

# Carol

An Ottawa author remembers the fabled writer who opened the doors of life for her readers



Carol Shields reinvented herself a few times — academic to mother to writer to chancellor.

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY

In the fall of 2001, I had lunch with Carol Shields and her husband Don in their house in Victoria. It was an interval of tranquillity in the midst of my hectic book tour. Don collected me from my hotel in the snazzy BMW that Carol had given him. Don, a retired professor of engineering, relishes the smooth German gear shift of his Beamer — but it is an unmistakably Shields vehicle. In delicious counterpoint to its powerful engine and leather upholstery, there is a child's seat in the back for the regular visits of their grandchildren.

When we arrived at the Shields' house, I was enveloped in an extraordinarily honey-warm glow. This gauzy effect came primarily from the light — pale and golden, thanks to the autumnal filter of leaves that veiled the windows of the sunroom where we sat. But it also had a great deal to do with Carol herself, who exuded the gentle welcome she always gives. As usual, in her presence I felt absorbed into the warm bubble of her humanity. She gazed directly at me over the lunch-table, a smile alight on her lips. Her voice was soft and her articulation clear. She asked penetrating questions about my relationship to my biographical subjects, then nodded encouragingly as she listened to my answers.

But I don't have to be in the same room to sense her empathy. When I read any of her novels, from her first (*Small Ceremonies*) to her latest (*Unless*) I enjoy exactly the same sense that she is talking directly to me. Her insights into character and motivation reflect her careful observation of friends, relatives, casual acquaintances, colleagues, strangers. She once told one of her readers, "I've learned to extract a whole life situation from a glimpse into a window or a piece of jewelry." She also listed some of her own characteristics, which confirmed her as a woman of deep wisdom and good judgment: "I don't believe in the prophetic nature of dreams,

don't believe in fortune cookie messages, extremely doubtful about left brain/right brain theories, love conversation, good food, Virginia Woolf, long walks." Yet there was nothing banal or coy about Shields: her intellectual acuity was evident in her fond though astringent book on Jane Austen.

Today, when I look back on our lunch in Victoria, I realize that the honey-warm glow was similar to the one I feel when I open a Carol Shields' novel: excitement at the start of a rich encounter, and anticipation of being surprised.

Because I was surprised. I was surprised because Carol looked so well, despite five years of illness and treatments. I was surprised because our wryly exchanged ("What are you working on?" "What do you think of...?") was as intense and enjoyable as ever. And I was surprised because she seemed determined to go to Toronto for the Gillier dinner (she was one of five nominees for the big prize) despite her health problems. However, I should not have been surprised by her plans for a Toronto visit. Her daughter Meg, who lives there, was due to have a baby the same week. In the Shields cosmology, such an event easily outweighs the chance to mingle with Toronto's glitterati.

Two weeks later, at the Gillier Dinner, in Carol's guest at her table. When Austin Clarke

was named the winner, I couldn't bear to turn around and look at her. When I finally did, I saw that Don Shields and Meg Shields were sitting close to her, one on each side, holding tight. And I also felt a huge wave of love and admiration surging across the room toward this fragile, blond woman. The three Gillier judges may have chosen Austin Clarke that night, but Carol Shields had already won the hearts and minds of thousands of Canadian readers, including the Gillier guests and particularly women.

Carol knew us. Whether we are traditional 1950s wives or 21st-century careerists, whether we are mothers or single, Carol understood and wrote about our perspective on the world. It is a timeless and empathetic vision. She struck a chord.

My favourite Carol Shields line comes in her *Thirteen Hands*. In an opening scene, a brusque pollster asks a Winnipeg housewife, "Do you think of yourself as marginal?" The housewife replies thoughtfully, "Well, that depends where you think the centre is." The centre of Carol Shields' world is at the intersection of ordinary lives and extraordinary epiphanies, not in the crucible of power, money and fame.

