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Book Review: Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction

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Based on an address she gave at Hanover College in 1996, the collection opens with an essay by Carol Shields, “Narrative Hunger and the Overflowing Cupboard,” in which she argues that readers have a hunger for narrative that can never be satisfied. This hunger, which manifests itself in a cultural fascination with obituaries and biographies, is related to the insufficiency of language to describe the world. Were language to match experience exactly, the reader could rest. But because experience can never be articulated in its totality, readers long for more. Shields argues that one of the reasons this hunger persists unabated is that certain stories, particularly those by women, continue to be considered irrelevant or unpublishable. Hunger for narrative, motivating both reader and writer, is then both good and bad, driven by loss but also driving the production of beauty, art, and (temporary) satiation.

Shields’s essay is followed by nine articles seeking to situate her work in relation to contemporary literary criticism, particularly feminism and postmodernism. Five address Shields’s experimentation with narrative form, while the remainder read her work in terms of “reaching beyond the word,” or how Shields attempts to articulate private and idiosyncratic experiences in a public language. The collection concludes with an annotated bibliography of works by and about the author.

Shields’s interest in biography and autobiography is picked up by most of the volume’s contributors, who focus primarily on these themes in Shields’ novels Small Ceremonies, Swann, and The Stone Diaries, and in her biography of Jane Austen. While these essays are generally well-written, readers already familiar with existing Shields scholarship will find little new in them. Nor may the essays be best served by being published adjacent to each other. In addition to focusing on a number of the same critical issues, many of the papers refer to the same passages, cite the same critics, and focus on the same characters. These similarities contribute to a unified collection, but make for tedious reading cover to cover. An exception is Lisa Johnson’s recuperation of the novel as a work of resistance, in which she contests some of Shields’s own assertions and provides a note of variety in a study of an author whose work is itself shifting and various.

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