

***Peter Czowski talks with Carol Shields on CBC Radio
about *The Orange Fish****

PG: The characters in *The Orange Fish*, a new collection of short fiction by the Winnipeg author Carol Shields are a disparate group but they share a certain trait. They tend to be ordinary people, powerless, maybe a little afraid. One woman hopes to reduce life's complexities by posting on her fridge an encouraging slogan. Another woman, a mother, would rather not know about her son's amputated leg. They're survivors whose survival tactics are very much at the heart of Carol Shields' fiction and I'm happy to welcome Carol Shields now. Good morning.

CS: Good morning.

PG: Was that a fair summary of what you're getting at in this book?

CS: Yes. I am very happy with your summary I have to say.

PG: I didn't do it all myself so I'm even happier with it.

CS: Yes, survival. Yes.

PG: Can we talk about *Orange* for a moment and then we'll talk about survival?

CS: Yes.

PG: I didn't start counting – I had to read this in page strips which is a nuisance when you want to read in bed so I didn't do as good a job as I may have. But there are so many orange references in every story I wondered is there an orange in every story?

CS: I have no idea. You mean you find this right through the whole book?

PG: Well there's an orange fish, an orange sun, an orange plastic bag, an orange subway pass, orange hair, orange....

CS: Good Lord. Good Lord. This is operating unconsciously and I didn't even know it. I have an orange fixation. The title story is of course *The Orange Fish* certainly is deliberate but I must have these colours floating through my brain. No, no. *The Orange Fish* came about because I actually own – I have to confess – I own a picture called *The Orange Fish* which I've had for years and I love it.

PG: **One of a limited edition?**

CS: Yes it is.

PG: **Do the other people that own the same print do they have regular meetings and talk to one another about its symbolism and its importance?**

CS: No they don't. I am #4 out of 20 and I look at this every morning and for years I've thought who are the other owners and wouldn't it be wonderful if we could have a big party and talk about it.

PG: **So you made it all up.**

CS: I made it all up I'm afraid. Well you know that's what we do.

PG: **You writers?**

CS: We writers, yes.

PG: **When I see survival going through so many of the books – and I probed about the orange and found it wasn't there – but it intrigues me what is at the heart of a collection of short fiction or a collection stories? When a writer at your stage offers the world a collection of work, is it all one work or is here's some stuff I've been doing recently or what?**

CS: I think it's not for everybody but it was for me. I sat down – or I went away actually for one year – and I wanted to write a number of short stories. So I suppose what pulled them together and is the only thing I can think of, is the time in which I wrote them. Those

were the things I was thinking about during that particular year. Of course I guess one doesn't sit down and think I'm going to write about this theme or that theme but you find yourself writing about something and there is a kind of unifying sense I suppose.

PG: **So you don't sit down with the first four stories and say ah, I see I'm writing about survival here. What else do I think about that? You just write some more and see where you go yourself?**

CS: Yes, yes. In fact what happens – or what very fortunately happened – with this book. As I was in the middle of one story the idea for the second story rose up of course and wanted to be written. It happened very nicely right through the year for me.

PG: **I can't imagine your life. I can't imagine your life....**

CS: Oh why not? Why can't you?

PG: **Well you teach. You have five – they're not children any more – but you have five offspring. Presumably you run a household and live a full life and do all of those other things and then you're churning out lectures. You're giving the world writerly contributions and then you take off for a year and you went to where Albania and Portugal?**

CS: Paris really.

PG: **What? Are you just sitting up in the old garret and typing things out.**

CS: You know whenever I read the little bios on my book jackets I always think what an interesting life this woman has. Who is she? It always sounds better on the book jacket. The reality of is of course is I only teach part-time, my children are grown up....

PG: **Which means, of course, that you have nothing to do with them any more?**

CS: Of course, of course. They're out of my life. Yes. So that I do in a sense have a lot of time for writing these days than I certainly did 15 years ago although I'm no more productive. It's a curious thing. You would think I would be much more.

PG:

Take me with you to your life in Paris as you're writing these and tell me what you reflect as you think about that, what you reflect about the ability to see things at home when you're away from home.

CS:

Yes. It's something that I think a lot about. People who do go away for a year like that it's not the way we want to live forever, but it's a wonderful thing – temporary – to be cut loose from all our responsibilities, our social ties, our work responsibilities. To have that time in which we can approach our writing with a kind of reflective ease that we don't have maybe at home. So every morning I would get up – we've lived in an apartment in the 13th Arrondissement. My husband would go to work and I would sit down at my typewriter and generally what I would do is to retype what I had done the day before. Something always wonderful happens when I do this retyping by the way. It always gets longer. I always find little corners that I want to go into that I hadn't seen the day before. Then I just start thinking from there. Then in the afternoon what I often did was I would go around the corner to a little café and I would have a coffee there and look over what I had written in the morning and work on it again. When I'm home in Winnipeg I don't have that kind of time.

