

Interview with Carol Shields about Happenstance (*The Husband's Story*)
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Transcription of audio tape

- INT:** Carol Shields is a Winnipeg writer. Her latest book is called *Happenstance*, a novel about a middle-aged survivor. I talked with Carol about her interesting views on being an author.
- Carol, I'd like to begin by asking you about the title of your novel *Happenstance*. You have a quote in there about the hero, Jack Bowman, *and it is pure happenstance that made him into a man without serious impairment or unspeakable losses* and explain the significance of that.
- CS:** Well happenstance is a strange word. It means half chance, half circumstance I think. I think really most of us are the people we are by chance. We don't write our own script I suppose is what I'm saying. We can't really blame all the forces around us – our parents and our happy or unhappy childhood – for the way we turn out. I think it's all a matter of chance or happenstance.
- INT:** **How does that philosophy know itself in your books?**
- CS:** I'm not sure it really does. It's something I've just started thinking about. The other thing is this book is about history and our own history we carry around, the sort of baggage of our earlier years. So I think that's the way I could believe those things that happen to us and pile up in our lives exist by happenstance. We can't affect them very much. So therefore I suppose if it is reflected in the novel at all it never really escapes from the situation of your life. I don't think you can do a great deal to change. You can do certain superficial things but, in a sense, there are other forces acting on you which are stronger than your own.
- INT:** **That's strange. You're saying in a sense that we're not in control of our own lives?**
- CS:** I don't think we are very much. I think we can make surface changes but I don't think we are, no.

INT: I didn't even get that feeling from your book.

CS: I think that in the book the hero, Jack Bowman – I suppose you had better call him an anti-hero – he does have something of a growth of self-awareness. I don't know if you felt that way. But it's not much. He opens a little bit but it's about an inch and just has a glimpse I think into other people's inner lives as well as his own.

INT: Well your book is set three years ago in 1978. The hero is, I think, 43-years-old – or the anti-hero if you want to call him that – and what is your book saying about middle age? Because from what I perceived you're not talking about middle age as being a kind of malaise kind of incurable disease, I think it reflects a more optimistic view.

CS: I think it is. I see it as an opportunistic period. I think it is a rather very questing period, often a joyful quest. I think also though it is a time when people come to certain degrees of resignation. I don't see resignation as a particularly negative thing, certainly not in this man's life. I think by the end of the book he looks at himself fairly squarely – as squarely as a man like that can – and reaches a certain degree of resignation of the kind of life he is going to lead. He's always going to be a man who is somewhat removed from events and I think he accepts that.

INT: Removed in what sense?

CS: Well, removed in that he's not a participant, he's an observer – as historians are. And, in fact, as novelists are. Most writers I think are people who are those who observe events rather than take part in them.

INT: Do you consider yourself to be an observer? Somebody who is more passive than active?

CS: Absolutely, yes.

INT: How are you an observer?

CS: Well I think most writers are people who sit back, they watch other people, they watch the unfolding of their personalities, the stories that surround them rather than affect them themselves. You can only do so much, I think, and we're like historians. We're recorders rather than shakers and movers.

INT: **Given your own experiences what is your view of people in the world, if you could come up with an observation of people what would it be?**

CS: I suppose I would have to say it's the old iceberg thing that really we see very little into people. During our lives I think we tend to be commutative inside our heads and only interact with people on a maybe about a tenth of the time. So I think this is an interesting area for the novelist to go into, into the interior of life of characters. I have the most enormous admiration for playwrights because somehow they have to do this without having these narrative passages which openly explore the process of thought. They simply have to do it all through dialogue, which I don't think is the way life is unfolding for most of us. I think that human personality is, in the end, mysterious. In *Happenstance*, in the novel, a man and his wife have lived together for 20 years and are happily married in fact. Nevertheless there has been an enormous amount of separation between them which is another thing I think that he resigns himself to.

INT: **So do you see your role in a sense as being that of a mirror, that of being somebody who reflects something which we often don't see?**

CS: I think that part of the role of a novelist is to reflect reality. I think there are other roles as well which is perhaps to interrogate reality. I think in some instances a writer can actually actively explore certain areas of human lives and ask questions. The one thing I suppose a writer is not is a person who has resolved most problems in his mind. I think this is probably the reason that we are writing novels. It's sort of an exploratory process. I'm always surprised when people ask me for my solid opinions on such things as what is literature and what is a short story because these are things I haven't really articulated to myself and am still thinking about and perhaps never will really come to conclusions. I think Saul Bellow, the American novelist – I'm a great fan of Saul Bellow – that he certainly believes this, that there are very few final resolutions in our intellectual life.

