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Hell hath no fury

Blake Morrison finds Carol Shields releasing her anger in *Unless*

By Blake Morrison

The chapter headings of Carol Shields's new novel take the form of prepositions and conjunctions - Notwithstanding, Despite, Whatever, etc. The word "But" is not among them, though it's one she has met, in open deprecation or as a silent parenthesis, when her books are reviewed. Her best-known books - *Happenstance*, *The Stone Diaries*, *Larry's Party*, *The Republic of Love* - are known for their accessibility (but not for their wisdom); are praised for their exquisite touch (but not for their risk-taking); or are said to do domestic ordinariness wonderfully (but not wider social issues).

Women novelists are used to such gentle belittlements. Jane Austen suffered them too, and Carol Shields, whose most recent book was a short biography of Austen, has learned to live with them, leaving the "Big Bow-Wow strain" to the boys and quietly getting on with what she does best. But she'd have to be saintly not to feel slighted, or subtly injured, by the suggestion that she's a suburban miniaturist. And even a saint might want to question the underlying assumption here (male = great/major, female = good/minor). Her new book makes plain that she isn't as quiescent as it appears. The old civility is still there, just about. But *Unless* is her angriest book to date - a study in awakening and the belated loss of innocence.

Her heroine and narrator, Reta Winters, doesn't approve of anger and till now, at 44, has had no reason to feel it. She lives in a large, comfortable house in a small town an hour's drive from Toronto; feels physically and emotionally close to her partner, Tom, who's a doctor; has three teenage daughters; and enjoys a modestly successful literary career - both as the translator of Danielle Westerman, a formidable octogenarian whose memoirs run to several volumes, and as a novelist in her own right. There has only been the one novel so far, *My Thyme Is Up*, but it did win a prize, and she is at work on a sequel, *Thyme in Bloom*, which will, she hopes, be as light and summery as its predecessor. Sunniness is what she does best.

But the sun clouds over when she learns that Norah, her eldest daughter, has dropped out of university and is sitting cross-legged on a Toronto street corner with a begging bowl in her lap and a placard saying GOODNESS round her neck. Reta, Tom and the girls go to see Norah, give her food and money, and visit the dossers' dormitory, the Promise Hotel, where she sleeps at night. But any efforts to speak to her, let alone reclaim her, are rebuffed. Friends offer conflicting advice - let Norah be, have her arrested, treat this as a "behavioural interlude". None of which helps Reta, whose cosy world of optimism has collapsed.

Why is Norah acting, or not-acting, as she does? Tom thinks she's suffering post-traumatic stress, but he (and we) must wait to find out what this trauma was. Lacking answers, and under the influence of Danielle Westerman, Reta adopts a theory of female exclusion, which she expounds in a series of letters addressed (but not posted) to men guilty of failing to recognise women's achievements. As Reta sees it, "The world is split in two between those who are handed power at birth, at gestation, encoded with a seemingly random chromosome determinate that says yes for ever and ever, and those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like

all of us who fall into the uncoded female otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang."

In another letter, Reta suggests that what has driven Norah from the world is the feeling that she is doomed to miniaturism - the same prejudice women novelists encounter. She knows that this might be nothing but a "tottering fantasy", that her sentiments are "excessive, blowsy, loose, womanish", that she must sound like a madwoman. But everything that happens seems to confirm her theory, not least the arrival of her new publisher's editor, Arthur, who having read a draft of her work-in-progress can see how much richer a book it might be if Ramon rather than Alicia became the central figure and the title were shortened to Bloom, thereby echoing that great Everyman, Leopold Bloom, in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

I didn't quite believe in Arthur, or feel sure that I was meant to. But only those looking for miniaturist perfection will be bothered when Shields's tone shifts into satire. That's part of the point: once you stop labelling her, you begin to see how much more is going on.

Unless could be classified as a novel about a woman writing a novel about a woman who writes. But this would suggest something claustrophobic, which it isn't. Though only 200 pages long, it finds room to digress on friendship, shopping, marital sex, relativity theory, hair ("I consider coiffure one of my major life accomplishments. I really mean this"), graffiti and much besides. These digressions aren't really digressive, of course. When Reta delivers a eulogy on cleaning, for instance - the joy of moving a dust mop over oak floors, the swift, transitory rewards of lemon spray-wax - it isn't just a provocation to those who say fiction must be all big guns, or who think housework means female oppression, it's also an insight into Reta's troubled state of mind, her hope that by putting her house in order she will get her daughter back.

The novel Reta is writing serves a similar therapeutic function - it's an escape into comic lightness, a way of feeling in control. But the damage isn't underplayed: Reta may have been slow to wake up, but we feel the loss of her contentment, her dumb sunniness. In place of them come loneliness and rage - and a sense of women's "impotent piety". The last thing she wants, she says, "is to be possessed by a sense of injury so exquisitely refined that I register outrage on a daily basis". But anger makes her see the world afresh and understand it better.

As a comic novelist, Reta likes a tidy ending: "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 at the margin of the novel's thin textual plane; make that five seconds; make that the millionth part of a nanosecond." Like so much else in the book, this sounds like an apology for the orderliness of Carol Shields's own art. There is a sense of wintry urgency about *Unless* - of any pretence of charm being dropped in order to get things said. But the charm is still there, and it shouldn't be belittled. Bard of the banal? No, elegist of the everyday. We should celebrate her achievement while we can.

- **Blake Morrison**

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