has blundered into the heart of it." Hazel could certainly have taken us happily through a novel and this is true of many of Shields's characters. To read her stories is to have a privileged view of people who are quite unconscious of eyes on them. They are not ruthlessly unmasked, but they do reveal the quite astonishing and varied humanity of their lives.

"Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass" is another of Shields's encapsulated novels. Mrs. Turner with her frizzy red-grey hair, in her shorts and halter, industriously cutting her grass on a hot June afternoon is quite unconscious of the mild annoyance of her neighbours or the scorn of the passing high school girls. They, in turn, are totally unaware of the riches of her life's experience. We, the readers, share in both: "She cannot imagine that anyone would wish her harm. All she's done is live her life. The green grass flies up in the air, a buoyant cloud swirling about her head. Oh, what a sight is Mrs. Turner cutting her grass, and how, like an ornament, she shines." The word "shines" is a Shields signature. Years ago I compared her compositions to the glowing interiors of Vermeer, the 17th century master-painter of Delft. "Many of his works centre on the figure of a woman, her surroundings so finely wrought, the furnishings of the room so detailed (the ornaments on a table, a picture on the wall behind her, a scene from an adjacent window), that the whole composition is a miracle of suggestive precision, light and colour." "Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass" is like that and so is the effect of many of the stories—a final wondering perception of the intricacy, difficulty and radiance of lives lived in the midst of the vast civilization beyond our view.

Always, Shields displays the most delicate and searching respect for words, their sounds and meanings. Sometimes she moves into surrealistic areas, as when her fancy suggests that weather stops when the Meteorologists go on strike or that global warming is caused by too much talking, but personal relationships are destroyed by too little. This last is a frequent theme—tired marriages limping along with too little communication. She is the magician, matching her characters' experiences with the intense precision of her language and so giving them a dignity and resonance that they could never claim for themselves. Emily Dickinson's "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" was her epigraph for *Various Miracles*; reviewing Dickinson's *Collected Poems* recently in *The Times Literary Supplement* Samantha Matthews quoted its conclusion: "Truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind." No one does the gradual dazzle better than Carol Shields.

Clara Thomas – *Books in Canada*