

Interview with Carol Shields

Recorded in Vancouver, 1992 (transcribed from audio tape.)

INT: Carol Shields joins me now and let's hear her read from her new book, *The Republic of Love*.

Downtown Winnipeg has its city share of graffiti-splattered back alleys, but is mostly made up of wide, formal boulevards lined with handsome stone buildings hideously exposed despite repeated attempts at landscaping. This is a place with a short, tough history and a pug-faced name. Elsewhere people blink when you say where you're from and half the time they don't know where it is. An American woman Tom met in San Diego on his last vacation there dug her fingernails into his bare shoulder and said, "God I don't believe it. You mean to tell me you live north of North Dakota?" Right now early June is the worst time of the year. Worst because he forgets from summer to summer that it's really going to happen. Just when the trees have finally filled out their crowns with great glossy leaves the cankerworms go on the march. The larvae make their way up the tree trunks and then the munching begins. It takes no more than two days to transform an avenue of foliage into ragged lace and ten days to strip the trees bare. At night there's a steady drizzling rain which is not rain at all but the continuously falling excrement of billions of cankerworms chewing and digesting. The streets and sidewalks are covered with slippery syrup, the air turns putrid. The worms grown fat spin themselves long, sticky threads and on these they descend like acrobats to the ground where they lay their eggs for the following year.

To walk in the old treed areas of the city is to brush against this rosiny web, to feel it break on the face and body, to catch at the eyelids, hair and clothing, to breathe it in through the mouth and nose. This morning, a Saturday, when Tom is paying for a box of Raisin Bran at the local Safeway, the cashier raises her impassive young eyes, reaches over the counter, plucks a green cankerworm from his hair, and flicks it delicately to the floor, crushing it with the toe of her rubber-soled shoe. She caps her offhand charity, dispensed without emotional waste, with a lazy expressionless smiling curse. "Have a nice day." She says, smiling numbly into the middle distance.

And yet, three weeks later, the leaves are back, thick and green as though the trees have somehow been tricked by their old xylem hearts into performing an additional annual cycle of regeneration, and doing what is expected of them, which is to flourish, to give shade, to provide nesting space and runways for small creatures; to produce the astonishing artifacts of flowers and nuts, fruit and seed that give comfort and colour to this northerly splotch on the map where by accident Tom Avery spent his infancy, that fortunate house

on the river, those 27 mothers. And where, for the past 17 years, he has elected to live. He loves this light-filled city in the same unarticulated way he loves the throwaway intimacies of Safeway cashiers, in the same wordless way he expresses his most passionate and painful moments in screeches and howls, moans and cries, the disjointed vowel sounds of “aiiii” and “ooowww” that mend the effects of weather and repair the damage he does to himself and others.

INT: That’s Carol Shields reading from her new novel *The Republic of Love*. Carol Shields is with me in the studio. When you were reading about the cankerworms in Winnipeg – which is the city where I grew up, which I never tire of repeating – what I remember is the almost sub-sonic sound of their chewing. At night you can hear this kind of quiet, munching all through the trees.

CS: Yes, yes. It is unearthly, really.

INT: But I had forgotten absolutely the excretal bits. That’s something I seem to have put from my mind.

CS: Well of course some years are much worse than others. You know, you can get through years where you hardly blink but we have had some pretty wicked years as well.

INT: It warmed my heart considerably in reading this novel to see Winnipeg portrayed so affectionately because so many people seem to have had the experience – so many Canadians seem to have had the experience – of passing through Winnipeg. It’s a place they’ve been when they’re on the train, it’s a place they’ve flown over and I don’t know that it has ever been done quite this way before.

CS: Of course I am very fond of Winnipeg. I’ve lived there now eleven years. It somehow seemed right, now, to write about it. The time had come but I’ve wanted to do a couple of things a little differently. I wanted to talk about Winnipeg in the spring, summer and fall and not just in the winter because that is, of course, the stereotypical picture that we all have of it. I also wanted to talk about it as a cosmopolitan centre. It does have more than 0.5 million people and I think that always surprises people that it does function in this big city way as well. So those were a couple of things. But I have to tell you that I did worry quite a bit about setting this book in Winnipeg because I know Canadians are familiar with Winnipeg or at least with the mythology of the city. But this book was being published in

New York and in London as well and I expected at any minute to get a phone call from these people and say “Look, we cannot publish a novel set in what is this place? Winnipeg?” And I had prepared a defense. I was going to say that if Anne Tyler can write about Baltimore, I can write about Winnipeg. But you know? No one even raised this issue so I certainly didn’t raise it.

INT: **Has this book come out now in London?**

CS: It is coming out next month in London.

