

Revenge of the Nerd

In Carol Shields' new novel, *Larry's Party*, delight is just a sweeter form of nervousness

By Richard von Busack

NOVELIST Carol Shields sometimes writes about how we carry the key to life's apparently unsolvable mysteries around with us. In *The Stone Diaries*, her Pulitzer Prize-winning 1994 novel, a quarryman named Magnus pores over one of his only remembrances of his dead wife, Clarentine. It is a photo of the woman posing in 1902 with a few other members of her "Ladies Rhythm and Movement Club."

Clarentine had abandoned Magnus many years before, and he doesn't really know why. Indeed, neither of them really knows that it was because Clarentine was a lover of women. In any case, there were no words for that sort of love in Clarentine's time--and no way for her to act on it even if there were.

Shields' new novel, *Larry's Party* (Viking Press), takes place over a 20-year period, from 1979 to 1997, and stars a man who is Larry by name and Larry by nature. Shields suggests that for every Larry Holmes and Larry Olivier, there are thousands of anonymous men who live under the shade of this most unassuming of names.

Larry Weller is a passive, quiet Winnipeg florist who becomes a noted artisan--a maker of garden mazes. Even though he is a professional baffler of other people, Larry seems incapable of learning his own direction in life: he can't chart the safest path through obstacles. To Larry, even delight is just a sweeter form of nervousness. When Larry is moved to a new feeling, Shields writes, "This anxiety he identified, finally, as a welling up of happiness."

Shields is Canadian. She's scarcely a regional writer, but she does deal directly with the problems of living "in a country you wouldn't want to ask to dance a second waltz." Larry's ultra-Canadian "fever of discouragement" half-alienates other people. As Shields writes in *The Stone Diaries*, "It is inevitable that each of us will be misunderstood; this, it seems, is part of 20th-century wisdom."

LARRY'S GENTLE livelihood as a maze maker supports an uneventful life. Larry's world is unmarred by violent death or poverty, untroubled by religion, undisturbed by grand passions. Even the ridiculous extremes of Manitoba weather don't faze him. His two marriages are like his mazes: he emerges from them a little disoriented but mostly unchanged. It's a quiet Larry life, but Shields finds multifaceted beauty in Larry's world and career.

In *The Stone Diaries*, Shields' characters are stone masons, botanists and Indiana club women. The narrowness of a specialist's life is a regular subject for the author. This is another part of 20th-century wisdom--people must specialize in a field to survive.

Shields' characters may make brief, disturbing jaunts to Europe, but they never really leave the plains. The world beyond burgs like Bloomington, Ind., and Winnipeg, Manitoba, is outside their vision, a sort of pastel blur.

Larry wonders, for example, about the bunches of alstroemeria that have arrived by jet at his florist shop: "This flower, an herb really, started out as a seed way down in South America in Colombia. Some Spanish-speaking guy, Larry imagines him, harvested the seed." On his honeymoon, Larry notes some Australian and New Zealand tourists "good-naturedly debating the merits of kangaroos and kiwis." (Did they really debate this? Or is it that these are just the sorts of things Larry imagines Australians and New

Zealanders would talk about?)

Shields uses these narrow lives as an affectionately satirical lens through which to view the recent past. She remarks on the past's faith in solid virtues and stone buildings when "the world is bewitched by the possibility of sudden reversal." Even the silliness of the past is a marvel to her.

Ultimately, Larry is bigger than he seems, since his life encompasses 20 years of North American social history; the century ages with Larry. Unlike most observers, Shields doesn't see decline in these last two decades. Instead, she records emotional progress, serene complications and true bravery in the face of change--a richness, not an impoverishment.

Among her gifts as a writer is Shields' habit of looking at the opposite sex with a lover's tenderness; no male writer could possibly acquit men of their sins as mercifully as Shields does. In the end, the key to Larry's life lies in his ability to move quietly through reversals, to arrive at a triumphant birthday party by the path of least resistance.

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