

Interview with Carol Shields

Diane Rehm – Public Radio Washington, March 31, 1994

(Transcribed from audio tape.)

The Stone Diaries

DR: Good morning and welcome back to the Diane Rehm show on 88.5 FM. In Carol Shields' latest novel *The Stone Diaries* it is easy to confuse fact with fiction. The novel has all the trappings of reality as it traces the life story of Daisy Stone Goodwill from her birth in rural Canada in 1905 to her decline and death in a Florida nursing home nine decades later. Diary entries, third party perspectives and even family photographs seem to offer a thorough account of one woman's relatively ordinary life. But these many details pose more questions than answers as the author explores the essential mystery of all our lives. The book was nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize last year and recently published in the United States. Carol Shields joins me in the studio this morning to talk about her new book, her career as a novelist, poet and playwright. We'll take your calls all through the hour on 885-8850.

Carol Shields good morning to you.

CS: Good morning.

DR: You've described *The Stone Diaries* as a nesting of Russian dolls, a novel that's like a box within a box within a box. What do you hope that readers are going to discover as they open this book?

CS: I hope readers will be curious about the life of this so-called "ordinary" woman, about the layers of complexity beneath the surface. I hope that they can place Daisy in the context of our century which is one of the things I was interested in looking at when I started out with this novel. Because, like a lot of people, I'm a bit scared about entering the next century and seem to spend a lot of time these days thinking about what these 100 years have brought us and where they have delivered us. So I wanted this novel to start at the beginning of the century and I wanted Daisy's life to parallel – more or less – the life of this century.

DR: It is extraordinary because – I have to say, this is just a wonderful novel. I just enjoyed reading it and I am enjoying reading it so much.

CS: How nice of you to say.

DR: Daisy's entry in the world is a surprise to her and a surprise her mother. She has no idea that she is about to give birth. Talk about why that surprise element is so important.

CS: I've always been fascinated by newspaper accounts – and you see one almost every year – about women who are rushed to the hospital, give birth without knowing that they were pregnant. In fact my husband used to say to me "couldn't you do that?" Because I always made a great fuss about my pregnancies and wanted to be treated like a princess. But I have wondered, how does this happen?

DR: She is a very large woman.

CS: She is very large. She is obese. Of course there's a lot of denial going on and of course a lot of ignorance. She herself was an orphan and probably didn't understand as much about the female body as we know today. So I think this is how it happened. The bigger question I think is why didn't her husband know? But, in fact, he was very naïve, very young and he didn't know. So this was the surprise.

DR: **Then we have Daisy herself giving the account of her own birth.**

CS: Yes. How can we know what our own births are like? This is a novel in which Daisy is trying to tell her own story to make sense of her life. It's a novel about biography. How do we do this? Now she's not really, of course, writing her autobiography. What she is doing is assembling in her head – as we all do – a kind of construction of what her life is. Of course there are missing bits – her birth and death of course are the two larger bits – which she has to fill in imaginatively. Again I think this is something we all do, fantasize about the missing links or perhaps contribute a good deal of wishful thinking, of touching up our autobiographies to make us look a little better.

DR: **I also found myself wondering whether you were trying to narrow the gap between that which we consider an ordinary life and that which we consider an extraordinary life.**

CS: Yes, yes. In fact all books – it seems to be my life's theme. And when my books are reviewed the reviewers always say, this is a book about ordinary people. What is this? Who are these?

DR: **What is ordinary?**

CS: Either we're all ordinary or none of us is ordinary.

DR: **The notion of ordinary women doing extraordinary things is something we're somehow more comfortable with but to describe all of those as ordinary somehow seems to be, perhaps, demeaning in some people's mind.**

CS: Well actually I suppose I think – this is maybe a romantic view – but I think the most ordinary of us – I say that in quotation marks – is capable of extraordinary acts of course, for example. Or extraordinary acts of cruelty. We all have that capability I think. But Daisy, of course, does not accomplish what we call success in public life, let me put it that way. Actually I had a letter from a reader not long after the book came out and she said "I wish Daisy had tried a little harder". Well I wish she had tried a little harder too but, on the other hand, I know that something like 90 something percent of women in this century have felt the full weight of social and economic stricture. That one or two percent who stood up and claimed their own lives, well we've had novels about those women. But it seems to me we haven't had enough novels looking at these women who simply were not given permission to own their own lives.

