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Why So Gloomy?

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By Claire Messud

SMALL CEREMONIES By Carol Shields. *THE BOX GARDEN* By Carol Shields.

DISCOVERY by the broader public of a writer in midcareer entails a particular delight: the revelation not simply of a single book but of a substantial and satisfying body of work. This is certainly the case with Carol Shields, whose novel "The Stone Diaries" captured last year's Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction -- as well as the rapt attention of a vast new readership. In spite of its notable success, this eloquent work was not a radical departure for its author: her subtle and slyly amusing renditions of ordinary life have been celebrated among a dedicated coterie of admirers for 20 years. Now, at last, Ms. Shields's earliest novels -- published in Canada in the mid-1970's -- are widely available in the United States.

Like the pair of narratives that make up Ms. Shields's charming "Happenstance," "Small Ceremonies" and "The Box Garden" are complementary, taking as their subjects the wildly divergent lives of two sisters, Judith Gill and Charleen Forrest, nee McNinn. In "Small Ceremonies," Judith records the ebbs and swells of a year in her comfortable family life. Contentedly married to a Milton scholar named Martin, she is at work on a biography of the Canadian pioneer Susanna Moodie (about whom, incidentally, Ms. Shields herself has written a book). Judith ponders the relationship of fact to fiction, the necessary gaps and concealments of biography and of life itself. As her novelist friend, the improbably named Furlong Eberhardt, remarks on the nature of biography: "People must be preserved with their mysteries intact. Otherwise, it's not real."

Through the seasons, Judith takes note, alternately with sharp-witted detachment and with wonder, of the folding and unfolding secrets of those around her: of her 12-year-old son, Richard, whose devoted correspondence with an English girl he adores but has never met provides his sense of self; of her 16-year-old daughter, Meredith, who grows simultaneously into beauty and unknowability; of her husband, Martin, whose sudden passion for explaining Milton by weaving a tapestry diagram appalls her, and about whom she acknowledges "that he possessed an existence of his own to which I did not belong, which I did not understand and which -- be truthful now, Judith -- which I did not really want to understand."

In other instances, Judith's projections about people are jolted by fact, most dramatically when John Spalding, an English professor whose Birmingham flat the Gills inhabited while on an academic exchange, appears in their suburban Ontario home. Judith's image of Spalding -- conjured from the bleak discomfort of his abode and his dire attempts at novel writing, stuffed on the topmost shelf of his Birmingham bookcase -- was "a very small man with a tiny brain pickled in purest white vinegar." What arrives on their doorstep is a bluff, obese joker who has written and sold a novel about the Gills as he imagined them, a portrait no more accurate than Judith's.

A comic dance that affords space for the serious, "Small Ceremonies" presents life's essential isolation as cause not for gloom but for celebration. But Judith's sister, Charleen, whose path has been altogether more difficult and solitary, is less confident of the merits of the unknown. As she remarks in "The Box Garden": "I can never quite believe in the otherness of people's lives. That is, I cannot conceive of their functioning out of my sight." Hers is a world in which disjunction exists not so much between what is imagined and what exists as between who people seem to be and what they become. Her former husband Watson's willful reinvention of himself as a hippie has scarred Charleen's life. The very gaps that amuse Judith horrify her younger sibling.

"THE BOX GARDEN," set a few years after "Small Ceremonies," focuses on Charleen's trip to

Toronto for her mother's second marriage. A penurious poet living in Vancouver with her 15-year-old son, Seth, Charleen dreads her reunion with the sour Mrs. McNinn and sets off protected by her boyfriend, an amiable orthodontist named Eugene. As it turns out, his consoling presence is much needed: in the days before the wedding, Charleen finds herself pursuing the unreliable Watson to his commune outside Toronto, trying to locate a shadowy figure named Brother Adam, with whom she has been corresponding, and, more distressing still, attempting to track down her son in Vancouver after he disappears in the company of Charleen's unstable friend, Greta. Judith, Martin and the viperous Mrs. McNinn hover colorfully around Charleen's traumas, as does Mrs. McNinn's intended, a wizened old cancer patient with a secret of his own.

A distinctly darker novel than its companion, trapped uneasily between farce and something more sinister, "The Box Garden" serves above all as an enlightening expansion of the dynamics of the McNinn family. It draws a memorable portrait of a bitter mother and her daughters, and ultimately grants both Mrs. McNinn and Charleen the prospect of happiness.

As the title of her first novel suggests, Ms. Shields has always been committed to the unrecorded minutiae of women's daily lives. From these slight but assured fictions to the wealth of "The Stone Diaries" is a leap only of range: the themes, the patience and generosity of spirit that characterize her current work are present, fully formed, in the felicitous sentences and paragraphs of Ms. Shields's earliest books.

Indeed, if there is fault to be found with these novels, it is one of absence rather than presence, and holds equally true of Ms. Shields's later books. Daisy Goodwill Flett, the protagonist of "The Stone Diaries," is described as "one of life's fortunates, a woman born with a voice that lacks a tragic register." Charleen Forrest, for all the adversity she has faced, lacks that register too, as does Judith Gill. And one comes to suspect that Carol Shields may also. In her fictional worlds, despair never triumphs: there is redemption or resolution or hope for even the sorriest of souls. This unwavering faith in grace may constitute the underlying untruth in an otherwise clear-eyed sensibility, but it doubtless also accounts, at least in part, for the powerful appeal of Ms. Shields's fine novels.

- **Claire Messud** is the author of a novel, "When the World Was Steady."

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