

should, by no means, imply that this novel is nothing more than a vulgar and crude work; we are only questioning the function of these coarse and unrefined passages within a novel whose style is, in general, elevated, graceful, and poetic.

In spite of these shortcomings, one has to admit that Mr. Saleh is a very talented storyteller and a skillful writer; but one cannot rid himself of the feeling that here is a gifted man who wants, by all means and in the shortest time possible, to impress the reader, the critic, and the scholar. And this makes Mr. Saleh look like someone who puts on all his new clothes at the same time regardless of weather, occasion, or fashion.

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¹See Mokhtar Ibrahim 'Ogobah, "al-Qissah al-Qasirah wa Tataworihā fi al-Adab al-Sudani al-Hadith" (The Development of the Short Story in the Contemporary Sudanese Literature), MA-Diss. Cairo, n.d.

²See Fatma Moussa, *Fi al-Riwaiah al-'Arabiah al-Mo'asarah* (On the Contemporary Arabic Novel); (Cairo: Maktabet al-Anglo, 1972), pp. 231-51.

³al-Taib Saleh, *'Ors al-Zein* (al-Zein's Wedding); (Beirut: Dar al-'Awdah, 1970).

⁴al-Taib Saleh, *Mausim al-Hijra ela al-Shamal* (Season for Migration to the North); (Beirut: Dar al-'Awdah, 1972).

⁵al-Taib Saleh, *Daumah Widd Hamid* (a collection of seven short stories which were published between 1956-1966 in different magazines and journals); (Beirut: Dar al-'Awdah, n.d.).

⁶Other Arab writers who have dealt with this theme are Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Beiram al-Tunisi, Tawfik al-Hakim, Yehia Haqqi, and Saad Elkhadem. See Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, *The Arabic Novel in Egypt: 1914-1970* (Cairo: The Egyptian General Book Organization, 1973), pp. 31-38; also Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, "A New Oriental Bird with Leaden Wings: On Saad Elkhadem's *Ajniha Min Rasas*," *International Fiction Review*, 2 (1975), 69-70; and Fatma Moussa, *Fi al-Riwaiah* . . . , p. 232.

Quiet Manifesto: Carol Shields's *Small Ceremonies*

At a time when some Canadian writers are getting on cultural bandwagons, or are partially blinded by the myths which they have created for themselves, it is refreshing to come across a novel like *Small Ceremonies* by Carol Shields. Her novel, as the title suggests, concerns itself with the small acts of a quiet family in a relatively peaceful Canadian academic community. Very little happens in the novel, yet subtly and with considerable skill Mrs. Shields unfolds the character of the narrator, Judith Gill, her English professor husband, Martin, and their two children, Meredith and Richard.

The problems for the family arise after their return from a sabbatical year in England. The Canadian experience of the characters is portrayed against a wider, multi-cultural background which highlights both the more general humanity and the peculiarly Canadian quality of their responses. The "small

ceremonies," like the English high tea on Sunday evenings, which define their English experience help them to identify the subtle differences and nuances of their Canadianness.

The setting is Canada in the early 1970's, and the characters beyond the Gill family circle help not only to add complication to the life of the family, but also to give a sense of the times in which they live, when large, archetypal action is obsolete and a more intimate understanding is required. Roger Ramsey, Can. Lit. professor at the university, and Ruthie St. Pierre, librarian and translator, live commonlaw in defiance of social morality when society has ceased to care about that sort of protest; Nancy Krantz, Judith's best friend, is an activist in all the "anti-" organizations, but is ultimately unattached to anyone or anything; and most prominent, Furlong Eberhardt, famous Canadian novelist, who teaches in the East and writes in mythopoeic patterns about his "roots" in the West, is blissfully unaware of the reality around him. Unlike the protest and obtuseness of her friends Judith Gill roots her observations firmly in her immediate world, more Canadian even than Eberhardt's, arriving at her larger discoveries through a fidelity to the minuteness of her experience.

