

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## CAROL SHIELDS, *UNLESS*

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**S**ome books, like some people, are easy to befriend: their appeal lies on the surface, inviting and accessible. Others are a bit stand-offish – it takes time to learn to appreciate them – but they often prove all the more rewarding to know once you make the effort. For me, Canadian novelist Carol Shields' *Unless* is a book of the second sort. The first time I read it, I found its structure somewhat scattered and miscellaneous, its narrator, Reta Winters, a bit too prickly, its conclusion too provisional. Over the years, however, *Unless* has become a favourite of mine: now I cherish it for its insight, its provocations, and its fragile but inspiring optimism.

*Unless* was Shields' last novel, written nearly a decade after her Pulitzer-prize winning *The Stone Diaries* and also after her diagnosis of breast cancer, which she died from in 2003. Noting that *Unless* is Shields' 'most explicitly feminist *and* her most intensely postmodernist text,' critic Nora Stovel suggests that Shields' cancer emboldened her: 'She did not think she would be alive to read the reviews.' The result is a delicately self-referential

novel about a woman's quest to write the novel she wants without fear or apology. 'I was trying to write the book I couldn't find on the library shelf,' Shields once said of her fiction; in *Unless*, in Reta's voice and through Reta's story, Shields offers a sometimes wry, sometimes scathing commentary on women's writing and its place in (or exclusion from) the literary canon.

When the novel begins, Reta is reeling from her daughter Norah's inexplicable decision to drop out of university and spend her days on a Toronto street corner holding a sign with the enigmatic message 'GOODNESS.' Reta concludes that Norah is reacting to the harsh truth of women's exclusion – from politics, from power, from literature: 'What she sees is an endless series of obstacles, an alignment of locked doors.' In the shadow of this crisis, Reta attempts to maintain 'a semblance of ongoing life' by working on the sequel to her popular and prize-winning comic novel *My Thyme Is Up*, a 'fresh bright springtime piece of fiction.' But Reta's anger at the 'accretion of discouragement' she blames for Norah's self-imposed exile makes her increasingly dissatisfied with *Thyme in Bloom*, especially its happy-ever-after ending for her protagonists, Roman and Alicia. It isn't that Reta no longer wants to write light fiction, though she is used to arguing with the 'critical voice in my head that weighs serious literature against what is merely entertainment.' It's that very dichotomy Reta wants to resist, with its destructive twinned assumptions that women writers are 'the miniaturists' of fiction and that therefore they cannot achieve true literary greatness.

In her probing of the relationship between scale and significance, Shields shows the influence of Jane Austen, who taught her, she said, that 'large narratives can occupy small spaces.' Even today, Austen's novels are often underestimated: 'Jane Austen is pure gossip,' V.S. Naipaul recently proclaimed in the *Times Literary Supplement*; 'her work is sentimental, provincial and confined to a tiny spectrum of British rural society.' The best rebuttal to such prejudicial proclamations is not just to point out how wrong they are about the reach and complexity of Austen's fiction but also to reject the underlying premise that what is personal and feminine is necessarily trivial – that, as Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own*, 'a scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop.' Both Reta and Shields resist this 'difference of value' (as Woolf herself did) by writing fiction centered in private female

experience that finds within its small scope room for expansive meaning.

'If the novel is to survive,' Reta decides about *Thyme in Bloom*, 'it must be redrafted.' Crucially, instead of marrying Roman, 'Alicia will advance in her self-understanding.' Norah's French professor tells Reta that Norah had complained about Madame Bovary's being 'forced to surrender her place as the moral centre of the novel.' This is the place Reta now claims for Alicia – only to be met with opposition from her brash young editor, Arthur Springer, who has his own quite different ideas about the kind of book *Thyme in Bloom* should be. 'With a mere two or three shifts of perspective,' Arthur tells Alicia, 'you could move from a popular novel to a work of art.' His proposals reinforce just the sexist assumptions Reta has been writing against: he wants to rename the novel simply *Bloom* – 'it gestures towards the Bloom of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, that great Everyman' – and he wants Alicia to yield her place to Roman: 'A reader,' Arthur argues, 'the serious reader that I have in mind, would never accept her as the decisive fulcrum of a serious work of art.' 'It's because she's a woman,' Reta says bluntly, and to Arthur's sputtering denials ('Not at all, not at all') she can only repeat, 'Because she's a woman.'

Fortunately for Arthur, at this fraught moment their discussion is interrupted by a call from Reta's husband: Norah has been hospitalised with pneumonia. Her illness is a turning point; she comes home, and amidst the relief and reconciliation, Reta's angry tension subsides. She finishes *Thyme in Bloom* on her own terms, keeping it whimsical while allowing Alicia to triumph 'in her own slightly capricious way.' Now Reta looks ahead to her next novel, which will be even more quietly radical, a book 'willing to live in one room if necessary,' which will 'hold still' while opening up towards 'a transfiguration.' It is a happy but also a precarious ending for both books – incomplete, provisional, transitional, like the word 'unless.' Norah's return has not solved Reta's problems, which are also the world's problems, but it has restored her optimism, a quality she considers essential to fiction: 'Unless [novels] can provide an alternative, hopeful course, they're just so much narrative crumble. Unless, unless.'

Making introductions is a tricky business; I worry that I have made *Unless* sound didactic and thus discouraged new readers. *Unless* is unquestionably a novel of ideas, many of them political

and some of them perhaps controversial. But it is also a funny, wise, and tender novel about a mother and her children, a woman and her friends, a wife and her husband:

It is not true that people in long marriages dissolve into each other, becoming one being. I touch Tom's elbow, the sleeve of his tan jacket; he places his long arms around me and his hands cup my breasts in the friendliest way possible. We are two people in a snapshot, but with a little cropping we could each exist on our own. But that's not what we want. Hold the frame still, contain us, the two of us together, that's what we ask for. This is all it takes to keep the world from exploding.

More than that, it is a novel that encourages us, by both its story and its example, to think about why we value fiction. 'This matters,' Reta rightly declares, 'the remaking of an untenable world through the nub of a pen; it matters so much I can't stop doing it.' For me as a reader, it matters too. I read novels, as Reta says she herself does, 'so I can escape my own unrelenting monologue,' which nowadays is prone, like Reta's, to angry protestations against an unjust and deteriorating world. But 'anger,' as Reta realises, 'is not humanising'; what she seeks and *Unless* offers is a way through it to a place where we can imagine for ourselves what Reta wishes for Roman and Alicia: 'to be fond of each other, to be charitable, to be mild and merciful.' In this modest yet revolutionary aspiration lies both 'the materials of a serious book' and the basis of a lasting literary friendship.