INT: **Well it will be really interesting for you I bet to hear how people respond to it for that very reason because I bet it will have a kind of air of exoticism about it.**

CS: Oh I think so. And, of course, it is an exotic city. It is the coldest city in the world – the coldest, large city I’m told.

INT: **What I find that I like about it so much when I go back there is that I find it a very nostalgic city. Not because I grew up there, but because when you walk around the neighbourhoods – and I think particularly the neighbourhoods that you describe in this book around Grosvenor and Wellington Crescent and the River Osborne area and the west side of the city as well – that these are neighbourhoods that have remained substantially unchanged from the time that they were built. Winnipeg has never boomed which I think makes it a very attractive place in lots of ways.**

CS: I think so. Actually I just got a review from New York this morning on the fax and it was describing Winnipeg as seen through this book and it said “this is a city where people still sit on their screen porches”. And, of course, it is. It is also a city where people tend to stay. And for that reason you’re always running into people who know people that you know or are related to people that you know so you have all these intersecting networks of people. It’s one of the things I loved about it right away when I moved there, having always lived in larger cities where somehow this didn’t happen.

INT: **At one point one character in this novel says “it’s a lovely city but maybe it is just a little too small because you are guaranteed that if you go out to something that you are going to run into somebody you know”.**

CS: Oh yes.

INT: Anonymity is virtually impossible.

CS: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

INT: Not to wax on too long about this but the other things that's so attractive about Winnipeg I think is – people are going to think I'm paid by the Chamber of Commerce – that you can buy a house there.

CS: Oh yes indeed. A wonderful house for what you would pay for a tiny apartment I suppose in other parts of Canada.

INT: You describe in the old warehouse district in Winnipeg around Albert Street I guess – Ballantine. Ballantine is that where there is at?

CS: Yes.

INT: It's been a while but in any case.... There have been some "New Yawk" style condo turnovers of these old warehouses and a couple here the Jaffe's live in one of these and it is described in the most splendid sort of way. And you say, "and you know? Two hundred thousand dollars is what that will cost." I thought two hundred thousand dollars? For two hundred thousand dollars in Vancouver what can you buy? A closet someplace!

CS: I had forgotten I had put in that price because I was told by an editor once don't ever put prices into novels because that dates your books so quickly. I have a novel that I published in 1977 and there's a woman who goes for a haircut – and it happens right here in Vancouver – and she is terrified of what this haircut is going to cost and it costs \$12.00 and it breaks the bank. How I wish now I had not put in this price.

INT: But that's one of the charming things about a novel that was written in the past is that kind of detail. It does anchor it in the time that it was written I think.

CS: Oh I'm glad to hear you say so! Two hundred thousand for a wonderful apartment yes. It will look like a bargain.

INT: Is this your neighbourhood in fact? The neighbourhood you described – the Wellington Crescent /Grosvenor area?

CS: Yes it is. We moved to Winnipeg and bought a house on Harvard Avenue which is in this very old area of Winnipeg and now we live in a condominium close so the Osborne area.

INT: **Are you in one of those conversions?**

CS: No we're not in a conversion, no, but we are on the river which is quite wonderful. The rivers in Winnipeg are kind of sleepy and brown but they're water and that water moves along and it makes you feel to look at it.

INT: **You're very poetic and I'd forgotten how dramatic the meeting of the Red and the Assinaboine is until, again, I went back. When I go back now I go back largely as a tourist – to see my family, but largely as a tourist. I see things so differently than when I actually lived there. I went down to the Forks – a development called The Forks – and witnessed I think for the first time since I was a schoolchild on a fieldtrip, this meeting of these two rivers. It is a very impressive sight.**

CS: Yes it is. It is very moving I think.

INT: **Well let's talk about Tom and Faye who are the two principles. The novel progresses along giving a chapter to Tom, a chapter to Faye and eventually the two are brought together. I'll say that much about it. Well just tell me a little bit about them. Who are they? Tom is a radio announcer?**

CS: Tom is 40-years-old. He's the host of a late night call-in show. He has been married and divorced three times. You can be unlucky in these things and he is one of the unlucky ones so he's in a position where he's living alone, looking for someone but not quite sure about wanting to become entangled again. Faye is 35. She has lived in the city all her life. She has a network of family and so on there and she has a job and her job is a folklorist in a folk museum, The National Folk Museum which, of course, a fictional construct. Her passion is mermaids. She is in the midst of writing a book about mermaids. I wanted this novel to do something that I hadn't done in other novels and which I don't really find much in novels and that is I wanted to write about people's working lives. You know how you read a novel and you hear about someone – oh he's a lawyer or an accountant – but you never get into that office, you never get into those file drawers and really see them working.

INT: **And you never get the sense of people's colleagues as really being their family. With your friends you don't see them once a week and talk to them about caulking the toilet or something but that's what you talk about with the people who are at**

work. It's the gritty, meaty stuff of quotidian life.