Beyond the delicate Jane Austenish portrait of family and friends which is the main substance of the novel (*Emma* comes to mind), the work poses two major literary questions—one about the relationship between art and life and the second about the relationship between Shields's novel and the Canadian literary tradition. As Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* demonstrates what her art is not and what it hopes to be, so *Small Ceremonies* is a literary statement with the intentions but not the trumpeting connotations of "manifesto."

There are interesting relationships between *Small Ceremonies* and Frederick Philip Grove's work which are important on the levels of both art and tradition. Most obviously Furlong Eberhardt, Canadian novelist, has mysterious origins and a Germanic name like Grove. Furlong's real name is Rudyard, which suggests Kipling but also Rudyard Clark of Grove's *The Master of the Mill*. John Spalding of Shields's novel immediately suggests Abe Spalding of Grove's *Fruits of the Earth*. Furlong's novels, all of them set in the prairies, also suggest a modern equivalent of Grove. These "clues" are more significant when we discover that Shields and Grove are both involved in a similar aesthetic exploration of whether it is possible to determine the social and individual realities of the human experience through the dialectic of fiction. A passage from *The Master of the Mill* about this problem can almost be seen as a summary of Shields's concerns: "What is the reality in us? That which we feel ourselves to be? Or that which others conceive us to be?"² It is through the tension between public knowledge and private awareness that Shields explores the reality of her narrator and other characters. The consequent ironies pervade the novel and reach beyond the art to include the writer herself.

Carol Shields is a biographer, poet, novelist; Judith Gill, her narrator, is a biographer and, by virtue of her position as narrator, a novelist (she has a sister who is a poet): Carol has recently published a critical study of Susanna Moodie's works; Judith is busy throughout the novel writing a biography of Susanna Moodie: Carol is married to a professor of civil engineering and has five children; Judith is married to an Associate Professor of English and has two children: Carol has studied and lived in England; the Gills go to England on sabbatical. Although drawn from Shields's own experience this novel is more than loosely disguised autobiography, however. The whole question posed by Grove, of how we know ourselves and others, is involved here.

At the end of Shields's novel we find that neither public nor private knowledge of the self, neither biography nor autobiography is final or definitive. Fiction, as the dialectical recreation in precise terms of the individual in a specific social context, is the only public reality.

Judith, the biographer, cannot comprehend what Susanna Moodie was like as a human being even with all the evidence she has at her disposal; she cannot comprehend her husband and children even though they live in the same house; and it is only with great difficulty that she comes to terms with herself, not as an abstract personality but as a member of a family and society where individuality cannot be separated from the paraphernalia of living. When reality is transmuted into fiction Judith, Furlong, and John Spalding, all of them writers, find that it is impossible to "plagiarize from real life" in their art. Biography, fiction, even autobiography is only one limited view of the whole complex of life which defines the individual. Even of Susanna Moodie's own autobiographical novel Judith is forced to say, "But, of course, it isn't really Susanna; it's only a projection, a view of herself" (pp. 152-3). And perhaps Judith Gill is a view of Carol Shields who finds something about herself in Susanna and can only account for the ambiguity of existence in the multiple levels of irony in the interplay between reality, autobiography, biography, and fiction in the novel.

