

FROM THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING  
AUTHOR OF *THE STONE DIARIES*

"Her stories have given me happiness, not  
just pleasure. There's something so  
bountiful and surprising about them, like  
the beautiful broken light of a prism."

—ALICE MUNRO

# Carol Shields Collected Stories

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY MARGARET ATWOOD

**P.S.**  
INSIGHTS,  
INTERVIEWS  
& MORE...



CAROL SHIELDS

*Collected Stories*

With an Introduction

- by Margaret Atwood

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

HARPER  PERENNIAL

*Various Miracles*. Copyright © 1985 by Carol Shields. Used by permission of Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

*The Orange Fish*. Copyright © 1989 by Carol Shields. Used by permission of Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

*Dressing Up for the Carnival*. Copyright © 2000 by Carol Shields. Used by permission of Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

"Segue." Copyright © 2003 Carol Shields Literary Trust.

First published by Random House Canada in 2004.

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 2004 by Fourth Estate, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

P.S.<sup>™</sup> is a trademark of HarperCollins Publishers.

COLLECTED STORIES. Copyright © 2004 by Carol Shields. All rights reserved.  
Introduction by Margaret Atwood © 2004 D. W. Toad Ltd. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

First Harper Perennial edition published 2005.

The Library of Congress had catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:

Shields, Carol.

[Short stories]

Collected Stories/Carol Shields.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-06-076203-9 (acid-free paper)

1. Canada—Social life and customs—Fiction. I. Title.

PR9199.3.S514A6 2005

813'.54—dc22

2004053342

ISBN-10: 0-06-076204-7 (pbk.)

ISBN-13: 978-0-06-076204-9 (pbk.)

05 06 07 08 09 ♦/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Praise for *Collected Stories*

"A magisterial compilation. . . . Shields has left us with an intricate literary map of human relationships and with certain proof that the radiant strangeness of ordinary people is always hidden within plain sight."

—*Washington Post Book World*

"A joyride. . . . One delightful turn after another."

—*Boston Globe*

"[*Collected Stories*] reveals [Shields's] quiet, marvelous talent for probing the hearts of her characters. . . . This big, beautiful collection should win Shields . . . the devoted readership she deserves."

—O, *The Oprah Magazine*

"Sublime. . . . Original. . . . Superb. . . . These surprising, effervescent stories can only help to ensure the power of [Shields's] legacy."

—*Miami Herald*

"Genius. . . . [Shields] is one of our strongest voices in literature."

—*Charlotte Observer*

"Transcendent. . . . Shields's stories are made of the fresh air and sunshine of comfortable daily life."

—*New York Sun*

"Shields writes about whimsy, happenstance, and serendipity, tragedies that really aren't, and clean, cutting prose about things that really hurt. . . . Amazing."

—*Denver Post*

"Surprising, daring, and varied. . . . Shields's *Collected Stories* makes you feel more keenly about the premature loss of her tremendous talent."

—*Rocky Mountain News*

“Full of wonder. . . . The stories are truly remarkable, combining great good humor with poignant observation.”

—*Seattle Times*

“A master storyteller of complex and surprisingly nuanced life stories.”

—*Providence Journal*

“Her stories have given me happiness, not just pleasure. They delight me at first by the clear and simple elegance with which they’re made. Then there’s something so bountiful and surprising about them, like the beautiful broken light of a prism.”

—Alice Munro

“Shields writes with an almost painfully attuned ear for the nuances of language and the way they attach to feelings and probe the most delicate layers of human consciousness. . . . She reminds us again why literature matters.”

—*New York Times Book Review*



*Collected Stories*

THE WORK OF CAROL SHIELDS

*Poetry*

Others

Intersect

Coming to Canada

*Novels*

Unless

Larry's Party

The Stone Diaries

The Republic of Love

A Celibate Season (with Blanche Howard)

Swann

A Fairly Conventional Woman

Happenstance

The Box Garden

Small Ceremonies

*Story Collections*

Dressing Up for the Carnival

The Orange Fish

Various Miracles

*Plays*

Departures and Arrivals

Thirteen Hands

Fashion, Power, Guilt and the Charity of Families

(with Catherine Shields)

Anniversary (with David Williamson)

*Criticism*

Susanna Moodie: Voice and Vision

*Anthology*

Dropped Threads: What We Aren't Told (Edited with Marjorie Anderson)

Dropped Threads 2: More of What We Aren't Told

(Edited with Marjorie Anderson)

*Biography*

Jane Austen: A Penguin Lives Biography

*For Emma and Alden*



Something has occurred to her—something transparently simple, something she's always known, it seems, but never articulated. Which is that the moment of death occurs while we are still alive. Life marches right up to the wall of that final darkness, one extreme state of being butting against the other. Not even a breath separates them. Not even a blink of the eye. A person can go on and on tuned in to the daily music of food and work and weather and speech right up to the last minute, so that not a single thing gets lost.