CS: Yes.

INT: **Now the stuff about mermaids. You're actually wearing one now. You've got a mermaid brooch, I guess. People are going to start giving them to you.**

CS: Yes they've already started. I've acquired one on this tour. I've been interested in mermaids for years and started reading about them, looking out for them whenever I'm traveling because they appear everywhere. Once you start looking you see them in statuary or paintings and they are a very important part of our mythology, but they're kind of a slippery element. They can mean one thing or very much the other. The mermaid who lures sailors to their death but, at the same time, is considered to comfort and provide solace. Mermaids are kind of unreachable characters and they swim alone, they're not communal. So are a lot of things about them that interested me. You know, I like to think about them. Like Faye in the novel I like to develop theories about them. But I haven't come to a final theory about what they really mean to us.

INT: **Have you been collecting mermaid lore over the course of the years?**

CS: Yes, over the last maybe five or six years. My original notion was that I might write a book about mermaids and then I decided well, what I would probably be capable of doing is writing a book about a woman who is writing a book about mermaids and that, in fact, is what I have done.

INT: **Carol Shields and we're talking about her new novel *The Republic of Love*. You write beautifully in this novel about that time of love where everything is new and love is a fresh season. I think in pop psyche terms this is called "the limerent phase".**

CS: Oh.

INT: **When you see the face of the beloved on every tree. I wonder if you could read this passage from a chapter about Faye, I think, and she's talking here about what it is like to be newly in love with Tom.**

She loved to lie next to him with her hand reading the back of his head, his heavy, sleep, substantial head, pushing her palm against the taper of his hair. Her own hands at these moments seemed detached from her body, not Fay McLeod's hands at all but hands belonging to a woman in love – any woman. They might be any couple too. Any lucky couple who happen to come together and now hold a privileged but hackneyed citizenship

in each other's lives. She loves to see him captured in the midst of his own pursuits, his habits, his pocket diary inked in with appointments and his possessions – his toothbrush, his springy shoelaces and the zipper of his jacket. The spaces of his profoundly personal moments offer themselves up and all these unguarded offerings are rounded and roughened by love. But Fay's noticed something she has never noticed before, that love is not anywhere taken seriously. It's not respected. It's the one thing in the world everyone wants – she's convinced of that – but for some reason people are obliged to pretend that love is trifling and foolish. Work is important, living arrangements are important, wars and good sex and race relations and the environment are important and so are health and illness. Even minor shifts of faith or political attention are given a weight that is not accorded love. We turn our heads and pretend it's not there, the thunderous passions that enter a life and alter its course. Love belongs in an amateur operetta, on the inside of a jokey greeting card or in the annals of an old-fashioned poetry society. Moon and June and spoon and soon – September and remember, Lord Byron, Edna St. Vincent Millay. It's womanish, it's embarrassing, something to jeer at, something for jerks. Just a love story people say about a book they happen to be reading – to be caught reading. They smirk or roll their eyes at the mention of love. They wink and nudge. Lovebirds, lovesick, lovey-dovey. They think of it as something childish and temporary and its furniture, its languages, its kisses, its fevers and transports are evidence of a profound frivolity. It's possible to speak ironically about romance but no adult with any sense talks about love's richness and transcendence, that is actually happens, that it's happening right now in the last years of our long, hard, lean, bitter and promiscuous century. Even here it's happening, in this flat mid-continental city with its half million people and its traffic and weather and asphalt parking lots and languishing flower borders and yellow-leafed trees. Right here, the miracle of it.

INT: Carol Shields reading from *The Republic of Love*. You say in this book love is a republic, not a kingdom. I guess I'm just vague on my political group – I think I know what a republic is but I'm not sure that I quite understand what your thinking is behind that.

CS: Well I've been thinking a lot about love the whole time I was writing this book. One of the things I thought that love is such a rare and marvelous substance and yet it is very widely disseminated and everyone gets a little piece of it. It seemed to me it was not a kind of aristocracy but a republic, the whole kingdom of love.

INT: I will confess that I went to the dictionary to look up 'republic' – The Webster's Unabridged – opened it up and as I was flipping towards the R's I landed on the M's and I looked down at the bottom of the page and the word was "merman" as in the male mermaid, not as in Ethel. So I thought oh! There's a coincidence.

CS: Which is a wonderful piece of synchronicity.

INT: Yes and I thought I would tell you about it because it seems to me from reading this book and other works of yours, that this is something that fascinates you is the seemingly random intersections where people meet or events happen and all of a sudden lives are changed in the blink of an eye almost.

