

# the shields stories:

## Five of the Best Tackle Canada's Premiere Short Story Writer

By Peter Vesuwalla

With the death of Carol Shields in 2003, there has been a resurgent interest in her exceptional body of work. Deepa Mehta's *Republic of Love* played in theatres in February, and last fall five of the best directors from across Canada converged on Winnipeg to work on *The Shields Stories*, an anthology series produced by Shaftesbury Films of Toronto and Winnipeg's Original Pictures, for broadcast on W Network in March 2004. It's a follow-up to last year's Gemini Award-winning *The Atwood Stories*. The producers chose Winnipeg mainly for its wide variety of inexpensive locations, and it just so happens that Shields lived in the city for 20 years, setting many of her stories there, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Stone Diaries*.



All photos by Steve Wilkie except the one above of Mina Shum, which is by Peter Vesuwalla.

"her whole life is an accident, and by accident she has blundered into the heart of it."

Carol Shields, *Hazel*

Vancouver director Mina Shum and Winnipeg's own Norma Bailey each directed an episode. As a film student, Shum once attended a workshop for filmmakers at which Bailey was a panellist. Of course, if this was one of her stories, Carol Shields would have mentioned that Shum and Bailey disagree on the year that the workshop took place. Shum says it was 1989, but Bailey thinks it must have been 1987 or 1988 because she remembers having a baby with her at the time. Shields's cheerful postmodern prose questions the storytelling process, especially when it comes to minute details like this.

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hazel

even plausible. Then we have to think about the art of creating a story. Just how much coincidence is permissible, anyway? I wonder if it's a mentality that comes from living in Winnipeg, where everyone is about one degree of separation from everyone else and coincidences happen all the time.

How appropriate it was, then, that I met Mina Shum (*Double Happiness*), who directed *Various Miracles* from a script by Esta Spalding (*Falling Angels*), outside a building her crew had just converted into a vintage clothing store. Such a store is the perfect metaphor for Winnipeg, where nothing is ever thrown out and

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same name, matter-of-factly lists a number of chance miracles, without any additional comment. Seven women who all happen to be named Emily line up at the same lingerie store; four people sitting at the back of the same bus each have a paperback copy of the same book; and a writer delivers a manuscript of her new novel to her publisher, who, after the first draft, said it, "relied too heavily on the artifice of coincidence."

Shields's stories continually challenge her readers. First she redefines "miracle" to include little mundane coincidences. Then she asks us to evaluate the story as a whole in terms of whether any of it is



even some of the older downtown buildings are recycled, disassembled brick by brick and rebuilt to look old. Living here gives you the feeling there's only a finite amount of stuff and a finite number of people, so coincidences are somehow mathematically expected. Buy something at a vintage clothing store in this city, and you're likely to bump into the original owner within five minutes.

Shum compares her contribution to *The Shields Stories* with her own 2003 feature, *Long Life, Happiness & Prosperity*, in which a young Chinese girl inadvertently sets off a chain of events when she dabbles in Taoist mysticism to find a match for her single mom, causing one man to lose his job and another to win the lottery. "That film, being about magic realism, and *Various Miracles*, share

various miracles

dolls dolls

# SPRING

a very similar but very different heart,” says Shum. “It’s similar in that it’s about how one person’s courage can affect another person’s life decision. And in *Long Life*, it was all about how we are not alone and how every action has an equal and opposite reaction. So they share a similar kind of dynamic.”

However, Shields’s stories don’t always lend themselves to straight screen conversion. Many are self-referential, often addressing the reader in the second person. She would draw attention to her own use of certain phrases or takes a moment to remind us we’re reading a work of fiction. *The Stone Diaries* even includes a section of supposed photos of the characters (which, upon inspection, look little like their descriptions) and a recipe for lemon pudding. And so, to one degree or another, each segment of *The Shields Stories* is a variation on the source material. Shum’s version of “Various Miracles” picks up more or less where Shields left off, and expands the lives of its characters. Purists may grumble, since the characters in the original short story take a back seat to the writing, but the writers and directors were given free reign to adapt the stories as they saw fit.



view her with a little bit of Carol’s personality. Carol was a feminist, but she wasn’t an artsy-fartsy bohemian.”

Perhaps the most notably feminist-themed episode is *Hazel*, written by David Young (*Swann*, 1996, which was adapted from another Shields novel) and based on a story in the 1989 collection, *The Orange Fish*. But this isn’t feminism of the flag-waving, male-bashing variety. “We’re having fun with it,” says director Norma Bailey (*The Sheldon Kennedy Story*). “We’re sort of doing a bit of a *Fargo*-like take on it.” The title character is a woman of a certain age who finds herself out in the competitive world of direct-sale kitchen appliances after her husband dies of heart failure. “It’s about a woman looking for her voice,” says Bailey, who’s been making films since the early days of the

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“I was not a compulsive Shields reader, I have to say,” says Shum, sacrificing a good chunk of her lunch break to talk to me. “I did some research after I was offered this project, because I want to stay true to what Shields was about. So more than reading her stories, I read Shields’s interviews, to get her mindset, because I’m doing a film about a writer. Even though the character isn’t Carol Shields, I want to

Winnipeg Film Group in the 1970s. “She’s someone who’s been sheltered in her own little house and is forced to leave it by circumstances. She finds her voice at the end. It’s always a challenge to do anything in a half an hour but it’s also freeing in certain ways because it’s a very well-defined box.”

a wood

# dolls dolls

For her contribution, actor turned director/writer Sarah Polley (*I Shout Love*) says she was more interested in capturing the spirit of Shields's writing than making a direct adaptation. And no wonder. *The Harp* is based on a story that's barely four pages long and contains almost no dialogue. "It was the only one that I found that I thought I could develop into a half hour," says Polley, who picked it out of the 2000 anthology, *Dressing Up for the Carnival*. "I think the reason adaptations of novels don't always work out in film is that you're trying to shrink something. I think the beauty of short stories—and particularly these very short stories—is you can actually fit it all in and you can expand upon it, as opposed to trying to shove everything into a half hour. With a story that's three pages long you can really develop the ideas, and that's what made it exciting to write."