DR: **You talk a little about the relationship between Daisy's mother and father, how that actually came about and how it set the stage for Daisy's life.**

CS: Daisy's mother was an orphan. She was handed over to an orphan's home in a very small rural town in Manitoba, in the centre part of Canada where I now live. Her father was a child of a very rather joyless couple in the same hometown. He had never had a girlfriend – this is going back to 1905. He started work at a very early age, quarrying stone. This is a stone quarrying area. He was called to the orphan's home to do a little bit of repair work on the doorstep where he met Mercy and was immediately taken by her.

DR: **Why?**

CS: Why? Because he had a kind of breath of the sensual possibilities within him. The fact that she was obese didn't bother him at all.

DR: **And he was very slim.**

CS: He was a very slim, small man. Well you know it's very hard to track down and account for passion. I can't, I suppose, account for this passion even though it's on my own pages.

DR: **He saw something in her.**

CS: He saw something that he knew would fulfil something missing in him.

DR: **So they began a life together.**

CS: They began a life. She was the stay-at-home wife and she was, in fact, while he was at work in quarries she was at home making a Malvern pudding and this is the scene that opens the novel. It's the day in which she gives birth to Daisy. By the way, I have recipes in all my books but this is the first novel I have a recipe in the first paragraph and I thought my editors might object a little bit but, in fact, they didn't. But I had a letter from – this is one of the wonderful parts about being a novelist is all the people you hear from about strange subjects – a woman who England who wrote me a very nice letter, full of praise but then on the third or four page she got down to the point of the letter which was that I had the wrong recipe for Malvern pudding and she included what she feels is the correct one.

DR: **Tell me what actually goes into Malvern pudding?**

CS: Well the Malvern pudding recipe which I found in an old cookbook is more like a summer pudding. It has bread. It is made with bread soaked with fruit juices and fresh summer fruits and this is simply put under a weight – a stone is what Mercy uses to weight it down – and then it is reversed so it is kind of a molded pudding. I don't know what it tastes like. I'm going to try to make one.

DR: **As Mercy dies a neighbour is there at the house and it is in fact she who takes away the newly born child, Daisy, and she actually leaves her unhappy marriage and takes the child and begins a new life. That life is part of what you document early in the book.**

CS: Yes. Yes she takes Daisy off to the big city, for her, of Winnipeg where Daisy lives with her and her son until the age of 11. At that point her real father claims her. I found when I was looking into the stone quarrying element of the novel that stone workers came to Manitoba from the Orkney Islands to work in Manitoba. Then when the stone industry fell on hard times in Canada these same stone workers came down into the limestone fields of Indiana. So by that time the novel had three geographical legs as it were. This is exactly what happens. Her father, Cuyler, reclaims her and takes her with him to live in Indiana.

DR: **Of course in the duration, in the period of time that Daisy has been living elsewhere Cuyler, her father, has been building this grand and glorious monument to his late wife made of the most beautiful stone. He then carved beautiful figures onto some of those stones so that people from miles and miles around come to see this monument.**

CS: Yes. He's an eccentric. He isn't happy with the first tombstone he carves for her so he makes a kind of circular monument which becomes a local – international attraction in fact. Actually I've

always been fascinated by people who build towers in their backyard of soup cans. It's not even primitive art. It's a kind of brute art right outside of any kind of tradition. I think there's something thrilling about it and this is the kind of man he was.

DR: Carol the novel really has, I think, the trappings of a factual biography. You include a family tree, you've got photographs and I'm going to talk about those photographs with you in just a minute. But is that line between fact and fiction as far as human life is concerned necessarily a wavy line?

CS: I think it is a wavy line. I think that historians nowadays would certainly agree to that. That their versions of history – their alternate versions, their selective versions – are all fiction in a sense. I think fiction writers cannot really extract the real from the novels so that what we all end up with is a kind of historical fiction I suppose.