INT: So what did you learn from having written *Happenstance* after you had exorcised it from your typewriter? What did you learn from the catharsis?

CS: I think I became quite a keen observer of the different ways that men and women behave. Of course this is the first novel I've written about a man. My other two books are about women as the main characters. I thought it would be interesting to look at life – to try to look at life – through a man's eyes. I paid a lot of attention to the ways in which men talk. I think men are capable of certainly experiencing all the same emotional responses that women are – or most of them – but they express them differently. I think language comes into it and I'm not quite sure what controls that. So that was an interesting thing I suppose that I discovered. I was also interested in the idea of friendships between men and friendships between women and I have a little section about that. It has always seemed to me that friendships between women are stronger and more meaningful and more numerous as well. I did a lot of thinking. Of course, well, what does one learn in the writing of a book? It is largely an imaginative process. So it's a kind of journey in itself. The ways in which, perhaps, family members get together. In this case there are two children. The wife leaves the husband with the children for five days. Suddenly – and I've always noticed this of my own family – that when one person is missing from the family all the relationships are juggled and certainly they are in this book. So that was another thing that I was looking at and paying attention to. I was also, I suppose, looking at the way in which – in a very small way and I meant it to be almost invisible as a scene – in the role of the women's movement affecting the wife in this novel. She's a woman who has led a very traditional life – staying home with her children and so on – but in the last year or two she has become a prizewinning quilt maker. I think her husband's reaction to this is rather common. He is her champion but he is perplexed, he can't quite understand it, the place it occupies in her life, but it is a benign perplexity rather than antagonistic I think.

INT: What's interesting about *Happenstance* is that I read it in the same week that I finally gave in and went in to see *Ordinary People*, the Academy Award nominated film. In *Ordinary People* the story revolves around an affluent family comprising a man, his wife and their 17-year-old son. They are torn apart by

the fact that their eldest son was killed in a boating accident. Their reaction too is an alienation and also an attempted suicide on the part of the surviving son. What I was interested in your book was that it was about transitions – as you said it was about a family, it's about middle age, it's about relationships yet there was more of an optimism. I got the feeling that your characters, if given the same situation as those in Ordinary People, would not have reacted as drastically.

CS: Yes. Well I do think that people are enormously resilient to changes in their life – most of us. Most of us are. You used the word when we were speaking earlier “a human casualty”. A fiction is littered with human casualties but life isn't I don't think. I think if you look around most people do survive. They juggle their reality, they juggle their relationships, they give way, they are flexible. Well what interests me is, as I mentioned earlier, the mystery of human personality and human personality is not mental aberration or neurosis I don't think. There is a great deal of scope within the realm of normalcy, a great deal of scope for drama I think.

INT: **That's what I sensed within what you were doing, that you did believe basically that people had the ability to take what was thrown at them, to digest it, to learn from it and to survive most importantly.**

CS: Yes. I think most of us do. I think that this side of us – now there are a few writers that have explored.... I don't know if you read John Updike the American writer. He explores a very normal range of human personality. After all, all human relationships are complex even if they are middle class and fairly sane. But aside from him and a few others I think fiction perhaps has focused in the last three years on the alienated personality.

INT: **Do you think that's a good trend?**

CS: It's an interesting trend. It begs the question really; how normal are writers? Is it the fact that writers actually seek out situations which offer more perhaps in psychic fireworks than the fairly day-to-day life.

INT: **What about you though? What about you? What do you like as far as writing goes?**

CS: What kind of writing? I read for a lot of reasons I suppose. I suppose what I admire is a certain use of language, a precise use of language. I hesitate to use this word but I will; an elegant use of language, which is find in such writers as Mavis Gallant. She's marvelous. And Alice Munro has a wonderful ability to take a phrase, take a sentence and give it a kind of balance of poetry of its own.

INT: **But what do you want to give to your readers?**

CS: What do I want to give to my readers? Oh gosh, that's such a presumptuous thing to think that I could give them anything. In fact writing is a very presumptuous act. I often think, when I meet people every day who are older and wiser than I am, I ask myself why do I think I have anything to tell anyone. So I'm not sure I do. I suppose what writers really do is when you offer a work of fiction to a reader what you're saying to that reader is here is another way of expanding your experience. I think this is why people read novels because it is simply a way to broaden your experiences. After all, we are limited really in our lives to a certain number of relationships. You can only live so many places and do only so many different kinds of jobs and love only so many people. I think that many of us feel that our lives are limited. And fiction serves this purpose. It is not escape I don't think, it's enlargement.

INT: **Carol, thank you.**

CS: Thank you.

INT: **That was Carol Shields, author of *Happenstance*.**