You don't have to know Carol Shields to be drawn deep, deep, deep into the worlds she created. She had an unflinching commitment to elegant, precise English, which she displayed in poetry, drama, fiction and biography. But it was not just the grace of her writing that seduced: she shared with her readers profound insights into human behaviour, male and female. She wrote with compassion for human frailty (not for Shields the fashionable "ironic detachment" that produces caricature). Her characters, male and female, are caught in the endless cycles of success and failure, stasis and reinvention, clarity and confusion, that make them so convincing. She reinvented herself several times, from academic to mother to writer to university chancellor.

Other writers recognized Shields' consummate skill. Shields was really good, for example, at weaving details of scarves, casseroles and house-plants into mesmerizing stories of thwarted ambitions and marriages under stress. At an evening of celebration for Carol, Jane Urquhart said, "If I want to let the reader know about a character's inner life, all I can do is describe it. But Carol is so brilliant that she gives us the interior life of a character simply by letting her describe her actual house and then the imagined house she dreams about living in."

Michael Ondaatje commented: "She showed us that earlier generations were like us, they could be distracted from their purpose by any breeze of passing sexual attraction or momentary irritation. And she showed that we can be freed by this, that it lets us step away from a stale life and make a new life for ourselves."

Carol Shields also had a wicked eye for pretension, and a delicious way of capturing it. In 1994, she came to Ottawa to address a literary luncheon at the National Arts Centre. Her audience consisted mainly of well-dressed, well-heeled women with strong views on How One Should Behave. Few had heard of Carol Shields (this was pre-Pulitzer) or knew what to expect from this small, neat, polite woman.

Shields read a carefully-selected passage from her *Stone Diaries* in which the main character, Daisy Goodwill, is invited to lunch by her future mother-in-law and instructed about the care of Harold Hoad, Daisy's future husband. The passage is vintage Shields. Mrs. Hoad is wearing "a floral printed porch dress and white reindeer-skin pumps."

Mrs. Hoad begins her sermonette: "I hope you won't think I'm speaking out of turn, Daisy..." Then she goes on, in the most excruciatingly refined language, to correct the dangers of a college education for a girl, the correct euphemisms for death, the right way to set a table, Harold's bowels, when to wear white shoes, the advantages of Venetian Velva Liquid, and the possibility that Daisy will find a curious porcelain bowl in her hotel rooms while on her European honeymoon. "You must be careful not to touch these things, since they are covered with germs, completely and absolutely covered. Germs of the worst sort."

Throughout the reading, Shields was as composed and gracious as her creation Mrs. Hoad. By the end of the passage, most of her audience was weeping with laughter. Most recognized themselves as either, if not both, the fictional Daisy Goodwill and Mrs. Hoad. Yet they did not feel mocked. "Oh gosh!" stuttered one matron through her laughter. "I remember the white shoes rule."

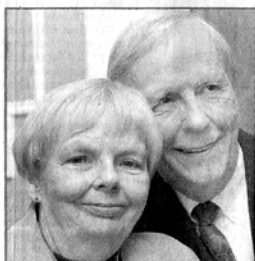
A few years ago, I attended the ceremony at Carleton University at which Carol and Don Shields each received honorary degrees. It was a wonderful warm, sunny day, and the ceremony was held outdoors overlooking the river. When I arrived at my reserved seat, I discovered that I was surrounded by women like myself — keen readers, each of whom felt a deep warmth toward this marvellous woman and a gratitude for her careful interest in our lives. Most of us were wearing hats, because we knew Carol would enjoy them. One of the women, writer Susan Lightstone, laughed as I looked surprised to see so many familiar faces. "Don't you realize," she said, "you're a member of a very large club — the Carol Shields fan club!"

Carol Shields died last Wednesday in Victoria. She was 68.

Charlotte Gray is an Ottawa author. Her latest book, *Canada: A portrait in Letters, 1800-2000*, will be published in October by Doubleday Canada.

Penelope's Way, by Blanche Howard — edited by Carol Shields (Coteau Books, 2000)

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Carol Shields with husband, Don.