

Accidents at the heart of life: Various Miracles

Jenny Uglow, The Independent

Canadian writer Carol Shields is best known here for her novel, *The Stone Diaries*, but this collection of stories shows her working equally well in miniature. For Shields, the isle is full of voices - a murmurous babble of half-forgotten memories, whispers, anecdotes, conversations half-heard or misunderstood. Truths are grasped in flickering glimpses beyond words, like patterns on the inner eye-lid before sleep. We come to feel like Hazel, in the opening story, who sees that her 'whole life is an accident, and by accident she has blundered into the heart of it'.

One story is, in fact, called 'Accidents', another 'Collision'. In the latter, set in a small state poised between Communist past and capitalist future, a man and woman leave a hotel. Both are purveyors of dreams: she a former film-star making a documentary on her country's glass industry for foreign investors; he a Canadian architect, designing a seaside resort. Both carry the baggage of self - lovers, ambitions, torn-up letters, painful remarks - but since neither can speak the other's language this all goes unsaid; they simply share an umbrella, smile, and part. Chance, and rain, make them touch.

Shields's stories are full of travellers, hotels and skies criss-crossed by planes. But the 'dense, dumb, depthless blue' the planes fly through is an illusory space. The globe is 'crowded, is it ever crowded', enveloped in an ever-thickening skein of lives, spinning, touching, flying apart.

'... the washed clarity is deceiving, the yawning transparency is fake. What we observe belies the real nature of the earth's atmosphere which is adrift, today as any day, with biographical debris. It's everywhere, a thick swimmy blizzard of it, more ubiquitous by far than earthly salt or sand or humming electrons.'

The physics of this humming world must include coincidence, at once satisfying pattern and maddening mystery. Coincidence is also the hinge of fiction: the lovely title story is crammed with them, from seven Emilys in a queue to twin parrots, separated at birth, dropping off their perch at the same moment (one squawking 'Ca ne fait rien'). To order chaos we make stories.

Shields's particular territory is the yearning and compromise of middle age, the sudden moments of communication when love breaks through habit. Remembering childhood and anticipating death, her men and women push their dreams on to invisible others. A Toronto couple set their emotional clocks by Christmas cards from an Englishman met on their honeymoon; a man falls in love on seeing a name scrawled in a shop window, 'Wendy is back.' Some people prefer not to see straight, as in one comic holiday diary of sexual failure and triumph; others, like the sinister couple in 'Poaching', feed off the narratives of strangers, but never give their own.

Shields's favourite characters, however, do not even know they have stories. They just live. Thus, a jolly mid-western widow is blithely unaware that her weed-killer horrifies her ecological neighbours, that her sagging thighs strike terror into schoolgirls, that she is the star of a poem about ignorant tourists in Japan. But Mrs Turner has her own rich, raucous history, her own world-view. When she travels she sees sameness, as well as difference: cats, dogs, bicycles, people eating, sleeping, working 'and making things with their hands and urging things to grow.'

Time and again, Shields sets the drift of individual lives against a shared compulsion to create - from cooking-pots and circular skirts to drawings and tapestries. Sometimes, too, the inanimate seems to breathe life, like the golden virgin at the Cluny museum holding the Crucifixion in her chest or the consoling, battered rag-doll in the most resonant story in the book, 'Dolls, dolls, dolls, dolls'. Asked about her favourite smell, one character chooses that of cloth laid out on a table before you pin the paper pattern on it. Shields's own outlines of lives, witty and generous, are alive with this provisional happiness, a fragile incandescence glowing against the dark.