The question of Canadianness is important to the conception of this novel as well, overtly in the person of Furlong Eberhardt, who, like Grove, was not originally Canadian, and more subtly in the relationship the novel establishes with the Canadian literary tradition. Furlong is conveyed to us through ironies as Judith herself is. He is first the great Canadian novelist who sells to an American company the movie rights of his "Canadian" masterpiece which he has indirectly plagiarized from an Englishman. Further irony lies in Furlong's origins which are not Canadian, although he is able to appear Canadian by adopting all the standard Canadian literary myths. However, the ironies do not stop there. The description of Furlong on pages 28-29 of the novel is based on the dust jacket of Kent Thompson's first novel—he has similar American/Canadian origins, though not hidden. But the even larger irony lies in the fact that Carol Shields is, like Kent Thompson, originally from the mid-Western United States, although in this novel peculiarly sensitive to the Canadian scene. Grove, Eberhardt, Thompson, Shields, are all "foreigners" in a nationalistic sense, yet all "Canadian" writers, and here the established nature of Grove's reputation is a necessary anchor to make the other ironies legitimate and real. Shields cannot be easily dismissed as un-Canadian (I do not wish to suggest she is) since her ironies have a genuine Canadian flavor. As with the autobiographical concerns the mode here is irony which encompasses Shields herself, and which suggests some of the ambiguities which arise in attempting to define the Canadianness of the Canadian tradition.

Small Ceremonies consciously and subtly recognizes a Canadian literary tradition and stakes its claim within it, proclaiming gently what it is and what it is not going to emulate. It is not Furlong Eberhardt's type of Can. Lit., "Saskatchewan in powder form. Mix with honest rain water for native genre" (p. 27). Shields avoids many of the standard Canadian formulas which often obscure rather than clarify the ideas implied by them—man vs. nature, urban vs. wilderness, moral vs. natural, materialistic vs. idealistic. Margaret Atwood is the most distinguished of the formularizers and Shields is staying carefully away from that camp. She also consciously sidesteps the tendency which developed in the 1960's to equate "creativity" with the scribbling of the gut

reaction in immature prose. With the growing desire of Canadians and Canadian institutions for a Canadian literature this type of insensitive, gut-analysis has spilled over even into published works and is characterized by Ludwig in a "creative writing" class in *Small Ceremonies*: "Ludwig poked with a blunt and dirty finger into the sores of his consciousness, not stopping at his subtle and individual response to orgasm and the nuances of his erect penis. On and on." (p. 68). Again, on a more eminent level one is reminded here of *Beautiful Losers*, and Shields's conscious avoidance of that particular type of superficiality, without castrating her own prose, is welcome.

Small Ceremonies reminds one often of Margaret Laurence's *Fire-Dwellers*, with its emphasis on the housewife coming to terms with herself and her family. There is even an overt echo of Laurence's novel when Judith wants to assure Roger and Ruthie that in spite of their loss of romance "everything will be just fine," a phrase reminiscent of the oft repeated "Everything's all right" of *The Fire-Dwellers*. Shields's novel, however, avoids the blatant, often vulgar and loud declarations of Laurence's. Because much is similar in obvious things, the difference of tone is most striking. Shields's is a more quiet, more subtle, more delicately ironic portrayal of suburban existence and of what it means to Judith to come to terms with herself and her family.

Small Ceremonies then proclaims itself as existing beyond many of the conventional formulas and myths of the contemporary Canadian scene. It does not indulge in the kind of "mandatory sex scenes" which are often taken as proof of the "honesty" of "self-expression," and so it moves beyond the superficialities of that sort of conformity. Above all it conveys in a quiet, precise style the glance, the subtle change of tone, the shortsighted immediacy of interiors and people, and the small ceremonies which are an index of the cohesiveness of any society or family. The novel is an affirmation in its own unobtrusive way of the unity of a Canadian society where not all behavior is loud and archetypal but some is delicate and on the verge of unself-conscious authenticity.

The novel works on all these levels simultaneously with very little loss of control. For a first novel, and given the complexity of the ironies and literary purposes of the work, it is a feat worthy of a much more experienced writer. *Small Ceremonies* promises much, not of the same, but of a clarity of social vision akin to Jane Austen's, which can lead to further insights into the society Carol Shields has adopted and come to understand. One hopes that she will be able to maintain in future the "balancing act between humour and desperation" (p. 123) which makes the ironies and tensions of this novel enlightening and very human.

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NOTES

¹Carol Shields, *Small Ceremonies* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976).

²Frederick Philip Grove, *The Master of the Mill* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), p. 60.