

AN INTERVIEW WITH CAROL SHIELDS

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Many people have called Larry Weller the "male counterpart" to Daisy Goodwill, the character in *The Stone Diaries*. Is that what you were trying to accomplish? Did you think about Daisy at all when you were writing about Larry?

I don't think of Larry as a male counterpart to Daisy Goodwill. The book seemed to me a separate endeavor. For one thing, [*Larry's Party*] surveys a slice of a life, not a whole life. I chose to look at Larry between the ages of 27 and 47, since it is during this period, I think, that most of our life choices are made. My idea was to lead him to "the center of the maze," a resting place in his life, but not the final resting place. Of course, I thought of Daisy as I wrote about this very ordinary man. It seems I am always thinking about gender and how the "accident" of gender alters our behavior and our expectations.

I've read you believe that coincidences are at the heart of what makes the universe go round. With *Larry's Party*, did you set out to write a novel that brought this theory into focus? Has coincidence played a significant part in your own life?

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. I've heard people say that we write our own script, but I've never been able to believe it. The forces of the world are too many and too complex to permit us this privilege. I suppose my life is as full of historical accident as anyone else's. I was born in the depression, spent a wartime childhood, married in the fifties. All these kinds of things must color in the squares of an individual life.

Why did you write *Larry's Party* in the third person, and not first person?

Except for my first two novels (*Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*), I've mostly written in the third person. Each position permits a writer certain liberties and imposes a balancing set of restrictions, but I find more and more that third person allows me to enter the narratives of people whose lives are very different from my own.

Language and communication are tremendously important to Larry. In fact, he all but says that his lack of vocabulary was a key factor in the breakup of his first marriage. Does a large, articulate vocabulary heighten the experiences of life? What about unspoken or unwritten communication?

I've always sensed that language is the great liberator. The fitting phrase, the precise word—these permit us to be more nearly ourselves. Like everyone else, though, I sometimes fear there is too much language pouring down on us, an overdose of communication that deadens us to private reflection.

Are there times that you find yourself struggling to articulate a particular sensation or feeling? Do you think that there is a word for every stop on the entire spectrum of human emotion?

I struggle all the time, and have come to understand that certain human responses leak around the edges of language. Larry Weller knows this too, when he wonders whether

language has evolved to the point where it can be fully expressive. I suppose writers use the nuances of tone when language itself fails us, or the useful tricks of metaphor.

How did the narrative order of *Larry's Party* unfold? Did you know from the beginning that his journey through life would be a circular one?

I love to create structures for novels, and I very early saw a double structure in *Larry's Party*. There was the ongoing chronological framework, in which I cut into his life every year or two to see what was going on. And then there was what I call a CAT scan structure in which I slice transversely into an aspect of his life—his folks, his work, his friends. This second structure was particularly useful to me since I was struck by the fact that men, on the whole, tend to compartmentalize their lives more than most women do.

You've said, "I've learnt that men don't often ask questions; women ask questions and men supply information." In *Larry's Party*, Larry seems to be asking the questions, while the women he surrounds himself with answer them. Is Larry an exceptional case or are you making more general claims about male/female relationships?

Perhaps Larry is more searching than most men. Certainly he asks the major existential questions: How did I get here? Is this all there is? But I'm not sure he asks the smaller and necessary questions. He doesn't probe his mother's religious impulses, nor ask his sister if she is happy. And he scarcely communicates with the young Dorrie at all.

How different do you think the men and women coming of age today are from those that grew up in the fifties? Do you think that our roles in relationships are "wired" in such a way that no matter what generation, certain elements of our relationships will ultimately remain the same? Do you believe that men and women are "wired" differently?

We went through an interesting period in the seventies when we optimistically believed that given the same kind of conditioning, men and women would grow increasingly alike in their personalities. This seems not to have happened; I can only suppose that our differences are Darwinian in nature and that they are likely to remain differences. The best we can do, perhaps, is modify extremes and cultivate sensitivity.

Your previous novel, *The Stone Diaries*, won the Pulitzer prize. Did you feel exceptionally pressured to write a book that would match your prior success?

Oddly, I felt no pressure at all after winning the Pulitzer. Certainly I was not badgered by my publishers. I've never believed that writers must "top" themselves with each new book. A creative life doesn't work that way, thank heavens. Most of us write out of where we are at the moment and we write the very best book we're capable of.

You've written a novel about the typical twentieth-century woman, *Daisy Goodwill*. You've written a novel about the typical twentieth-century man, *Larry Weller*. What is next?

I suppose I'll continue to write about certain unresolved questions: the question of art and who makes it, the problems and puzzles of gender, and the arc of a human life which is, in the end, the only plot that interests me.