DR: So in a sense you're writing a biography as opposed to a fictional life of a woman.

CS: Except that this isn't a real woman. But I did know as soon as I was into the novel and as soon as I had a structure for it, that I was really writing was about biography, about this whole problem of how we tell our stories. I wanted to gesture to that form in the novel, hence the genealogical table. When I read biography – and I read a lot of biography – I love to turn to that section of photographs in the middle of the book. I keep checking the image against the text. I do it so often that by the time I've finished the book the book will open automatically to this section. So I wanted to include some photographs. So I put this to my editor and I expected him to say 'no we can't possibly do that'. Because one thing I've learned is that book publishers are THE most conservative people in the world. But in fact he only paused for a moment and then he said 'we can do that'. So I finished the novel and then I started collecting a few photographs that I thought would work with the book. They're not good photographs. These are actually poor quality photographs on the whole. They're the kind that get left – they don't even make the family album – in the bottom of the drawer somewhere.

DR: But I have to tell you Carol that the photographs of Cuyler and Mercy around 1902 does not quite fit my own internal depiction. In other words this woman is not nearly as large nor he not nearly as small as I had envisioned them.

CS: Yes. I love the photographs but I wished we could have found one with a fatter Mercy. But the fact is about the distortion of truth. Probably what happened was that Cuyler confided to his daughter Daisy saying 'your mother was a rather large woman'. And in Daisy's mind, of course, she became larger and larger. So the photograph is meant to come at the truth glancingly. Each of the photographs, in fact, is just slightly off. This is part of the – I hardly dare say this on radio – post-modern nudge I was after. Now they did try to make Mercy a little bit fatter in the photographs by computer enhancing but she turned out to look like a bit of a freak. Then they did thicken her up around the waistline slightly but we decided to leave this. We decided it wasn't going to be a distraction and that the reader would understand the intention.

DR: Then there are some quite modern photographs. Talk about who those people are.

CS: Yes. Well some of the photographs I found – one in a museum, some at postcard markets, some my editor found – but we realized right at the end that we didn't have any contemporary photographs. So I took these out of my own family album and they are photographs of my own children – I have five children, four daughters and a son – who kindly gave me permission to use these photographs and to give them new names. They're enjoying it, their very small celebrity.

DR: Carol Shields is with me. She is a Canadian writer and author of *The Stone Diaries*,

shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1993. If you would like to join us call us between now and the next half of the hour on 885-8850. Would you read for us from the book? Maybe you can set up for us.

CS: This is Daisy talking about her father, Cuyler Goodwill.

"It has never been easy for me to understand the obliteration of time, to accept as others seem to do the swelling and corresponding shrinkage of seasons or the conscious acceptance that one year has ended and another begun. There is something here that speaks of our essential helplessness and how the greater substance of our lives is bound up with waste and opacity. Even the sentence parts seize on the tongue so that to say 'twelve years past' it is to deny the fact of biographical logic. How can so much time hold so little? How can it be taken from us? Months, weeks, days, hours misplaced and the most precious time of life too, when our bodies are at their greatest strength and open as they never will be again to the onslaught of sensation. For twelve years – from age fourteen to twenty-six – my father, young Cuyler Goodwill, rose early, ate a bowl of oatmeal porridge, walked across the road to the quarry where he worked a nine-and-a-half hour day, then returned to the chill and meagerness of his parent's house and prepared for an early bed. The recounting of a life is a cheat, of course. I admit the truth of this. Even our own stories are obscenely distorted. It is a wonder really that we keep faith with the simple container of our existence. During that twelve year period it is probable that my father's morning porridge was sometimes thin and sometimes thick. It is likely too that he rubbed up against the particulars of passion, snatched from overheard conversations with his fellow workers or the imperatives of puberty or caught between the words of popular songs or rare of draughts of strong drink. He did attend the annual bachelor's ball. He did shake the hand of Lord Stanley when the old fellow steamwhistled through in 1899. My father was not blind despite the passivity of his youthful disposition nor was he stupid. He must have looked about from time to time and observed that even in the dead heart of his parent's house there existed minor alterations of mood and varying tints of feeling. Nevertheless, twelve working years passed between the time he left school and the day he met and fell in love with Mercy Stone and found his life utterly changed. Miraculously changed."