PG:

You don't have the rewrite time? Because you rewrite all the time anyway.

CS:

I do rewrite, yes.

PG:

Can I ask you a very practical question about this because it intrigues me?

CS:

Yes.

PG:

Because you intimated that, certainly when you're away from home, you're still on a typewriter. You haven't gone to these electronic things?

CS:

I have just recently, yes.

PG:

Because I want to know what it does to the process of rewriting. I, too, am a – I was going to say born rewriter – and I notice now switching to the electronic thing it is too easy to rewrite. You don't do that. You don't put page four back in the typewriter and do it again. You don't find those extra corners sometimes and I would infer – you are such a wonderful craftsperson in so much control in your approach. That doesn't come easily. I'm just wondering if you're concerned about that?

CS:

I am concerned about it and because I'm still so new at it I'm waiting to see how that works out. Because, in fact, just what you said it true for me. It is in the labourious retyping where my best ideas come and I may need that. The computer may just be too fast and too easy for me. You need to kind of rev up and that's how you do work. You simply type over an entire page. Now you suffer terrible back pains, it takes you a lot more time, it simply isn't as easy as a nice Macintosh but I may find it's not going to work for me.

PG:

And then the worst thing that happens is somebody phones you up who has just read a paragraph that's absolutely perfect and says, 'my goodness you write so easily' right? That's happened to me.

CS:

Yes, yes, yes. If it reads easily it's often thought that it is written easily.

PG:

Are you scared of old age.

CS:

Yeah. I am a little. Isn't everybody?

PG:

I don't know yet. It pops up from time to time in these stories and sometimes it pops up with kind of devastating clarity.

CS:

Yes, yes. The spectre of old age. I think it is frightening. It's something certainly I'm thinking about these days. I have an elderly parent, I'm getting a lot older myself, I'm seeing friends of my own age with serious illnesses. I suppose I simply am thinking more about it, how to cope with old age. The trade-off we make.

PG:

Tell me about Hazel in the story called Hazel.

CS:

Oh. Well that story did seem to pop out of nowhere. For years whenever I've seen women in stores demonstrating cooking ware I've always wondered what their lives are like. I'm always seduced by them – by the way they talk, by the way they flip pancakes and do everything publicly. It's such a strange sight to come across. I always stand and watch them and I ask myself where do they go at the end of the day? What are their lives really like? So the story starts with an attempt to reimagine what one of these women – what are the conditions of her life? How did she happen to get this job?

PG:

Is she in control of her life?

CS:

I think she is at the end of the story but not, certainly, in the beginning of the story. I think she wouldn't even have understood what that terms means "in control".

PG:

You know I said survival at the beginning. So many of the people in these very disparate stories are in situations where they're sort of not quite content with the way things are going yet not willing to jump over the side and see what would work out that way.

CS:

I think probably you're right. I think most of the compromises we make are very small ones, the way we adjust our life from time-to-time so that we do, perhaps, have some more control over it. But very few people make major changes in their lives. We drift along for a while and perhaps correct the steering occasionally.

PG:

"Correct the steering." You don't have to rewrite that phrase. Now I need to know in the limited time – you grew up in Chicago, right?

CS:

Yes.

PG:

Before you joined our country. Did you ever live in Ernest Hemingway's family's house?

CS:

No, I didn't but my mother actually did.

PG:

Ahhh this is The Code if you're overhearing this conversation as I hope some people are. The Code is a very good story in which characters go into the house of Dr. Hemingway, as he was. Right?

CS:

Yes.

PG:

Is that based on...? That part of that story called Family Secrets is based on family history?

CS:

Just that part. The story – we always had the wonderful story as children. When my mother was a young schoolteacher she came to teach in Chicago and she and three other women boarded in a house in Oak Park, Illinois and it was the house of the Hemingway Family. Of course Ernest Hemingway had not yet produced his first book so of course they had no idea what sort of family they were.

PG:

Was the house badly heated?

CS:

Yes it was.

PG:

Who said that Hemingway's prose that you could read as the prose of a man who grew up in an under heated house. Was it your observation or your mother's?

CS:

That was my own observation. As I say, my mother never thought.... My mother never made a great deal of it but it seemed, of course, a very thrilling connection for us.

PG:

It was really nice to meet you. You and I hadn't talked before and it is a delight to meet you at last. We shall talk again I'm sure. Let me say now only that Carol Shields is the author of, most recently, The Orange Fish that is published by Random House and this evening in Toronto she'll be reading at Harbour Front.