

'Collected Stories': Woman on the Edge

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By ANN HULBERT

CANADIAN women are on the edge of the edge -- this has to give edge to voices." In the spring of 2002, a year before she died of breast cancer, that was how Carol Shields celebrated the bracing literary company she kept in her adopted country. For male writers up north, she observed, there was no "haunting of the big cats: Hawthorne, Twain, Faulkner, Hemingway" (whose birthplace was her own hometown, Oak Park, Ill.). For Shields, surprised by the Pulitzer Prize for "The Stone Diaries," there was an invigorating sisterhood. In Alice Munro, whose praise adorns the back cover of this fat volume, and Margaret Atwood, who contributed the introduction, she found birds of a feather. All born in the 1930's, they took flight at their own pace, which for Shields meant taking her time.

She was 40 in 1976 when her first novel appeared, a housewife with five children and an engineer husband whom she had married right out of college. Over the next 16 years, she produced six novels and two of the three collections of stories -- "Various Miracles" and "Orange Fish" -- in this omnibus edition; the third, "Dressing Up for the Carnival," appeared in 2000. Her trademark characters, kindly but confused souls making their way in a land of "people sugaring off and drinking tea and casting for trout and nodding amicably," won Shields a largely Canadian following. She also earned a kindly reputation herself as a warm-hearted writer from Winnipeg with a fondness for happy endings.

In 1994, "The Stone Diaries," an inventive collage (complete with photographs) chronicling the erratic path of motherless Daisy Flett through most of the 20th century, established Shields on a bigger map. With the unassuming air of her own characters, she carried on as a demure middle sister might. Where Munro (four years her senior) made her mark with a cast of intrepid provincials set on escaping to the big city, and Atwood (her junior by four years) stirred up controversy with her dystopian visions, Shields took the "women's writer" label in stride. She was too busy tending to her tribe of wanderers -- who are neither upstarts nor exiles (if they drift over the border, they often drift back) -- to nurse the indignation she'd felt early on.

Shields's novelistic signature is her sympathetic insight into "the rather lumpy psychic matter of perplexity" felt by her characters. Delving into the lives of obscure people like Daisy, she captures their dazed awareness that they are mysteries to themselves -- yet she also grants them "the cool and curious power of occasionally being able to see the world vividly." In the novel "Larry's Party," which appeared here three years after "The Stone Diaries," her bemused protagonist (a man this time) sums up Shields's own approach to the depiction of middle-aged muddle. "His life, he feels, is not so much a story as a sequence of soundings -- real soundings, bouncing in his inner ear." Do I know how to be (or to like) this person I'm becoming? Larry is far from the only Shields creation to start brooding about that at roughly age 30 -- and never stop.

"Soundings" is perhaps the best term for Shields's short fiction, which has attracted comparatively little notice. Packaged in bulk, these stories can be oddly disappointing, even as they deliver a useful jolt to the domesticated image of Shields the novelist. Read them and you'll recognize -- what else? -- the edge in her voice. Then go back to the novels and what might too readily have registered as sweet mellifluousness, lacking (as Shields writes of Daisy's voice) "a tragic register," will ring a little differently. It's not that the stories are dark; in fact, many of them strive for comic effect. It's that in them Shields insistently presents herself

as a highly self-conscious, skeptical artificer. Despite her lyricism, she wonders whether the narratives all of us spin about our lives are "much of a handrail to hang on to." As one of her characters puts it, they're merely "better than no handrail at all."

The cumulative effect of these 56 stories is to conjure up a very writerly writer honing her technical and theoretical skills and paying little attention to conventions of plot and character. There's not much traditional suspense here; in fact, a surprising number of Shields's stories are fancifully essayistic treatments of items as disparate as keys and dolls, even a bready food called a "flatty." The only name you're likely to remember is Hazel. It's the title of the longest (23 pages) of these notably brief stories, and the one most reminiscent of Shields's novels. In it, she draws a comically poignant portrait of a woman rather like Daisy, a middle-aged widow whose foray into the working world as a kitchen appliance saleswoman leads to the unnerving yet exhilarating discovery that her "whole life is an accident, and by accident she has blundered into the heart of it."

A very different sort of story, "Ilk," is more representative of the detached and arch spirit at the core of the collection. It unfolds at, of all places, an academic symposium on narrativity, where a young expert in postmodern discourse spars cleverly with an older colleague over signifiers and signifieds, even as she tries to comprehend how he can have weathered a tragedy she knows has hit him. The story feels slight and self-consciously worked up, yet that may be part of Shields's point, a way of amplifying her playful rumination on the maze of language. In fables like "Words," "Scenes," "The Metaphor is Dead -- Pass It On," "Block Out," "Collision," "Weather" and "Death of an Artist," she calls attention to the epistemological -- and emotional -- slipperiness of the process of writing, of documenting, of understanding.

The tour de force among these sometimes mannered linguistic musings, called "Absence," is by and about a seasoned woman writer who discovers that the "I" key on her word processor is jammed. Shields doesn't just pull off the virtuoso feat of composing the whole story without a word in it that contains the letter "i." In the process, she also conveys the struggling writer's -- her own -- visceral intimacy with language, "those other, less seemly vowels whose open mouths and unsubtle throats yawned and groaned and showed altogether too much teeth." She doesn't stop until she has shown how, shorn of an "I," the writer's thoughts finally "flowed through every object and every corner of the room" and words came -- and with them, paradoxically, confirmation of that "stubborn self," their source. Shields neither celebrates nor laments: "There was no escape and scarcely any sorrow."

Taken together, Shields's stories risk seeming like curiously weightless exercises -- lightly parodic postmodern turns. Yet this eclectic bundle of fragments also serves to highlight her novelistic gift and heft. When Shields stitches together such vivid patchworks of lives in her longer fiction, she manages to convey the inadequacy, and also the urgent necessity, of words to give us a grip on our discontinuous selves -- and a glimpse into the ultimately unknowable worlds of others. Shields's novels do tend to end happily. But they are also haunting because she has made us aware that "the arabesque of the unfolded self" (a very Shieldsian phrase from "Absence") is always a dance over an abyss.

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