

## BRIEF MENTIONS

### CAROL SHIELDS

#### *The Box Garden*

Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson,  
1977. Pp. 213.

When we meet Charleen Forrest, the heroine of *The Box Garden*, she is in serious trouble. Her husband, Watson, absconded a dozen years earlier when he confronted the terror of growing up, and his plunge into hippiedom, "whole-earthery," and eastern mysticism has not lessened her hopes that her loose-ended life might somehow be linked up with his again. Charleen works for a pittance on a journal of botany, writes poems, and tries to survive what she feels to be a lamentable absence of any talent for successful living. She is bullied by friends who seem to have a need to patronize a pitiable divorcée. Though she is constantly seduced by a desire to find a symbolic order and pattern in existence, she resists the impulse convinced that the rhythms of life are random and irreducible. In wry self-mockery she is burdened by a need to pretend that she is a benevolent and caring person, qualities that come naturally to some people. She is a true denizen of the second-half of the twentieth century in her cautious determination neither to despair nor to hope for too much. Of her ill-defined relationship with her lover, Eugene, she says: "I'm grateful for his company here on the ethical edge, in the noman's land between youth and age, between puritan guilt and affluent hedonism; what a pair we are, half-educated, half-old, half-married, half-happy," and concludes in the rueful rhetoric of the half-bewildered: "Isn't goodwill a kind of prehensile heroism in this century?" (p. 128). Charleen is a collector of recipes for happiness, keenly aware that in our broken-spirited age strategies for achieving peace have a comic variety.

Fortunately for the reader he comes upon Charleen Forrest when she is beginning to weary of her self-hatred. She journeys to Toronto from Vancouver to attend the remarriage of her seventy-year-old mother. The trip and reacquaintance with the home of her childhood forces her into an analysis

of the shaping forces in her life. One of the best touches in the book is Shields's characterization of the mother as a nagging, shrivelled figure dedicated to a mean, Scottish parsimony and to prodigal cascades of clichés and homilies on how to live properly.

It becomes clear that for Shields the world is split between those who can cope with life because they can handle the messiness of living with other people, and those who can not. Survival is possible if we understand that love can strengthen us against our terrors—of death, of responsibility, of failure. Greta, Watson, Mrs. McNinn, and other characters in the book lock themselves into isolation, but Louis Berceau, Eugene, Seth, and Judith know how to cope. Charleen discovers when she exorcizes the ghosts of her past that she does not have to hold herself in abeyance any longer.

Shields has a crisp, lively style but there seems to be a slight contradiction in the method of the book. Charleen tells her story as a confused coward incapable of mastering life. Yet her insights into those around her are trenchant, occasionally glib, often shaped by an almost ruthless conviction in her own values. She cannot always translate this inner certainty into her external behavior, but one feels that the diamond-hard judgments of Carol Shields are not always successfully absorbed into the persona of the dithering Charleen Forrest, who allows Seth, her son, and Eugene, her lover, to escape from the kind of probing scrutiny applied to the other characters. Viewed as they are through the soft, unfocussed light of her love they seem to be lacking in substance. The climax of the novel, which involves the abduction of Seth by a friend unhinged by excessive meditation, seems a rather artificial twist in the plot to add frenzied energy to a book that percolates quietly along for three quarters of its length. For someone who keeps insisting that we must cope with the messiness of life the book ties up its loose ends a little too neatly.

Shields has been touted by reviewers as a brilliant, intoxicating, great novelist. Those are unfair burdens to lay on her shoulders leading to expectations in the

reader that she cannot possibly fulfill. She is a brisk, skilled craftsman with a sharp eye for detail and a gift for the telling phrase. The ideas on which her novels are based are familiar, but they are ideas that need to be asserted frequently and persuasively. Charleen learns that we must take responsibility for our lives, for the consequences of our actions. We must come to terms with our relationships with others however painful because we cannot survive alone without becoming sick with bitterness or mad. As yet another novel about the awakening of a mixed-up middle aged woman it is distinguished by its refusal to slip into the usual clichés of the form. Charleen is not dedicated to the idea that the mists of confusion will clear if only she can decide which man or combination of men she can blame for her disordered life. She analyzes a range of forces in her life and realizes eventually that an obsession with finding scapegoats is simply a way of refusing to grow up. If the quest into our past strengthens its grip over us instead of releasing us from it then we are doomed. Shields's novel is a pleasant affirmation of the need to accept winning out over the compulsion to blame.

Anthony S. Brennan

**MARY SODERSTROM**  
*The Descent of Andrew McPherson*  
 Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson,  
 1976. Pp. 225.

Mary Soderstrom's *The Descent of Andrew McPherson* spans two countries, five generations, at least four wars, and more than a half century in time. Set in 1959, the novel focuses on the lives and memories of Andrew McPherson and his descendants, and their relationships with one another. At 79, Andrew owns a successful auto dealership in Green River, Idaho, where he lives in his own house on a tree-lined street with his son Howard and Howard's family. Twice-widowed, Andrew is retired, with only two surviving children: Elizabeth, who refused to move to his house, and Howard, who agreed.

Similar to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* in form, the novel is divided into twenty-seven sections, varying from two to forty-two pages in length, each of which has as its title the name of the character with whom it is primarily concerned. *The Descent*, however, is not a stream-of-consciousness novel. Unlike Faulkner, Soderstrom uses little symbolism and makes no attempt to portray preverbal levels of consciousness, limiting her field to her characters' present activities and conversations, and their memories of past events. Each section is presented in large part, but not entirely, from the point of view of the character whose name it bears. The story is told in the third person by an author who must be considered omniscient.

Ten sections are devoted to Andrew, and five each to Howard, Howard's wife Francine, and their daughter Alice Marie. One section is given to Elizabeth, and one to Franklin, Howard's and Francine's only other child. As one would expect, the earliest series of events are told when they occur in Andrew's memory. The greater part of Andrew's sections, in fact, are devoted to what he remembers: his childhood in Montreal; his marriages there, to Helen in 1899 and to Annie in 1901; the years spent in Winnipeg, on a farm in Saskatchewan, and in Dry Creek, Montana, before the move to Idaho; the birth of his four children, and the death of two.

Howard and Francine live more in the present, but also have their memories. Howard remembers unhappy times in his childhood, and, with more contentment, the early years of his marriage. Francine remembers her home in Glen Falls, New York, and her parents—French-speaking Catholics who had come from Trois-Rivières, geographically a mere seventy-five miles down the St. Lawrence from Andrew's home in Montreal, but a distance that Andrew and his Scotch Presbyterian family could not traverse.

Alice Marie is only eighteen in 1959; her memory rarely extends more than a year into the past. She lives mainly in the present, solely concerned with her own life. The events of her life as they unfold form the central action of the novel in the present, not only for her, but for her parents, and for her grandfather. The only female grandchild of Andrew McPherson, she is more like him than any of his other descendants have been.