Reading beyond the fridge magnets:
Carol Shields short stories show depths some critics overlooked, says Hermione Lee

Collected Stories of Carol Shields **reviewed by Hermione Lee**
The Guardian
July 3, 2004

In the last years of her life, Carol Shields went on working. She published a remarkable novel, Unless, a volume of stories, and a short, sympathetic life of Jane Austen. The biography dealt feelingly with the frustrations, deprivations and solitude of a great woman writer with no literary confidantes and a restrictive family life. The novel gave the story of a woman writer of light novels, whose daughter had run away from home to adopt an extremist life of "goodness" - either of madness or sainthood. The novelist, Reta Winters, was writing angry, unsent letters about the exclusion and powerlessness of women. Reta had already made an appearance in one of the late stories, "A Scarf", in which she says, of herself and other women writers, "Not one of us was going to get what we wanted." The same phrase recurs in Unless.

These late themes forcibly suggested that the tendency to celebrate Shields as a benign, tender, mild observer of ordinary, minor lives has not made for a perfect fit. There is a good deal of fury and resentment in her work, and she can be sharp and bitter. ("In his late forties he fell in love with another woman. Was she younger than his wife? Yes, of course she was younger.") She was a late-20th-century feminist who saw that women (including women writers) are still being patronised and minoritised all over the place. The very everydayness and ordinariness she was so praised for attending to was also what allowed her to be somewhat condescended to, in spite of the prizes and the good reviews.

And she knows all about condescension. The widow disapproved of by her family and friends because she takes a job demonstrating kitchenware, or the unspeakable Mrs Turner, despised by her neighbours for her sloppy unecological gardening habits and her vulgarity, are among her heroines here.

The story-writer can find "narrative fullness" in "the interstices of nanoseconds" or "nano-people", like the aunt with bad teeth who worked as a receptionist in a piano factory in New Hampshire and died young of cancer. In that story, "Ilk", set at a conference on narrativity, the feminist writer argues that narrative isn't "perpetually thrusting" or "ejaculating", it can be a "little subjunctive cottage by the side of the road". The risk of this attention to the overlooked and everyday is that it can edge into banality and coyness. One of her women characters writes "Happiness is capability" and sticks it on her fridge, and there is a fridge-magnet tendency at times in Shields's work: a penchant for happy endings (which she can satirise in herself, too), for cutely punning titles, folksy parables and comforting adages. These are the perils of investing in the heroism of banality. Of a cruel divorce: '"We won't discuss oven mitts.' Beth said this nicely, with dignity."

Beth is one of several women in the story "Dying for Love" who don't, in fact, die for love, but hang on to the "handrail" of familiar things, and whose tragedies are relieved by "a saving capacity for digression and recovery". What makes the oven mitts worth writing about is that they feature in a story of despair. In Shields's best stories, comfortingness is hard-won. A more usual Shields fridge-magnet might read: "The truth is, though it is very seldom admitted to, there is very little anyone can do for anyone else." Her middle-aged women - widowed,

divorced, or stuck inside old marriages - are often characters of "despairing good cheer". There are some strong stories about the "sorrowful sharing" of marriage - immense silences on long car journeys, dread of a bullying husband's retirement, the humiliations of local infidelities. And she is very good, too, on subtle shifts of grief in bereavement, on the secret lives of children, and on small bids for freedom.

Marriage is "at best, a flawed and gappy narrative" she thinks, but she is interested in flaws and gaps. So her stories are always catching at fragmentary scenes "that bloom": two sisters talking about their childhood, women taking time out from a family feast, a middle-aged man in bed with his wife. "Only last night - or was it the night before - he woke suddenly at three in the morning and found his wife had turned on her light and was reading. He lay quiet, watching her for what seemed like several minutes: a woman no longer young, intent on her book, lifting a hand every moment or two to turn over a page, her profile washed out by the high-intensity lamp, her shoulders and body blunted by shadow. Who was this person?

"And then she had turned and glanced his way. Their eyes held, caught on the thread of a shared joke: the two of them at this moment had become each other, at home behind the screen of each other's face. It was several seconds before he was able to look away."

The storyteller goes out of herself and disappears into such secret moments, and there are a number of references to floating out of oneself into other people's stories. A nice comic example comes in "Love so Fleeting, Love so Fine", where just the sign "Wendy is back!" in the window of a shoe-shop is enough to have the narrator imagine Wendy's whole life and fall in love with her. What Shields likes best are the invisible links between scenes, people, stories, however fragile. That's why she enjoys accidents and coincidences so much, sometimes a bit too indulgently.

To make connections, to leave your own life and enter the lives of others, you must pay attention. The worst thing in a Shields life is to be like the husband in "Hinterland", who has "forgotten how to pay attention, grown somehow incapacitated and lazy". We must all have it: "In the end we'll wither away unless we have a little human attention." When you've been reading Carol Shields, you go outside, you listen to a conversation, you think about your own life or a friend's life, and you notice more. And for this she should be thanked.