—From *The Stone Diaries*

## Introduction

I BEGAN READING CAROL SHIELDS' BOOKS many years ago, with *The Box Garden*. In that novel there's a passage that made me laugh so hard I thought I would do myself an injury. It's the chapter describing a mother with scant taste but a lot of energy, who spends her time like a down-market and rather crazed Martha Stewart, relentlessly decorating her modest house—papering and re-papering its walls, hand-painting its lampshades, dyeing its scatter rugs—much to the alarm of her adolescent daughter, who never knows what new, ferocious colour the house will be when she gets home from school.

This, I thought, was not only terrific satire, but fine comedy as well. Yet when I recently read the passage again, it no longer struck me as all that funny. Now, years later, and with several demented decorating episodes of my own behind me, I found it poignant, even faintly tragic. The mother is defeated by her house, in the end. She abandons her doomed attempts to make it into a work of art. She recognizes the futility of her efforts. Time claims her. She sinks down. She gives up.

This ability to strike two such different chords at once is not only high art, it's also the essence of Carol Shields' writing—the iridescent, often hilarious surfaces of things, but

also their ominous depths. The shimmering pleasure boat, all sails set, skimming giddily across the River Styx.

Carol Shields died on July 16, 2003 at her home in Victoria, British Columbia, after a long battle with cancer. She was sixty-eight. The enormous media coverage given to her and the sadness expressed by her many readers paid tribute to the high esteem in which she was held in her own country, but her death made the news all around the world.

Conscious as she was of the vagaries of fame and the element of chance in any fortune, she would have viewed that with a certain irony, but she would also have found it deeply pleasing. She knew about the darkness, but, both as an author and as a person, she held on to the light. "She was just a luminous person, and that would be important and persist even if she hadn't written anything," said her friend and fellow author Alice Munro.

Earlier in her writing career, some critics mistook this quality of light in her for lightness, light-mindedness, on the general principle that comedy—a form that turns on misunderstanding and confusion, but ends in reconciliation, of however tenuous a kind—is less serious than tragedy, and that the personal life is of lesser importance than the public one. Carol Shields knew better. Human life is a mass of statistics only for statisticians: the rest of us live in a world of individuals, and most of them are not prominent. Their joys however are fully joyful, and their griefs are real. It was the extraordinariness of ordinary people that was Shields' forte. She gave her material the full benefit of her large intelligence, her powers of observation, her humane wit, and her wide reading. Her books are delightful, in the original sense of the word: they are full of delights.

She understood the life of the obscure and the overlooked partly because she had lived it: her work reveals a deep sym-

pathy with the plight of the women novelist toiling incognito, appreciated only by an immediate circle but longing for her due. Born in 1935 in the United States, Shields was at the tail end of the post-war generation of North American college-educated women who were convinced by the mores of their time that their destiny was to get married and have five children. This Carol did; she remained a devoted mother and a constant wife throughout her life. Her husband Don was a civil engineer; they moved to Canada, beginning with Toronto in the '60s, a time of poetic ferment in that city. Carol was already writing then, and attended some readings, said of that time, "I knew no writers." Undoubtedly she felt relegated to that nebulous category, "just a housewife," like Daisy in *The Stone Diaries* and like Mary Swann, the eponymous poet who is murdered by her husband when her talent begins to show.

After obtaining an M.A. at the University of Ottawa, Shields taught for years at the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg, where she began publishing in the '70s. But this was the decade of rampant feminism, in the arts at least. Her early books, including *Others*, *Intersect*, *Small Ceremonies*, and *The Box Garden*, which examined the vagaries of domestic life without torpedoing it, did not make a large stir, although some of their early readers found them both highly accomplished and hilarious. She had her first literary breakthrough—not in terms of quality of writing, but in terms of audience size—in Britain rather than in North America, with her 1992 novel *The Republic of Love*.

Her glory book was *The Stone Diaries*, which was short-listed for the Booker Prize and won the Canadian Governor General's Award, and then, in 1995, the Pulitzer Prize, a feat her dual citizenship made possible. Her next novel, *Larry's Party*, won the Orange Prize in 1998. To say that she was not

thrilled by success would be to do her an injustice. She knew what it was worth. She'd waited a long time for it. She wore her newfound prominence with graciousness and used it with largesse.