CS: Yes, it does fascinate me. This whole idea of synchronicity fascinates me. In fact I wrote a whole book about it, a book called *Various Miracles*, and that's what the miracles are, these moments where for no reason that we can really track certain events do coincide. I think it like a strange force in the world. Now scientists have tried to explain this but they have not convinced me. But I think we have all had experiences of meeting people in strange places that we know – that kind of an experience – which does seem quite miraculous to me.

INT: I find that, as time goes on, I take these things more and more seriously in that I take those occurrences as almost signposts that are pointing a particular directions. So I will base big decisions now on seemingly random events which I guess is as good a way to do it as any.

CS: As good as any.

INT: I remember Alice Munro in one early collection wrote a story called *How Did You Meet Your Husband* or *How I Met My Husband* which I always thought would be a great exercise for a creative writing class – How I Met My Husband/My Wife whatever, my spousal unit. How did you meet your husband?

CS: I think for people who are in relationships of longstanding this is the great story of their lives, how we met. I've been to parties where people have gone around the table and talked about how we met. I do think my meeting with my husband was somewhat miraculous in that we were both away from the countries in which we lived. I was an American and I was studying in England and he was a Canadian doing post-graduate work in England. So that was where we met – in another country. So it did seem quite marvelous.

INT: How did you meet? Because you were both studying?

CS: We were both studying and we had both gone at Christmas to Scotland to a hotel which was sponsored by the British Counsel for Foreign Students and that was our meeting.

INT: How did you wind up in Winnipeg then? Was it work that took you there?

CS: Yes.

INT: As it often is. You seemed to have some France connection as well?

CS: Yes. We've been going to France every summer for about 25 years I think now, partly because of work but it has now become a place where we have a little house and we just like to go and to just be in France. France is a kind of hobby of ours.

INT: There is quite a lot of France in this novel as well as the earlier collection you mentioned, *Various Miracles*.

CS: Yes.

INT: And Faye traveling around in France sees lots of mermaids so I would guess that you've gathered some of that lore while you've been away there.

CS: Yes. I keep a mermaid journal.

INT: What colour is it?

CS: Actually it is blue so I think that's quite appropriate.

INT: I don't mean this as a criticism, just as an observation. It seems to me that in this novel that it's not that you're unkind to people who are single, but I get the sense that you think it's a sad state of living. That people who are alone in the world without a partner, without a significant partner, are not less necessarily but maybe less fortunate than people who have found someone who can be Number 1 in their lives. Do you think so?

CS: No I don't think so. I know a lot of people who are single in the world and who are very happy in the world – people who live alone. But this of course doesn't mean in any way that their lives don't have connections outside that. I remember writing a book – it was a novel called *Swann* – in which there was a woman who was known as the village virgin more or less. One of the reasons I wanted to write about her was because I wanted to talk

about a person who, just because she doesn't have a sexual life, it doesn't mean she doesn't have a life. I think it is important to me anyway to validate people who make those decisions. It just happens that the people in this novel are people who are possessed by a yearning for another and for them their lives are not complete.

INT: **Okay. Well love is redemptive in this novel I think and I want to ask you to read one final passage. This is from just about the end of the book and a lot of which we have not spoken has transpired. This is Tom at his late night radio show and he has given out a question to his listeners. They are supposed to call him with a response to this question.**

Tonight's question: "What can you do to help keep the earth green?"

The first caller speaks in a sweetly cracked, no-nonsense contralto. "Baking soda. Get your listeners going on baking soda Tom. Bicarbonate of soda. Sprinkle a little on your kitchen sink, on your bathroom fixtures, wherever and just wipe clean. It's natural, it's pure, it's run right down the drain back into the earth."

"Hey," the second caller calls "Wally Badreau is the man to keep us green. How about playing a little Badreau tonight instead of all that folky goop you've been dishing up lately? My favourite is a piece called 'Rain'?"

A man calls in and says "ban snowblowers. They're noisy and they use up precious fuel and they blow snow all over your neighbour's driveway. I gotta fellow next door and I sure hope he's listening in tonight."

A woman says, "I plan to cut the shoulderpads out of all my blouses and dresses and load them on a barge and dump them in Lake Winnipeg, creating a tidal wave which I'm told can be harnessed to provide electric power to the entire region."

"I like to chant a couple of lines of poetry into the ozone layer every day or so," a caller says. "That's my contribution."

"You know what?" the final caller says. "We've got to get back to neighbourliness. We've lost it. Saying good morning to each other. Saying how do you do, how are you feeling, how's the world treating you? Recycling plastic bags is peanuts, ditto with phosphate free detergents. We're always hollering these days about the infrastructure of our cities but love has got an infrastructure too. Love your neighbour. Let him love ya back a little. Love is the greenest stuff going. Let's hear it for love."

INT: **Let's hear it for love. Carol Shields reading from *The Republic of Love*, published by Random House. Thanks very much. Nice to meet you.**

CS: Thank you.