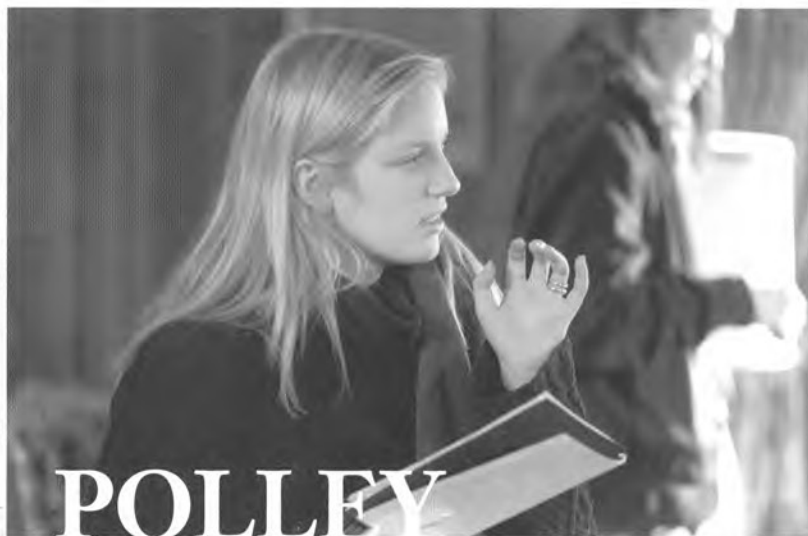
Polley says she was attracted by the slapstick premise of a woman who's innocently walking down the street when a harp falls out of a window and lands on her. Later, the harpist visits her in the hospital and asks her to help pay for



The Harp

a new harp "I was overjoyed when I found the story," she says. "It really demonstrated that part of Carol Shields which I really love. She can be laugh-out-loud funny in an unsophisticated way. What people tend to think of when they think of Carol Shields is this kind of whimsical, witty sensibility in terms of its humour, and I actually love that she can be really juvenile and she can just make you cackle. That's what I wanted to celebrate in her work."

Lori Spring, who acted as creative producer on the series as well as writing and directing another two stories from *Various Miracles*, "Dolls, Dolls, Dolls, Dolls" and "A Wood," both found herself getting in touch with the darker, more tragic side of Shields. "Dolls, Dolls, Dolls, Dolls," as Shields conceived it, is a collection of four separate anecdotes told by one character all involving dolls and the strange desire to nurture inanimate objects. The last one involves the horrible murder and dismemberment of a little girl," says Spring, who worked on *The Atwood Stories*. "Even now, talking about it, I get a rumble,



## POLLEY

an uneasy feeling that I think is at the heart of that particular story. I think that kind of phenomenon occurs very frequently in Shields's stories. There are layers. The surface is deceptively light and sometimes even banal, but the stuff going on underneath is anything but." There's also a bit of darkness under the surface of *A Wood* (which Spring stepped up to direct after Barbara Willis Sweete dropped out of the project). As two brothers bicker while their sister prepares for a violin concert, we slowly learn a great deal about the guilt and resentment over the death of their father that lurks deep down in each of them, while they all maintain stiff upper lips.

Lynne Stopkewich (*Kissed*), working from a script by Dennis Foon (*Long Life, Happiness & Prosperity*), took her characters literally into the darkness for *Windows*, the story of a couple of artists who opt to cover up every window in their house and go without natural light, rather than pay a new window tax. This story, taken from *Dressing Up for the*

# the harp

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## windows

*Carnival*, sounds preposterous at first, but has its roots in reality. In England, there really was a tax on any home with six windows or more for about 150 years. But reading the story you get the sense that Shields was also writing about the experience of living in Winnipeg in the winter, when the necessity of staying indoors and the short daylight hours can actually lead to mood disorders. "When I first read the script, I kept describing it to my friends as *Lord of the Flies* in Winnipeg," says Stopkewich.

Shields never specifies where in Winnipeg the characters in *Windows* live, and everyone who reads the story seems to imagine a different neighbourhood. But for Stopkewich, the story could only take place outside the city limits in rural Manitoba. "It's almost kind of like a desert island effect," she says, on set at an old nunnery in Saint Francis Xavier, Manitoba, just a few minutes west of Winnipeg. "This particular spot satisfied all those requirements. It's a really excellent building, with lots of history to it in terms of the architecture. It's really hard to find that kind of space in the city. If anything I wanted it to be almost like the house in *Days of Heaven*, where you've got the house in the middle of nowhere to give it that isolated, slightly surreal effect."



Left: Mina Shum's *Various Miracles*



Right: Sheila McCarthy in Norma Bailey's *Hazel*

Whether that's the sort of setting Carol Shields had in mind when she wrote the story we'll never know. Committing her work to celluloid forced the five filmmakers to solidify things that were left open to the reader's imagination when she wrote her short stories. "You just get nervous if someone is going to say you've betrayed the work or taken it in a direction that's not right," says Polley. But she got some reassurance from Shields's daughter, Catherine, who just happened to visit the set the day Polley was filming her most off-the-wall scene, and diverging the furthest from the original story. Sensing her presence was making Polley a little nervous, Catherine Shields leaned over reassuringly and said, "If my mom were here, she'd be giggling the whole time."

*Peter Vesuvalla is a freelance writer based in Winnipeg.*