*Unless*, her last novel, was written in the small space of time she spent in England and France, after beating cancer the first time and before it came back. It's a hymn to the provisional: the sense of happiness and security as temporary and fragile is stronger than ever. Those who had heard Carol Shields interviewed earlier were probably surprised by a frankly feminist strain in the novel—particularly the angry letters her protagonist, writer Reta Winters, addressed to male pundits dismissive of woman writers—because in conversation she was discreet and allusive. The little frown, the shake of the head, said it all. Possibly feminism was something she worked into, as she published more widely and came up against more commentators who thought excellent pastry was a facile creation compared with raw meat on skewers, and who in any case could not recognize the thread of blood in her work, though it was always there. The problem of the luminous is that its very luminosity obscures the shadows it depends on for its brilliance.

*Unless* was published in 2002; although it was short-listed for just about every major English-language prize, the Munro Doctrine, informally named after Alice Munro, had set in by then—after a certain number of prizes you are shot into the stratosphere, where you circulate in radiant mists, far beyond the ken of juries.

I last saw Carol Shields at the end of April. Her new house was spacious, filled with light; outside the windows the tulips in her much-loved garden were in bloom. Typically for her, she claimed she couldn't quite believe she deserved to live in such a big and beautiful house. She felt so lucky, she said.



## *Introduction*

Although she was very ill, she didn't seem it. She was as alert, as interested in books of all kinds, and as curious as ever. She'd recently been reading nonfiction works on biology, she told me: something new for her, a new source of amazement and wonder. We did not speak of her illness. She preferred to be treated as a person who was living, not one who was dying.

And live she did, and live she does; for as John Keats remarked, every writer has two souls, an earthly one and one that lives on in the world of writing as a voice in the writing itself. It's this voice—astute, compassionate, observant, and deeply human—that will continue to speak to her readers everywhere. For who is better at delineating happiness, especially the sudden, unlooked-for, unearned kind of happiness, than Carol Shields? It's easier to kill than to give birth, easier to destroy than to create, and easier for a writer to describe gloom than to evoke joy. Carol Shields can do both supremely well, but it's her descriptions of joy that leave you open-mouthed. The world may be a soap bubble hovering over a void, but look, what astonishing colours it has, and isn't it amazing that such a thing exists at all?

Such a world—various, ordinary, shimmering, evanescent but miraculous—is a gift; and it's the vision of this gift that Carol Shields has presented us with in her extraordinary books. We give thanks for it—and for her.

—MARGARET ATWOOD

## Contents

*Introduction*    *xiii*

Segue    *i*

### *Various Miracles*

Various Miracles	23
Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass	29
Accidents	40
Sailors Lost at Sea	49
Purple Blooms	63
Flitting Behavior	68
Pardon	82
Words	87
Poaching	94
Scenes	100
Fragility	112
The Metaphor Is Dead—Pass It On	125
A Wood (with Anne Giardini)	128
Love so Fleeting, Love so Fine	141
Dolls, Dolls, Dolls, Dolls	148
Invitations	165
Taking the Train	171
Home	178
The Journal	187
Salt	192
Others	198

### *The Orange Fish*

The Orange Fish	219
Chemistry	228
Hazel	248
Today Is the Day	271
Hinterland	277
Block Out	297
Collision	314
Good Manners	333
Times of Sickness and Health	340
Family Secrets	355
Fuel for the Fire	368
Milk Bread Beer Ice	382

### *Dressing Up for the Carnival*

Dressing Up for the Carnival	397
A Scarf	404
Weather	419
Flatties: Their Various Forms and Uses	427
Dying for Love	431
Ilk	440
Stop!	447
Mirrors	450
The Harp	461
Our Men and Women	465
Keys	473
Absence	482
Windows	486
Reportage	496
Edith-Esther	502
New Music	514
Soup du Jour	524
Invention	532
Death of an Artist	541
The Next Best Kiss	547
Eros	565
Dressing Down	579

## Segue

SOMETHING IS ALWAYS SAYING TO ME: Be plain. Be clear. But then something else interferes and unjoins my good intentions.

Max and I were out yesterday morning, Sunday, a simple enough errand in our neighborhood. We “sallied forth” to buy a loaf of good seed bread and a potted plant, chrysanthemums in our case, with the smashed little faces that our daughter so admires, that bitter bronze color, matching the tablecloth she was sure to be laying right that moment out there in Oak Park. Eleven o'clock; my husband Max and I would be expected at half past twelve. We always arrive carrying a modest gift of some sort.

There, at the market, stimulated, probably, by the hint of frost in the air, I felt a longing to register the contained, isolated instant we had manufactured and entered, the purchase of the delicious hard-crust bread, the decision over the potted plant—this was what I wanted to preserve. But an intrusive overview camera (completely imaginary, needless to say) bumped against me, so that instead of feeling the purity of the coins leaving my hand, I found myself watching the two of us, a man and a woman of similar height, both in their middle sixties, both slightly stooped—you'd hardly notice unless you were looking—and dressed in bright colors, making