

## Larry's Party – 1997

**Actually, there are parties in all of my books, and I hadn't realized this, but it was pointed out to me by a very astute critic, who tracked the parties right back to *Small Ceremonies*, where there's a kind of suburban buffet supper. I love parties, and more than the parties, I love the idea of parties. I love the idea of people gathering under a roof, strangers or friends or both, where there's a flow of food, a flow of talk, movement, human movement, where certain possibilities are produced that don't occur in our non-party lives.**

Carol Shields from the 1997 interview "The Arc of a Life" with Eleanor Wachtel, published in *Random Illuminations, Conversations with Carol Shields*

"Later, Larry memorized the formula for getting through the maze. He could recite it easily for anyone who cared to listen. Turn left as you enter the maze, then right, right again, then left, left, left and yet another left. That brings you to the centre. To get out, you unwind, turning right, then three more rights, then a left at the next two turnings, and you're home free."

If only the maze of Larry Weller's life, or our own for that matter, could be so easy.

In fact, on this first visit to the Hampton Court maze on his honeymoon, Larry Weller took a wrong turn and became lost in the maze. Carol Shields herself had the same experience in this particular maze as have many of us encountering hedge mazes. And yet, there is a certain satisfaction in finding your way, reaching the centre, even in the trying. In *Larry's Party*, Carol describes it that "getting lost, and then found, seemed the whole point, that and the moment of willed abandonment, the unexpected rapture of being blindly led".

For Larry Weller the maze experience was the beginning of a passion and, eventually, a career. For the readers of *Larry's Party*, the maze is an integral part of the story, the very structure of the novel itself and even visually stimulating as each new chapter begins and we are greeted with a different maze drawing below the intriguing titles which draw us into Larry's world.

*Larry's Party* followed *The Stone Diaries* (1994), Carol Shields' Pulitzer prize winning novel about Daisy Goodwill. She was living in Winnipeg, Chancellor of the University of Winnipeg.

In *Larry's Party* Carol writes about twenty years in the life of Larry Weller, a likable, ordinary man born in 1950. As the story begins in 1977, Larry is 26 years old, still living at home and dating Dorrie. The book moves episodically through the next 20 years, each of the 15 chapters a sort of checking in on where Larry is now. At the same time each chapter is, as Carol often described them, a CAT scan, a slice of a certain aspect of Larry's life. The chapters also work as independent stories, although connected to those that come before or after by the threads of Larry's life.

In her interview with Carol in Toronto, October 1997 Eleanor Wachtel says "*Larry's Party* is organized like a kind of maze. You circle back to some of the same details or previously covered ground.

There's a chronological momentum, but it almost seems secondary. .... At what point did you realize that your form was going to so closely resemble your content?" Carol replies "I think I must have been in chapter three when I realized that each of these chapters was, in a sense, a small maze that Larry enters and then exits at the end, so the structure felt right for the material. Getting him in and out of each chapter was the trick." (from *Random Illuminations, Conversations with Carol Shields* "The Arc of a Life").

The maze, with its choices and turns, dead ends and retracing of steps, its offer of hope for finding the one true path, becomes a metaphor for Larry's life journey.

We journey through the 15 chapters, delightfully entitled "Fifteen Minutes in the Life of Larry Weller, 1977", "Larry's Love, 1978", "Larry's Folks, 1980", "Larry's Work, 1981", "Larry's Words, 1983", "Larry's Friends, 1984", "Larry's Penis, 1986" until we reach "Larry's Party, 1997". Along the way we are entertained and enlightened.

We learn about Larry Weller, an ordinary man made extraordinary in the deft hands of Carol Shields. The *New York Times* said "Using her fierce gift for observation, a natural story telling talent and a gently comic charm, {Shields} gives us a nicely tactile sense of Larry's ordinary life." We learn of his unremarkable childhood in Winnipeg, the son of working class parents, coloured by the terrible

domestic accident that befell his mother before his birth. We learn that Larry came to his work in the flower shop “by fluke”. We follow Larry and his first wife Dorrie on their fateful honeymoon in England. We watch as Larry’s life, like ours, unfolds in a series of mistakes and coincidences. In an interview quoted on [www.uspenguinroup.com](http://www.uspenguinroup.com), Carol says in response to a question about coincidences “I am deeply interested in synchronicity and, in fact, all forms of coincidence. In Larry’s life, accident plays a major role, and he is the sort of person who allows this to happen. He is, in a sense, someone who lets life happen to him, but then I believe most of us fall into that particular camp.”

We see that Larry learns “about the world, exactly as everyone else does – from sideways comments over a lemon meringue pie, sudden bursts of comprehension or weird parallels that come curling out of the radio, out of a movie, off the pages of a newspaper, out of a joke – and his baffled self stands back and says: so this is how it works.”

We laugh, we worry, we wonder. We watch Larry relate to his parents, his two wives, his son, his co-workers and his clients. We go along as he maneuvers his way through the late 70’s, the 80’s and much of the 90’s. We remember where we were, how we fit in. We realize that some things never change and some questions never will be fully answered.

*Larry’s Party* delves into many of the themes that reappear in Carol Shields’ work and in her conversations – themes of art and words, family, gender, goodness, relationships, “the arc of human life”. These were the topics that came up if you sat down for a cup of tea and a chat with Carol, that fueled her questions, that coloured her reading choices, that found their way into everything she wrote. They are life’s questions that we all try to make sense of and understand.

The idea for this novel rose out of a luncheon conversation with a group of women friends who wondered what it must be like to be a man today. Carol often remarked that men were a mystery to her. This conversation at lunch spurred her on to spend some time considering the mystery. She talked to her male friends and associates, sometimes learning a little, sometimes coming up against their “jocular mode”. She tells Eleanor Wachtel “It’s getting not just to that body, which is always going to remain a mystery to us, but getting to that interior monologue. What does it sound like inside those men’s heads? It’s a risk, and I understand now why there aren’t many women writing about men, or many men writing about women, because it *is* so risky. You can get it wrong so easily.”. As a woman, I guess I will never really know if she got it right but she certainly made it believable.

The last chapter of the book is “Larry’s Party, 1997”. He invites his ex-wives, friends and family. Much of the chapter is written in dialogue as the group sits at the table eating roast lamb, drinking good wine, conversations swirling around them and doubling back to cover the issues and questions that have followed Larry through the book. It is like we are there too, trying to keep up with the conversation. It reads like a play and makes me wish that I had seen the stage play of *Larry’s Party*. Perhaps some day I will have that opportunity.

Parties at the Shields’ home were always a welcome invitation to receive, the anticipation of the good conversations, interesting and varied guests, a chance to run into old friends and meet new ones, the bountiful refreshments, the noise and laughter all part of the overall pleasure. I will look forward to finding the parties as I read and reread her novels, just as I take note of the references to articles of clothing – in this novel, of course there was Larry’s tweed jacket but also Dorrie’s pink travel suit, Lucy’s outfit of flowered parka, purple skirt and boots as she tried to stop the bulldozer ripping out Larry’s maze, Beth’s “wardrobe of nun’s clothes” and the blue nightgown that Larry tried on, amongst many), and to laundry, house cleaning and the products needed for these chores. Little parts of our existence, cleverly and lovingly described by Carol. Little mentions that remind me that one day Carol and I extolled the virtues and joys of Swiffer dusters upon their entry into our lives, that when she was ill and not going to the grocery store often she asked me what was new in cleaning products. They remind me of Carol and I delight in coming across them as I read.

I loved this book. I knew I was going to love the book after just a few pages. I gobbled it up. And I know that I will read it again and again.