DR: Carol Shields and the book we're talking this morning is called *The Stone Diaries*. Ms. Shields is going to be reading and signing at Chapter's this evening at 7:00 p.m. That's at 1512 Kay Street NW. Let's go to the phones now – 885-8850 and Betty in Bethesda you're on the air.

BET: Hello Diane. I enjoy your program.

DR: Thank you.

BET: The recipe for the Malvern pudding mentioned by Ms. Shields at the beginning of her talk, when I was a child we had one – I don't know it was called Malvern – but it is blueberries cooked with bread lining the mold and maybe a layer or two with bread in-between.

DR: Now you are going to have all of our listeners searching for Malvern pudding.

BET: I don't think they need to worry about a recipe. Just put the bread around and be sure and have enough liquid in the blueberries and I suppose they would use sugar but I think I would try orange juice to sweeten it nowadays.

DR: What a great idea.

BET: I know they cut the crusts off the bread and it was delicious. You turn it over and press it overnight and make it cold.

DR: Sounds wonderful. Betty thanks for calling. Bye bye. Let's go to Julie in Alexandria,

you're on the air.

JUL: Hi. I finished the book last week and just loved it and I, too, also kept referring to the pictures but never could find one of Daisy and I wanted to know if I had missed it or why there wasn't one of Daisy in the picture section.

DR: **What a good question. Carol?**

CS: No. There's no photograph of Daisy.

DR: **Why not?**

CS: This is a book, an autobiography of a woman who is, in fact, erased from her own life. She is a woman really – like many women in this century – who had no voice of her own, who was defined through others, whose obituary would read you know “wife of, grandmother of” and so on. This is why. There are also no letters from her. There are a lot of letters in this book that Daisy received but none that she wrote. No one saved her letters. But this is the trick of writing this book actually.

JUL: Well thanks so much for the book. I just loved it. It's making the rounds of our book club and my guess is that it will be on the schedule for fall. It was beautiful.

CS: Thank you so much.

DR: **You know I have a sense that this book is truly going to appeal to books clubs, this phenomenon of book clubs going on in this country I don't know whether it's also going on in Canada as well. But I must say it is phenomenal the amount of interest in books these days coming through the book clubs.**

CS: Well I'm a member of a book club as well. We are about twelve or fourteen women. This seems to be pretty well standard as far as I know. We meet once a month and I never miss. It's very important to me. It's a friendship group. What we do is we talk about our book for maybe about an hour and then we talk about our lives. It is a phenomenon. Even in the city where I live – which is not a large city – there are many, many of these clubs.

DR: **Anne you're on the air.**

ANNE: Good morning Diane. I'm a first-time caller.

DR: **Good morning – glad to have you.**

ANNE: And I'm also a Canadian. My daughter in Toronto told me that I must read this book and she sent it to me or she gave me when I was there. I just wanted to tell Carol Shields that I just loved the book and I saw myself and I saw my own mother and my three daughters and it was a wonderful book and I hope everyone enjoys it.

CS: Thank you.

DR: **Thanks for calling Anne. Call us again. The whole business of Canada and the names – for example, Margaret Atwood – and other female Canadian writers have made people are saying well, here's Carol Shields and her name ought to be right up there. How does that**

make you feel?

CS: People have been saying this for years. You should be better well-known, you should be better known. You know it's very hard to explain these things. But we do, in fact, in Canada have quite a reputation for women writers and always have. This goes way back to the nineteenth century. Women have always been prominent in our literature.

DR: **Does that suggest that women themselves are more prominent in Canada?**

CS: No, no. I don't think it does suggest that. I think what happens is – and this is only a theory and heaven knows I would hate to be stuck with a theory. So this is my theory for today let's say. But I think that women were excluded from public life. They were excluded from the novel of action, from the novel of politics and from all these areas and so what they concentrated on was the novel of private life. In fact I think that intuitively they realize that this is where everything really happens. So their novels I think have a kind of universal appeal.

