

## LOS ANGELES TIMES

### The Goodbye Girl

By Jane Ciabattari

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"Unless," Carol Shields' 10th novel, is a thing of beauty—lucidly written, artfully ordered, riddled with riddles and undergirded with dark layers of philosophical meditations upon the relative value of art, the realistic possibilities for women "who want only to be fully human" and the nature of goodness, that enduring human dilemma also worked thoroughly by Saul Bellow. What is goodness? How can goodness survive in the face of evil? How should a good woman—or man—live?

Shields, who was brought up in Oak Park, Ill...has spent her adult life in Canada, where she raised five children and taught literature before beginning her literary career with the novel "Small Ceremonies," published when she was 40.

This makes her that rare creature, a writer eligible for American as well as British and Canadian literary prizes. She has won many, including a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award for "The Stone Diaries," (1994), the lyrical and profound "biography" of Daisy Stone Goodwill, an Everywoman whose life spans the tumultuous 20th century, and Britain's Orange Prize for "Larry's Party," her 1997 novel about an "ordinary" man with two ex-wives, a teenage son and a growing sense of his own vulnerabilities ("Larry Weller stars in his own life movie, but in no one else's. This is hurtful to admit, but true").

Shields knows her way around postmodern conceits. "Unless" is a novel about a woman who is writing a novel about a woman who writes. Shields plays with fact and fiction, weaving in events such as the contested U.S. election of 2000, then gently putting them in their place ("People enter and exit the world; that's the real news"). Her emphasis is on emotional depth as well as dazzling wordplay.

"Novels help us turn down the volume of our own interior 'discourse,' but unless they can provide an alternative, hopeful course, they're just so much narrative crumble," muses Reta Winters, the novel's narrator. "Unless you're lucky, unless you're healthy, fertile, unless you're loved and fed, unless you're clear about your sexual direction, unless you're offered what others are offered, you go down in the darkness, down to despair."

Winters, nee Summer, has great self-awareness and panache. The Orangetown, Ontario, resident is a translator of Danielle Westerman, an octogenarian French-born poet. She is also an editor, scholar and novelist (author of "My Thyme Is Up," a light romantic comedy), a doctor's wife and the mother of three teenage daughters, the eldest of whom has dropped out of college to sit cross-legged on a Toronto street corner with a begging bowl in her lap and a cardboard sign on her chest printed with the word "GOODNESS."

Her daughter's actions baffle Winters, plunging her into a period of great unhappiness and loss. She struggles to understand what has happened and why Norah has cut her loved ones out of her life. "Norah seems stung by the tang of misery, nineteen years old, with something violent and needful beating in her brain," Winters muses. "It's like a soft tumor, but exceptionally aggressive. Its tentacles have entered all the quadrants of her consciousness. This invasion happened fast, when no one was looking."

Winters' other daughters are suffering, too—Natalie is having trouble sleeping, Chris is falling behind in math. They spend Saturdays sitting on the corner with their sister, but as months pass, they give it up and get on with soccer and other activities. Winters and Tom, her husband, consult a psychiatrist who counsels “non-interference” and suggests that Norah is giving herself “the gift of freedom.” While Tom looks into whether Norah has suffered some sort of trauma, Reta speculates that she has begun to perceive the limits of her gender. “A deterioration has occurred to the fabric of the world, the world that does not belong to her as she has been told.”

Winters is comforted by three women friends she meets weekly for coffee. They discuss acts of goodness as ethical choices—what about the newspaper image of a woman giving birth in a tree during a flood in Mozambique—“What did we do about that? Did we transform our shock into goodness?” one of them asks. Another mentions the Muslim woman who set herself on fire in downtown Toronto. “Someone did try to help her. Someone tried to beat out the flames. A woman.” They worry that Westerman is right, that women are doomed to “goodness but not greatness.”

Perhaps, Winters thinks, her daughter is pursuing “a process of self-extinction” that parallels Westerman's theory that “inversion is the tactic of the powerless, a retreat from society that borders on the catatonic.” She considers Westerman's lifework: “What does her shelf of books amount to, what force have these books had upon the world?” She thinks about the books her daughters read in school. “Imagine someone writing a play called “Death of a Salewoman.”

Meanwhile, Winters is at work on a sequel to her novel. One deliciously tart element in “Unless” is a satiric romp through a series of set pieces from a writer's life: The author interview, in which a book columnist asks hideously invasive questions about her daughter (“he was the barking terrier, going at [my] ankles”), then allows her to pick up the tab, confiding that, like most journalists, he is underpaid; the book-signing (“My impulse was to apologize for not being younger and more adorable, like Alicia in my novel”); the winning of the Offenden prize, which damns her to minor status by honoring accessibility (“A beginning, a middle and an ending...is that too much to ask?” is its motto); and the encounter with the boorish young editor who wants her to reframe the sequel with a male protagonist—under a male pseudonym—because, she realizes, he can't imagine a woman being the moral center of a novel or a female author writing a serious book.

As Winters struggles through this thicket of despair and comes to hard-won insights about her daughter's enigmatic behavior and her own place in the world, Shields carries us into a moment of illumination not unlike the ending Winters visualizes for her novel: “gathering together of all the characters into a framed operatic circle of consolation and ecstasy, backlit with fiber-optic gold, just for a moment on the second-to-last page, just for an atomic particle of time.”

Like Winters, Shields has the wisdom to know that in art, as in life, this harmonious design will quickly be supplanted. “We only appear to be rooted in time,” she writes. “Everywhere, if you listen closely, the spitting fuse of the future is crackling.”

In this consummately artistic and poignant novel, Shields touches gently upon some of life's harshest surprises, acknowledges the fleetingness of happiness and reminds us how precious life is.

**- Jane Ciabattari**