

Re Marriage

Carol Shields (Author)

Happenstance: Two Novels in One About a Marriage in Transition.

Reviewed by Donna Coates

In a recent interview, Carol Shields confessed that she was "furious" when she came out of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* because "absolutely no one in that film had a job. People's work lives are written out of novels, too." Shields never writes people's work lives out of her fiction, though; in *Happenstance* (1980) and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (1982), re-issued as the two-volume set *Happenstance: Two Novels in One About a Marriage in Transition* (1991, 1994, 1997) work is a (pre)-occupation, one which she has continued to explore in *The Stone Diaries* (1993) and *Larry's Party* (1997). The clever packaging of *Happenstance*, apparently Shields' idea—the novels open from opposite sides, each upside down to the other—reflects her belief that the cultural conditioning imposed upon women and men in the 1950s which encouraged them to value work differently was detrimental to both.

At the outset of "The Husband's Story," Jack Bowman thinks, correctly, that his life is going well: he has a solid marriage and a good job as an historian at the Great Lakes Institute in Chicago. But when his wife of twenty years goes to a convention in Philadelphia, leaving him in charge of the couple's two children for five days, it starts to fall apart: the housekeeping degenerates; he quarrels with his son; his next-door neighbour tries to kill himself; and his best friend's marriage collapses. But worst is when Jack learns that an ex-lover is publishing a book on the topic he's been halfheartedly researching for years, thereby exposing his biggest problem—complacency. In the 1950s, when jobs for men with master's degrees could be had for the asking (those were the days!), he landed this one straight out of graduate school, but the job has placed too few demands on him: if he doesn't publish, he won't perish. (Obviously, what Jack needs is a probationary, tenure-track appointment.)

Jack is ill-equipped to deal with his problems because he's been coasting, oblivious to the fact that the hiring practices and values of the workplace are changing. The institute has hired a male secretary; highly skilled and educated women have entered the workforce; and PhDs are nipping at his heels. (It also looks as if his adolescent daughter, who can fix anything, is headed for a non-traditional career as a mechanic or engineer.) Jack is further impoverished because, unlike his wife who delights in sisterhood, he has been socialized to hide his feelings and thus can't bring himself to "share his pain" with his only male friend.

Meanwhile, in "The Wife's Story," Brenda is experiencing an exhilarating series of "firsts" at the crafts convention. She gets drunk, attends a lecture by a feminist who argues that traditional quilting patterns are comprised of orgasmic and phallic symbols (Shields' dig at theorists?), receives honourable mention for her "Second Coming" quilt, and nearly succumbs to an affair with a sensitive (naturally) Canadian. At forty, Brenda's life couldn't be better, but she's paid her dues for, like Jack, she is a product of time and circumstance. In the fifties, she was encouraged to make marriage her "career," which she did with a vengeance. But by the late 1970s, realizing that marriage and motherhood have "detained her too long in girlhood" and that history is passing her by, she falls out of love with Jack and into a deep depression. She toys with the idea of returning to work but finds typing, the only skill she possesses, boring.

By happenstance, Brenda takes up quilting, an occupation which rescues her from domestic entrapment and brings her economic reward and a modicum of prestige; she makes art, not craft. While nineties feminists may be disappointed that Brenda works at home and hasn't yet achieved financial independence, Shields, we recall, published her first novel at forty, and likely wrote it at home. It's also important to stress that Shields is not writing about working-class women (although Brenda's and Jack's origins are working-class), or suggesting that women's brains turn to mush if they don't earn money outside the home: one of Brenda's most insightful friends does volunteer work. For Shields, then, any activity which releases women from

domesticity and brings them pleasure is "work."

The endings of these novels "converge" in the middle, just as Brenda and Jack "converge" at the Chicago airport. (Shields is seemingly fascinated by arrivals and departures.) Brenda's absence has made Jack's heart grow fonder, and at the end of his story, he's reaching out, gratefully, to her. But at the end of her story, Brenda is thinking in the future tense, calmly going over in her mind the familiar routines which she knows will follow. Just before sleep comes, however, Brenda shifts into the present tense and "drifts away on her own." She's reclaimed her life (her "Second Coming?"), formerly defined by Jack, by motherhood, by marriage. Her marriage is still "working," but only because she is, too.

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