DR: **You make the comment in the book that our own memories can be too cherishing. What do you mean by that?**

CS: I suppose I mean in some ways that we draw these memories around us like a kind of cloak and they're not always true memories. The idea of enhancing of our memories, of carrying them with us. It's something that keeps us away from real life I think.

DR: **What do you mean 'keeps us away from real life'?**

CS: Separates us.

DR: **Because we are too intent on that life that we've created for ourselves through the memory.**

CS: Yes.

DR: **Is there a danger in that somehow?**

CS: Of living in your memories alone? Well you all know that people as they get older do this more and more. I don't know why. I'm sure it will happen. It will come upon all of us. Why do we live in our memories instead of keeping ourselves open to the world?

DR: **Perhaps you can talk a little bit about how Daisy feels as she begins to move towards the end of her own life.**

CS: Yes. It was an interesting book for me to write in that from that point of view – aging. Myself I'm past the middle of my life. I'm 58 years old and I'm beginning to look around and thinking, you know, in ten years I'm going to be a much older woman. But by the time Daisy is in her 50s I'm only halfway through the book. It shocked me a little because I had laid out this book in ten chapters and it struck me for the first time how much of our life is spent being old, how little of

our life is spent being young. And I didn't know how to write from the point of view of an older woman. Of course I had my mother, I had my mother-in-law, I had friends who are older, I have a woman I'm in correspondence with in London, Ontario – I've never actually met her. I'm interested in the life of older people but to get it just right, to get it to feel right, to sound authentic I don't know. You don't know if you've hit the right tone, the right chord. I suppose I won't know until I'm there.

DR: **What kinds of comments are you getting from readers because I know their comments are very important to you?**

CS: I get a lot of comments from people my own age who say I buy this book for my mother. Sometimes I think oh dear, is this a good idea? Because in some ways this book is a sad book. It's about a woman who doesn't ever quite come to terms with her own life, who feels at the end that she has somehow not fully satisfied. She hasn't accomplished maybe what she might have. So I'm not quite sure but I have heard from a few older people yes. Well they've been very nice letters and these people have said very good things to me.

DR: **The notion of ordinary somehow gets equated unsuccessful.**

CS: Yes.

DR: **Is Daisy's life a successful life?**

CS: I've asked myself that same question. At the end of our lives I guess we all have to say well what does success mean? Does it mean that I held a powerful job during a long piece of my life or does it mean I brought up three children? I survived the life I was born into I only had one nervous breakdown and otherwise I kept myself on a fairly easy plane. I was kind to others. Daisy, of course, belongs to the generation where one is always asked to think of others, to be courteous at all times. Is this a good thing? Maybe she might have been discourteous to others and thought only of herself. She didn't do that. It's hard to say what is a successful life. I think I would have to say – someone referred to her in a review the other day as the new kind of heroine. I have to say the word heroine hadn't occurred to me. I see her as a kind un-heroine – not quite an anti-heroine – but I do see something heroic in her life.

DR: **Maybe it's the word 'heroine' and its relationship to the word 'hero' that somehow you reject more than the characterization.**

CS: Yes. Yes. A new definition of heroine is perhaps what we need. Or perhaps a new word altogether.

DR: **A new word. 885-8850. We'll take your calls between now and the late half of the hour. Emily you're on the air.**

EMILY: I just wanted to talk about your conversation that you had a bit earlier about women's books. As a young woman, as a girl, I never got books that were written by women because I knew women didn't have any fun. Women didn't write exciting stories. Now I read virtually nothing but women's stories.

DR: You're playing catch up.

EMILY: Yes. I'm playing catch up. Because women are such exciting people to me at my age and I'm now 71. So it's just such a reverse for me and I think that we've got some work to do even yet today with our young women and not seeing women as these exciting people that they are. So that's all I have to say.

DR: Emily thanks for your call. Carol do you want to comment?

