

UNLESS: A NOVEL - 2002

I like to think of this book on these four little legs: this idea of mothers and children; the idea of writers and readers – I wanted to talk about the writing process; I wanted to talk about goodness; and then I wanted to talk about men and women – this gender issue, which interests me so much and has actually been a part of every book I've written. I think I am always writing about this.

Carol Shields from the interview "Ideas of Goodness" with Eleanor Wachtel, published in *Random Illuminations, Conversations with Carol Shields*

Unless is about a writer, Reta Winters, a middle-aged novelist, mother, and translator who lives in a pastoral town just outside Toronto. Reta lives a happy and successful life until her eldest daughter, Norah, suddenly and inexplicably abandons family, boyfriend, and university to sit, cross legged and silent, begging on the northeast corner of Bloor and Bathurst wearing a sign that reads only "Goodness".

When *Unless* was published Carol Shields was in her mid-60's. She and Don had retired to Victoria and were living in their wonderful Georgian home with sunlight streaming in from all sides warming the rooms filled with books and clocks, collected art and treasures from their life together, her children grown and leading successful lives, all with children of their own. But, like Reta Winters in *Unless*, Carol was coping with her own pain and sense of loss. And yet there was joy to be found, and shared, in even the smallest of things. Carol and Don came into our lives the year before. We were neighbours, had mutual friends, enjoyed the evenings when they would walk down our shared "country lane" and join us at our table for a meal and conversation (always preceded by Carol taking the time to really look at the table and how it was set), were privileged to attend their famous Christmas parties and meet their many, many friends. I will be forever grateful for the time we had with Carol, I only wish it could have been longer.

Perhaps *Unless* grew from several events around the beginning of 1999. At the end of 1998, Carol was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer with the devastating prognosis of living perhaps only three years. The novel, which was to become her last, was planned, likely the "four little legs" mentioned above already in place. In early 1999 she was asked to write a short biography of Jane Austen for the Penguin Lives series and she received a Guggenheim Fellowship which allowed her to plan a sabbatical leave to write the novel. The decision was made to take the sabbatical in her beloved England so that research for the biography would be close at hand.

Many other events around that time no doubt influenced the direction *Unless* would take but one that had a profound effect on Carol was that neighbours in Winnipeg "lost" one of their daughters to the streets. While the story eventually had a positive resolution, the torment suffered by the family until that happened was very real and life altering.

I found the story of Reta's daughter Norah compelling. We live in the downtown core of Victoria now and are surrounded by constant reminders of the pain and problems caused by homelessness, substance abuse and mental illness and each person on the street has his or her own story. Sometimes we learn the story, most often we do not. We learn to live with the reality, to cope or deny or help, each in our own way, as did Norah, as did Reta and each member of her family.

But *Unless* is much more than the story of Norah. If we look at Carol's "four little legs" in the quote above, we understand how much there is to discover and to learn in this novel. The *New Statesman* (U.K.) says *Unless* "is a formidable meditation on reality: it takes the vessel of fiction in its hands and hurls it to the floor. Shields' unambiguous prose is here put to the service of her intellectual daring and the result is a book that speaks without pretension about its strange and singular subject: the relationship between women and culture, the nature of artistic endeavour, and the hostility of female truth to representations of itself...Shields has produced a very, very clever book about motherhood, honour, art, language and love. It is a lament, a punch in the face, an embrace."

Unless is also a novel about writers and writing and novels. In her interview Eleanor Wachtel asks Carol "Has it been liberating to enter, as you say, these 'incestuous waters'? As your character Reta puts it, 'to write about a woman writing'?" Carol replies "Yes, these are incestuous waters, to write about a woman writing about a woman writing, yes. I feel that these are all the things a writer shouldn't do, but, just for once, I'm going to allow myself to do it."

Earlier in the interview Carol has said "I know writers shouldn't write about writers. The world is full of other people who are perfectly interesting;.....But when it came right down to it, I had this novel to write and I wanted to write about what was terribly interesting to me, and that was writing a novel: how you write a novel, how you *make* a novel. I always think of it as novel making. And so I wanted this woman to be a novel maker....." I think we are all glad she made that decision. I also enjoyed immensely the fact that Reta was a letter writer. We have all wanted to write a letter to express our outrage. Reta wrote wonderful letters of outrage that she never sent but we all understood that it was the expression that was important and cheered her on.

The third leg is Carol's desire to talk about goodness. This discussion includes talking about happiness. What is goodness, what is happiness? Must we do good to be happy? Jane Urquhart wrote in *The Globe and Mail* "Brilliant, humane and deeply satisfying.... It is part of Shields's genius that she so often offers up humour and compassion on the same plate -- sometimes spiced with a subtle political comment or two. But, I repeat, this is only a part of her genius. The true gift that she gives us is that of her enormous wisdom, a wisdom that is achingly apparent in this amazing combination of darkness and light, humour and pathos called *Unless*. The fact that there are no clear answers to the questions that surround the nature of goodness, happiness, sorrow, does not mean that these conditions should remain unexamined. It is examinations of this kind that enhance life itself. And who better than this author to show us where to look, what to pay attention to? What better guide than a book like *Unless*, and what better companion than Carol Shields?"

And then there is the fourth leg, the gender issue. *Unless* has been called Carol's most overtly feminist book, a statement with which she readily agreed. Certainly Reta tries to work through the issues as she tries to make sense of Norah's behaviour. Her indignation spills over in her letters, in her conversations with her friends, in her reaction to her new editor's suggestion upon reading a draft of her new book is that the central character should be Ramon rather than Alicia. In the "Ideas of Goodness" interview, Carol replies to a question about writing such a feminist book right now by saying "I didn't catch up to the women's movement until the eighties, but I've been a part of it in a small way ever since. I spend a lot of my time thinking about it and a lot of my time counting, counting how many men are mentioned, say, on the front page of the newspaper as against how many women, counting men in photographs of some new committee, counting members of Parliament ". At the same time, Carol wrote about interesting men in all her books. In an interview with bookreporter.com May 10, 2002 we find this exchange:

BRC: There's a gratifying amount of feminist outrage in *UNLESS* as well as a very happy marriage. There's no logical reason that the two should be incompatible, but certainly their coexistence can create tension. Can you talk about the difficulty (or not) of reconciling them?

CS: I do love good men, and have had a number of them in my life. Men deserve novelistic space. And good marriages --- how rare are they --- can help us from blaming men. I do not believe that men wake up every morning and think: how can I oppress women today? They are as caught up as we are in our assigned roles --- but they have power and we don't.

Unless did not end with the publication of the book. Together with her youngest daughter Sara, Carol began work on a screenplay based on the novel. If you were lucky enough to have been in Toronto or Vancouver or Victoria and had the opportunity to see the play on stage in 2005, to see Nicola Cavendish bring Reta Winters to life, you know that Carol Shields lives on.

At one point in her interview discussion with Eleanor Wachtel, Carol says “I suppose I don't believe in endings really.” I'd like to think that Carol will be with us for a long time, in her books, in our minds, and in our hearts. We have much to learn from reading and rereading her work. I liked these two quotes. Together they give the sense that for *Unless* and for Carol there is no ending.

“Reading the book [*Unless*] is like having an intimate conversation with an old friend....Funny and sad, comic and poignant all at the same time, *Unless* is the continuation of a conversation that has been ongoing among women for generations.” -- *The Chronicle-Herald* (Halifax)

“A novel for the ages.... *Unless* is the work of a master writer at the peak of her powers.... *Unless* has a sense of the timeless about it, a sense that it will be read with as much eagerness 100 years from now as it will be today.” -- *Vancouver Sun*

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