



1998 WINNER

LARRY'S PARTY BY CAROL SHIELDS

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Carol Shields's novels include *Unless*; *Larry's Party*, winner of the 1998 Women's Prize for Fiction; *The Stone Diaries*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and shortlisted for the Booker Prize; *The Republic of Love*; *Happenstance*; and *Mary Swann*. The short story collections *Dressing Up for the Carnival* and *Various Miracles* were republished alongside previously unpublished works in one volume, *The Collected Stories*, in 2004. Born and brought up in Chicago, Carol Shields lived in Canada from 1957 until her death in 2003.

PLOT SUMMARY

Larry Weller, a Canadian florist, and his naive young wife, Dorrie, spend their honeymoon in England. At Hampton Court, after falling in love with the hedges of England from on board a tour bus, Larry discovers a new passion. Perhaps his ever-growing obsession with mazes may help him find a way through his deepening bewilderment about life, as we follow Larry through twenty years and two failed marriages.

Episodes from Larry's life between 1977 and 1997 flash back and forward seamlessly, with Larry's life expanding and contracting, all the time adapting to society's changing expectations of men. Larry moves through the spontaneity of the seventies, the blind enchantment of

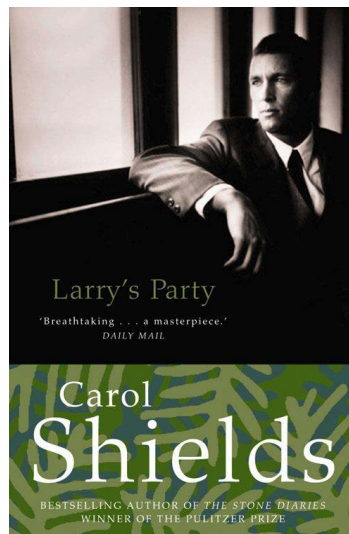
the eighties and the lean, mean nineties, completing at last his quiet, stubborn search of self.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Larry's Party follows the life of its protagonist over a long period of time, but never shows the pivotal points where specific actions happen in Larry's life,

such as the birth of his son or the breakup of his marriage with Dorrie. Instead, the novel shows Larry's own reflection on those events, and the novel's narration in the third person gives it an additional sense of reflection and distance.

Shields uses the symbolism of mazes in Larry's life as a metaphor for him gradually finding his way through a life in which he often feels lost. As Larry points out, "the whole thing about mazes is that they make perfect sense only when you look down on them from above."



Larry is a relatable character from the point of view that he's a pretty ordinary person with an ordinary life in which, sometimes, events happen to him, but without a sense of grand destiny or meaning. Larry's life and experiences are by no means universal: Shields represents the life of one heterosexual, white working class Canadian man in the latter half of the twentieth century.

“ WHEN YOU WRITE HAPPY ENDINGS YOU ARE NOT TAKEN SERIOUSLY AS A WRITER . . . WHEN MEN WRITE ABOUT ‘ORDINARY PEOPLE’, THEY ARE THOUGHT TO BE SUBTLE AND SENSITIVE. WHEN WOMEN DO, THEIR NOVELS ARE CLASSIFIED AS DOMESTIC ”

CAROL SHIELDS,
AUTHOR

DISCUSSION POINTS

In *Larry's Party*, Carol Shields is reflecting on what it meant to be a man in the late twentieth century. Larry is a florist, which seems a definite effort on Shields' part to present readers with a non-stereotypical male character, but does she achieve this?

How does Larry perform his gender? Has our idea about what a man is changed since 1997 when the book was first released? If so, how do you think that this has come about? What is Carol Shields saying about men and masculinity in *Larry's Party*?

And do we still need a book about not very much happening in the life of a white heterosexual man?

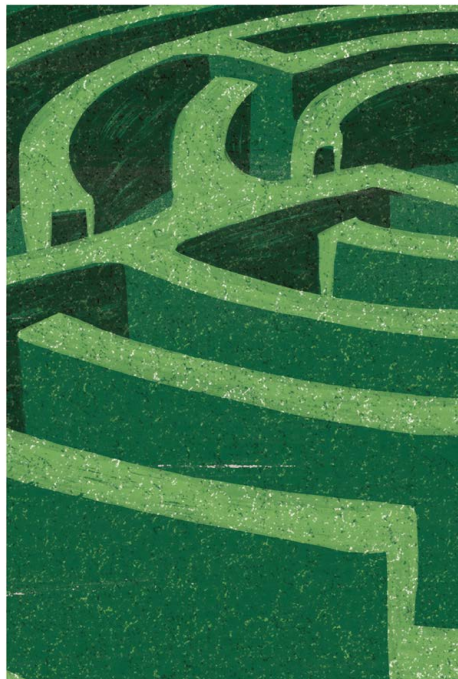
QUESTIONS

Beth Prior describes herself as a third wave feminist. What is your understanding of Shields' description that she is “anxious to understand the mysteries of men as well as women”? Do you think Shields is reflecting the aims of third wave feminism in writing *Larry's Party* with a male protagonist? Is this subversion effective?

How is sex represented in the novel, and how does Larry's attitude towards it contrast to how he perceives Dorrie and Beth enjoying sex?

Does the structure of the book reflect Larry's obsession with mazes?

Is Larry a good father? If he was a woman, do you think Shields would have spent more time on the theme of his parental role?



NEXT STEPS

Write a short essay about a woman from history or the present day, imagining it included in Beth Prior's book about early women saints, *Happy Enough*. Who would you write about? Who do you consider worthy of sainthood?

Or, for something different, write a fairy tale about a maze, or featuring one. According to the Ancient History Encyclopedia, “Labyrinths form a visual counterpart to the epic folk-tale which often consists of a long and convoluted

journey with episodes that repeat and double back on themselves. They may symbolise a journey of self-discovery too, a journey in to the centre of the self and out again and, in this way, the ancient symbol emerges as a Jungian archetype: a tool for self-exploration and healing.”

You could watch the 1986 film *Labyrinth* or Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* for inspiration, or remind yourself of the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Will your fairy tale involve some sense of self-discovery for your character, as Shields does with Larry and his mazes?

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE STONE DIARIES BY CAROL SHIELDS

THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS BY KIRAN DESAI