CS:

Yes. I'm very interested in your comments and I have to say that the books that I read in school, the great classics of our time – all of them by men of course – yes I felt locked out of that tradition. I felt locked out of those books. I knew something was wrong but I didn't know what it was that was wrong for a long time. I did have, of course, my home library – the library of my parents who were not literary people at all but just ordinary people, whatever that means. What I had were their old schoolbooks or their old books that they read as children. For example books, all those Horatio Alger books that we're told were so awful all about success and so on, very pedantic. On the other hand I loved them. I have to say I loved them. I thought that was the way the world was you know? Half of the universe instructing the other half in behaviour. But I had a few of my mother's old books too. One was Anne of Green Gables. It's a book that meant an enormous amount to my mother and I can see why because Anne – many people of course have read these but they're still.... My daughters read them. Now they are reading them to their children. The Anne books – Anne Shirley transformed her society in a way that Tom Sawyer didn't. Tom Sawyer capitulated to a society but Anne reached out and touched all those around her. She was a woman of strength. Another book I remember of my mother's that I also loved – in fact it's rather a terrible book – called *Girl of the Limberlost*, Gene Stratton-Porter. Again it's about a woman – it's sort of an interesting mother/daughter situation. Terribly sentimental and completely unrealistic but it had something for women. And that book, I can hardly believe it, is still in print. So there were a number of these books but they seemed to me growing up as anomalies. They didn't fit in with the rest of the pattern at all. Now I have to say I read mainly women's books because at the moment, at this time in our history, women seem to be getting it right.

DR: Getting what right?

CS: The way we live. There was a time – my early novels were sometimes talked about as being 'domestic' novels. This is the novels I wrote in the 70s. Now I think we've all decided that, in fact, everyone in the world has a domestic life and somehow this has to enter into our literature.

DR: Daisy observes that it seems that men are uniquely honoured by the stories that erupt in their lives whereas women are more likely to be smothered. What does that mean?

CS: I think women.... Well there's a kind of heroic element that touches all men's stories whereas I think women get oppressed by the stories. They get stigmatized by them. They become so attached to them that they can't be separated from there. Oh there goes the woman who gave birth to that rather precocious boy. There goes the woman whose husband fell out of a window on her honeymoon. So that they become, I supposed, stitched to their stories. Men are simply it seems to me enhanced, lit up by whatever happens to them.

DR: Rena you're on the air.

RENA: I'm a longtime listener of your show and I'm really enjoying the discussion of this novel.

DR: **Good. Thank you.**

RENA: I teach WAMU or ETA on-line doing things at home. I'm usually interested in most of the topics that you and Derek discuss and I also find that even those topics I initially think I might not be interested in are fascinating and I learn about books or subjects I might never know about otherwise. I look forward to reading this book and I want to thank you for your wonderful show that keeps us who are working at home sane and in touch.

DR: **Oh Rena that's lovely to hear. I thank you for being part of the audience that calls with thoughtful comments and, at times questions and, at times, comments and I assure you that you have a treat in store for you if you go out and seek *The Stone Diaries*.**

RENA: Oh thank you. I am a first-time caller and I got my nerve up to call.

DR: **I'm glad you did. All right. Thanks a lot. We have some lines open now if you would like to join us. 885-8850. You talked in an interview that you did recently about your manner of writing and your transition to personal computers and the like and what happened to you in the process. Talk about that.**

CS: Like our last caller I was a stay at home mother and I did my writing at home. The first novel I wrote on a portable typewriter – a non-electrical portable typewriter. It seems incredible now. Then I acquired a second-hand electric typewriter and then I acquired one of those IBM Ballistic affairs which I thought was the last word in technology. I thought I had finally gone as far as I could. I was rather late as a writer coming into the computer world. When I did I, of course, like everyone else just fell in love with this little machine that smiled at me every morning and wished me a good morning.

DR: **I know the feeling well.**

CS: But it had an effect on me which I think is a fairly common effect. I started to write longer and longer and longer. I've never had a lot of editing done on my books but when I finished this book – which is called *The Republic of Love* – my editor was obliged to take out 125 pages. I'm grateful to her. She did it with enormous tact. They were pages that should have come out. But it is very easy when you have this magnificent little machine to just add you know one more phrase, one more clause. Of course I did not give up my machine for the next novel but I did learn to exercise some restraint.

