

Unless by Carol Shields

Reviewed by Clara Thomas, *Books in Canada*

Unless is the story Reta Winters tells us as she endures the breakaway of Norah, her eldest daughter, from family, boyfriend, girlfriends and university. Every day Norah sits cross-legged on the northeast corner of Bloor and Bathurst, a begging bowl on her lap and a cardboard sign on her chest. GOODNESS, it says. Norah's defection from a normal life is an inexplicable mystery arising from the totally unlikely context of a loving family: Tom, the doctor father; Reta, the writer, translator, housewife mother; two younger sisters, Natalie and Christine; a treasured old dog, Pet; and their rambling old home on the outskirts of Orangetown, an hour's drive from Toronto. Day by day, Reta practices strategies to survive the cruel present: "It's abrupt and brutal. It's killing us. What will really kill us, though, is the day we DON'T find her sitting on her chosen square of pavement."

Shields is a constant, curious and consummate artist of words and explorer of their potential. "Lonely" and "loneliness" echo throughout the story, evoking and underlining the ultimate human condition. But "Goodness", Norah's strange obsession, defies definition and remains mysterious, though Reta tries to tease out its meaning. All of *Unless's* chapter headings, some thirty of them, are, she says, like necessary putty, "odd little pieces of language to cement the narrative together." They are words like 'once', 'wherein', 'nevertheless' and 'unless' itself. "Remember," they say, "you are reading a fiction, a construct, a writer writing about a writer who, like herself, is a wordsmith." Reta tells us of her intense pleasure in manipulating words as she writes her second novel, *Thyme in Bloom*, working in her third-floor box-room, perched on the chair she calls her "Freedom Chair".

Shields gathers thousands of her potential readers in a special group, parents like herself, who would emphatically say with Reta that the worst thing that could happen "would be socketed somehow, into the lives of my children." Her "back story, as they say in the movie business," is her work as a writer and for years the translator of the famous, acclaimed Frenchwoman feminist, Danielle Westerman, now well into her eighties. Her "front story" is her life with Tom and the girls. We read to the very end before we find out what Norah's "back story" is, the event that separated her decisively from her loved ones. At the end of *Unless* Shields has "bundled up each of the loose narrative strands" as neatly as Reta has finished off *Thyme in Bloom*. The appended warning rider applies to both works: "It doesn't mean that all will be well for ever and ever, amen; it means that for five minutes a balance has been achieved."

Meanwhile Reta tours us through episodes in both her stories and we learn about a large cast of characters on the way. The dailiness that is such a substantial feature of Shields's work, celebrated especially in *Swann* and *The Stone Diaries* is shown to be Reta's life-saver. She cleans her house fanatically, visits the library and talks with her two librarian friends, takes us through a family dinner, recollects the details of a short book tour her publisher arranged for her first novel, *My Thyme is Up*. She entertains Colin, an old friend, at dinner and bears with his disquisition on the theory of relativity, makes her useless weekly pilgrimage to Norah's corner and joins her three best

Orangetown friends for their weekly coffee and conversation. Most days, she also finds some relief in the alternate world of Alicia and Roman, the major characters of *Thyme in Bloom*. All the while, Shields's particular meticulous observational genius holds her readers, willingly caught in appalled sympathy and identification with Reta and the whole spectrum of her experiences.

Reta's voice is emphatically, overtly and sometimes angrily, a feminist voice: "But we've come so far; that's the thinking. So far compared with fifty or a hundred years ago. Well, no, we've arrived at the new millennium and we haven't 'arrived' at all. We've been sent over to the side pocket of the snooker table and made to disappear." When she is enraged about some injustice toward women she writes a letter to its perpetrator-but she doesn't send it. Putting her anger in words is the therapy she needs, not to dissipate the anger but to nullify the damage it does her to feel such rage.

Shields's delicate and devastating irony is in full play: "I am not a snob-I read the Jackie Onassis biography for example." That short sentence sets up a small hum of appreciative amusement matched time and time again as Reta moves through her days with both self-knowledge and self-doubt: "I understood perfectly well that there was something just a little bit DARLING about my own book." In editing and translating Danielle Westerman's work she has developed a respect and critical appreciation for this woman who endured so much during the Holocaust years and whose feminism and moral integrity are so starkly present. Westerman is Reta's mentor, a role model who stands for the austere excellence in writing that Reta admires above all. She measures her first novel, *My Thyme is Up*, against Westerman's and it falls far short, a mere bauble. She can still accept with grace and a grin the New York Times' condescending dictum: "Oddly appealing, ...Mrs. Winters' book is very much for the moment, though certainly not for the ages."

Shields's readers have come to expect her particular signatures, entertaining and informative diversions into unexpected areas, mazes in *Larry's Party*, mermaids in *The Republic Of Love*. *Unless* gives us trilobites, Tom's hobby-passion, trombones, the instrument of Roman, the male lead in Reta's book-in-progress, and of course, Colin's boring dinner-table pronouncements on relativity. The fascination with random chance, "happenstance", that so informs all of Shields's work is much in play here. "Unless" and "If", Reta says of the denouement of her own family's story, and "If" again, she says of the ending of *Thyme in Bloom*. She plans a sequel called *Autumn Thyme*: I want it to hold still like an oil painting, titled: "Seated Woman, Woman at Rest". Half my work will have been done for me, at least for those who have read my first two books. These readers will stand ready to accept the fact that my Alicia is intelligent and inventive and capable of moral resolution, the same qualities we presume, without demonstration, in a male hero.

That is Reta speaking of her book-but it is Carol Shields speaking of *Unless* too: "There you have it," she says: "stillness and power, sadness and resignation, contradictions and irrationality. Almost, you might say, the materials of a serious book." Yes, indeed. Thank you, Carol.

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