

Men and Women, Forever Misaligned

New York Times

March 27, 1994, Sunday, Late Edition - Final

Review by Jay Parini;

THE STONE DIARIES

CAROL SHIELDS, the American-born Canadian novelist and story writer, is often mentioned in the same breath with Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro, and her last novel, "The Republic of Love," attracted a small but enthusiastic band of admirers, myself among them. Last year "The Stone Diaries" was nominated for Britain's Booker Prize and acclaimed by many reviewers there. Now it has been published here, and it deserves our fullest attention.

The novel provides, glancingly, a panorama of 20th-century life in North America. Written in diary format, it traces the life of one seemingly unremarkable woman: Daisy Goodwill Flett, who is born in 1905 and lives into the 1990's. "The Stone Diaries" includes an elaborate family tree of the sort usually found in biographies as well as eight pages of family photographs. Surveying the faces in these photos of Ms. Shields's sharply drawn characters, the reader naturally wonders: are these "real" people or the made-up kind?

The question soon becomes irrelevant: indeed, the novel willfully smudges the already blurred distinctions between fact and fiction. "When we say a thing or an event is real, never mind how suspect it sounds, we honor it," writes one of Ms. Shields's several diarists. "But when a thing is made up -- regardless of how true and just it seems -- we turn up our noses. That's the age we live in. The documentary age."

So the novelist inserts her tongue deeply into her cheek and documents everything. But unlike the historian, who must cling to the enameled outer layer of reality, Ms. Shields plunges into the interior life of her characters with all the ferocity of a major novelist. As her readers, we are allowed to peer into the hearts of Daisy Flett and her family with gaudy indiscretion, and this voyeurism is at times unsettling. Humankind, as T. S. Eliot noted, cannot bear very much reality.

Poor Daisy, our hapless flower, arrives in this world in the least hospitable of circumstances. Her mother, the absurdly fat Mercy Stone, expires at the moment of Daisy's birth. Before she does, however, there is plenty of time for Ms. Shields to offer a startling portrait of the erotic life of Mercy and her uxorious husband, Cuyler Goodwill. He is a stone mason (all puns are probably intentional) whose creative energies were focused on his profession until he was 26, when he stunned the small Manitoba community (and himself) by marrying an obese orphan. He revels in Mercy's vast regions of pink flesh: "He is not repelled by the trembling generosity of her arms and thighs and breasts, not at all; he wants to bury himself in her exalting abundance, as though, deprived all his life of flesh, he will now never get enough. He knows that without the comfort of Mercy Stone's lavish body he would never have learned to feel the reality of the world or understand the particularities of sense and reflection that others have taken as their right."

Here, as in her previous fiction, Ms. Shields writes with an almost painfully attuned ear for the nuances of language and the way they attach to feelings and probe the most delicate layers of human consciousness. Her words ring like stones in a brook, chilled and perfected; the syntax rushes like water, tumbling with the slight forward tilt that makes for narrative. The reader is caught in whirlpools and eddies, swirled, then launched farther downstream.

After her mother's death, Daisy is adopted by a neighbor, Clarentine Flett, who is about to leave her husband, Magnus, a dour immigrant from the Orkney Islands. Clarentine moves

with the infant Daisy to live with her son Barker in Winnipeg, where a cozy family group is established. Barker becomes one of the major figures in Daisy's life: guardian, then -- after a lapse of decades -- husband. A botanist, he is obsessed with "the western lady's-slipper, genus *Cypripedium*," thus sublimating his most primitive urges. The intensity of his gaze on this particular organism summons other complex longings, and botanical metaphors abound as the author lets one narrative strand lengthen and twine with others.

Cuyler Goodwill eventually flees Canada and the memory of his poor dead Mercy to Bloomington, Ind., where his talents as a stone cutter are in demand. He becomes a pillar of the community and a moderately wealthy man. The course of his life is summarized by his daughter: "In his 20's he was a captive of Eros, in his 30's he belonged to God, and, still later, to Art. Now, in his 50's, he champions Commerce." He is eloquent if somewhat voluble, given to saying things like, "The miracle of stone is that a rigid, inert mass can be lifted out of the ground and given wings." We follow his life tangentially through his daughter's eyes, right up to the splendid scene of his death beside a lake in spring.

As he lies "on a patch of Indiana grass like a window screen about to be rinsed off by the garden hose," he comes to a lovely sense of his place in the scheme of creation. In a touching moment, he fights through the gauze of a failing memory to recall the name of his beloved Mercy, at last finding it. "Ah, Mercy," he says to himself. "Mercy, hold me in your soft arms, cover me with your body, keep me warm."

The diaries leap from decade to decade, tracing the stages of Daisy's life: her first, tragic marriage to a boy from Bloomington, her second marriage to her old guardian, Barker, and the birth of her children. The fact that her life fits the familiar contours is, somehow, refreshing; Daisy is Everywoman, and her crises are the normal ones. "The real troubles in this world tend to settle on the misalignment between men and women," the diarist tells us as she discovers something like love with Barker Flett. Daisy's own "misalignment," in particular, is evoked with inspired circumspection, not only from her own point of view but from others' as well.

Barker, who has been turned into a "voyeur in his own life" after "decades of parched solitude," meditates on his relationship to Daisy as they fall asleep:

"Is this what love is, he wonders, this substance that lies so pressingly between them, so neutral in color yet so palpable it need never be mentioned? Or is love something less, something slippery and odorless, a transparent gas riding through the world on the back of a breeze, or else -- and this is what he more and more believes -- just a word trying to remember another word."

The novel ends with the death of Daisy as images are torn from a long life and pinned to the spinning wheel of her mind. Fragments of overheard conversation cross the page -- disembodied, eerily displaced; lost recipes, bits of official paper, shopping lists, book titles: the disjecta membra of a life float by. Slipping in and out of a coma toward the end, she begins to imagine her own extinction: "You might say that she breathed it into existence, then fell in love with it."

There is little in the way of conventional plot here, but its absence does nothing to diminish the narrative compulsion of this novel. Carol Shields has explored the mysteries of life with abandon, taking unusual risks along the way. "The Stone Diaries" reminds us again why literature matters.

- Jay Parini