DR: **So a new kind of discipline is what was apparently called for then.**

CS: Yes.

DR: **How did you deal with your editor in that situation? You say she was very kind and tactful but nevertheless what was going on in you?**

CS: I don't live of course in New York. I don't live anywhere near my editor. So everything is done over the phone or through the mail. She just suggested two long, long places to cut out – totally irrelevant stories, self-indulgence of the worst kind – and then she suggested about 1,000 little places where I could give the book a bit of a haircut. She suggested them and they were good suggestions. I took most of them. It was heartbreaking for a moment to take out these words but the text simply closed over the ellipses perfectly. She's a remarkably talented editor.

DR: **The Diane Rehm show is made possible in part by the Bicycle Exchange now with 9 area locations including the New Bikes USA Superstore in the Festival at Muddy Branch in Gatorsburg..... Hi Rita you're on the air.**

RITA: Hi. I heard you say *Girl of the Limberlost* was one of your mother's favourite books. I couldn't believe it because my mother had, for years, a tattered copy of this and read it and reread it. It was one of the last books she read before she died. I couldn't believe – I thought it was just a book that existed in limbo and that nobody else had ever heard of it. I thought it was just extraordinary.

CS: Thank you for calling. I'm glad to hear someone say this, that their mother had a copy as well.

DR: **All right Rita. Thanks for your call.**

RITA: Well I hope to be a writer some day too.

DR: **Oh really?**

RITA: As a stay at home mother whose children have gone away sometimes.

DR: **Have you made a stab at it?**

RITA: Well, I've learned how to use a computer for one thing and I've written some things which will be more very soon.

DR: **Good luck.**

RITA: Thank you very much. Bye.

DR: **You were actually born here in the States.**

CS: I was born in Chicago – Oak Park, Illinois – and I lived there until I was married at age 22 and I married a Canadian and immigrated on my honeymoon. I've lived in Canada ever since.

DR: **So your identity? I mean....**

CS: A mixed identity, of course. I've got a foot in both countries, plenty of family here in the States. I

do get back – never as often as I'd like. This year I'm living in Berkley, California on sabbatical.

DR: Oh I see. Now talk about the changed status that perhaps you feel, perhaps you don't feel as a result of the kind of attention you're now getting. I mean there aren't many people who can say that their books were nominated for the Booker Prize.

CS: How has it changed my life? You know it doesn't change it very much. I suppose that it does. You have a sense that there are some readers out there – and maybe more than there used to be – who say, in effect, you are doing okay. You can go on doing what you're doing. It's all right. And women need this very much. They need this permission given to them.

DR: More than men?

CS: I think so because at least when I was a young mother writing at home I sometimes had the feeling that I was stealing time in order to write my books – stealing time from my family. You know I could have been baking cookies for the kids or something instead of up there with my little typewriter. This is why I think it is so important for women writers to get that first publication or that first grant, something that tells them what you're doing is valuable, you can go on doing this. I suppose having a successful career in writing does allow you to say I'm a writer and this is what I do. I need a little place where I can do this but I don't need much more. So most of the time I think that being successful or not – what you're doing is you're going into a little room and you're shutting the door and you're sitting there and that's where you really live.

DR: Does the family, for the most part, support you and have they supported you right along or was it at some point not only your feeling that maybe you should have been baking cookies that they're feeling as well?

CS: Oh no I don't think so. I think this is just sort of a holdover from the 50s, *The Ladies' Home Journal* period that I felt that I should be baking cookies and I guess I did bake quite a few million of them. Actually I didn't start writing until they were all in school. And I might say that to your listeners out there who have young children. Eventually children really do go to school. I found, very gradually, that I had a little more time every year to devote to writing. The first novel I wrote entirely between 11:00 – 12:00 every day just before the kids came home for lunch and I very seldom got any more time during the day to get back to that.

DR: So did you just persevere and...?

CS: Well I set myself a little task which was to write two pages a day. Now it takes me all day to write two pages. Then I could squeeze it into that one hour.

DR: And what about that first application? That first manuscript that went out and how much of your own heart and soul were attached to it?

CS: Well the first manuscript that went out came back. It was never published. It was a novel that I think of now as my apprenticeship novel. I sent it to three publishers – totally unsuitable publishers by the way. I knew nothing about where to send things. But they all sent me lovely rejection letters and they all gave me some advice and they each had the same advice for me. So I was encouraged by this.

DR: What was the advice?

CS: The advice was what I had done wrong was I had separated myself from my characters too much, that I was a kind puppet master dangling these characters on strings, that I had to get inside the head of the characters. So when I started the next novel which I did immediately, I took that advice to heart and I tried to get closer in. The next novel was published right away. Again it was one that I wrote trying to squeeze in this time while the children were at school. The children have always been very interested in my writing and so has my husband, although he's not a reader of fiction. He's a scientist and like many scientists he thinks why would someone want to read all this made-up stuff?

DR: Are more of your readers women than men?

CS: I don't know. I wish I knew. I don't know who my readers are in a sense. I suspect, of course, that more of them are women because, for one thing, women just read more novels than men do. I think that publishers have statistics on this.

DR: Cheryl you're on the air.

CHER: Hi I just wondered if Margaret Laurence was someone that influenced you in any way, from the beginning when you first mentioned.... From the first part of the conversation I thought of Margaret Laurence even with the images of the stone.

CS: Margaret Laurence – for those listeners who don't know Margaret Laurence. Everyone knows Margaret Atwood but Margaret Laurence is very dear to the hearts of Canadian readers.

CHER: I knew that even though I was in Vermont when I discovered her.

CS: She was one of the first, I think, women writers. She published in the late 50s and 60s and she had the courage to write about people who lived in rural Canada and to get underneath those lives. A book called *The Stone Angel* was her first novel. She had written some short stories before then. But it is a novel that sort of knocked my socks off I guess.

CHER: Okay. That's interesting because I think of that and you and maybe we can give her another pitch because I know she's dead now but she was just wonderful.

CS: Yes. She's a wonderful novelist. I think people haven't talked enough about the language she used in her writing which has meant a great deal to me.

CHER: Oh that's wonderful to hear. Well thank you. I'm going to get your book as well. And I love you Diane Rehm. That's a given.

DR: All right. Thanks. Bye bye. Hi Linda you're on the air.

LINDA: Good morning. I'm very intrigued by your dialogue as always, particularly in your discussions

with each other regarding women writers and their ability to deal with the issues of satisfaction and success in terms of women's ability to recognize their own. When you asked the author, Diane, about how she felt about being a nominee for the Booker Award and her first reaction wasn't "I felt so satisfied". I felt that was very telling and I would love to hear you two reflect on your own observations about these issues and women's identities.

CS: Now I've kind of lost track of the time the last few days, but I was in Chicago to give a reading I think three days ago and at the reading were seven of my old high school girlfriends. We all went out for dinner afterwards and had a wonderful time. I had hoped that it would be just as it always used to be – we've always kept in touch and we're close to each other - and they wouldn't suddenly think here's this used to be a friend of ours and now she's a writer and she was on public radio this morning and so on. But it was just as it was always was. We talked about... Well we talked about our memories, about our children, about our lives and we didn't talk about being successful or unsuccessful in any of the terms that these topics are usually given.

DR: **And in that sense do you think that success for a male is different from success for a female and how it is has manifested?**

CS: I don't know. If we look back on our lives, the moments that we preserve in that preserving gel of memory are very different from the ones we expected to preserve. You know they might be very small things like well, I think of sort of sitting on a beach and having a butterfly land on my knee, for example.

DR: **Carol Shields and her newest novel is called *The Stone Diaries*. She will be reading and signing at Chapter's Book Store at 1512 Kay Street tonight at 7:00. Thank you so much for being here. It was a pleasure to talk with you.**

CS: Thank you so much Diane.