A black and white close-up portrait of actor Ralph Fiennes. He is looking slightly upwards and to the left with a serious expression. He has short, dark hair and is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored, open-collared shirt.

Ralph Fiennes in Anthony Minghella's
The English Patient

Swann and The English Patient

By Douglas Fetherling

The literary adaptation has made a welcome return to Canadian screens this season. After years of auteur-dominated cinema, that all too often served-up well-directed but poorly plotted films, the award-winning novels of Carol Shields and Michael Ondaatje (among others) are providing the source material for Canadian and international directors.

All *Swann* photos courtesy
Norstar Entertainment Inc.

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**From the bottom:
David Cubitt, Brenda Fricker and
Miranda Richardson.**
The tension between the characters
never quite works. It's as though
Richardson is performing in a soap
opera, while Fricker is appearing in
an art film.



Carol Shields, for whom the publication of *Swann: A Mystery* was a career turning point, holds two unusual distinctions. First, she is the only Canadian imaginative writer to win a Pulitzer Prize (in 1995 for her most recent novel, *The Stone Diaries*): an anomaly made possible by the fact that, although she's lived in Canada since her early 20s (she's 61 now), she has kept her American citizenship. Her second distinction is that, in all of world literature, she seems to be tied with Jane Austen for the number of works being brought to the screen at the present time. In addition to Anna Benson Gyles's version of *Swann*, which is hitting the theatre screens across the country as I write these words, there are two other Shields projects queued up behind it.

Swann: A Mystery was a commercial success as well as a great *succès d'estime*. It was, for example, short-listed for the Governor General's fiction award (but lost to Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*). Indeed, despite its success in Canada, *Swann* was even more warmly received in Britain, where it drew inevitable comparisons to its unintended rival, A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, and ended up on the *Daily Telegraph's* select and prestigious round-up of the year's best books. Ever since then, Shields has had an enormous following in Britain, where her entire fiction back-list has now been brought out in railway stall paperbacks. In 1992, her next novel, *The Republic of Love*, enjoyed an even more positive reaction in the U.K. It also did well in France.

Benson Gyles, an English director and independent producer, purchased film rights to *Swann: A Mystery* in 1991 and commissioned a Canadian, David Young, to develop the script. Late in 1995, Shields came to Toronto for the first read through with the various cast members, including the English actor Miranda Richardson and Brenda Fricker from Ireland (who won an Oscar for *My Left Foot*). Within a few days of their all sitting down together at the big round table, the filming of *Republic of Love*, starring Bridget Fonda, was getting underway on the other side of town. This film, the second in line to be finished and released, was written by Shields in loose collaboration with the producer, Bruce Duggan, a Winnipegger like herself. At about the same time, Cynthia Scott, who directed *Company of Strangers* for the National Film Board, was in the early stages of turning *The Stone Diaries* into a feature.

Swann

Naturally, it's hard to say what effect all of this activity will have on Carol Shields—except to make her better known and no doubt give her a whole new wave of followers who haven't read her before. At the moment, all one can do is to look briefly at the film that's actually at hand. Doing so leaves one with the impression that *Swann* the movie is a well-intentioned and interesting piece of work, but definitely a small film, and that it has little of what made the novel such an excellent book.

The very title hints at the major differences. The text entitled *Swann: A Mystery* has become a film called simply *Swann*. This alteration is a telling one. The book is indeed a mystery (it won the Arthur Ellis Fiction Award), but a serious one; a mystery about the unknowability of the past, as represented by a Canadian poet murdered by her abusive husband (recalling the tragic case of Pat Lowther of B.C., killed in 1975 by her husband, who subsequently died in prison). In the week or so after the film opened, the newspaper ads for *Swann* were altered to read *Swann, A Murder Mystery*, but this too misses the point.

Lowther came to be seen as a feminist martyr, and there is certainly a generous amount of applied feminism in Shields's book. What distinguishes it even more, however, is its razor-edged satire of academic scholarship, the Can-Lit kind in particular. Mary Swann, the poet of the title, was a farm woman who wrote in the vernacular tradition. In the film, we don't get to read or hear many of her verses, but we know what they must be like, for *Swann* the writer is totally *sui generis*, working in the folk formalism that appeals to people with the urge to write but whose reading stopped with Robert Frost if not Emily Dickinson.

Swann's humble verses were—to use the splendid literary euphemism—published privately by the local job printer. In Benson Gyles's movie, the printing was filmed at Coach House Press in Toronto. This is the film's only trace of Shields's wicked send-up of the literary world. It is impossible to believe that screenwriter Young, a former Coach House avant gardiste before he turned to commercial storytelling for television and the screen, wasn't hip to this most delicious element of the novel. The viewer is left to presume, then, that Benson Gyles or her Canadian producer, Christina Jennings (who produced Ondaatje's *Love Clinic*, the 20-minute short he wrote while they were both residents at the Canadian Film Centre), just didn't get Shields's satirical thrust, or else they excluded it as a matter of policy.

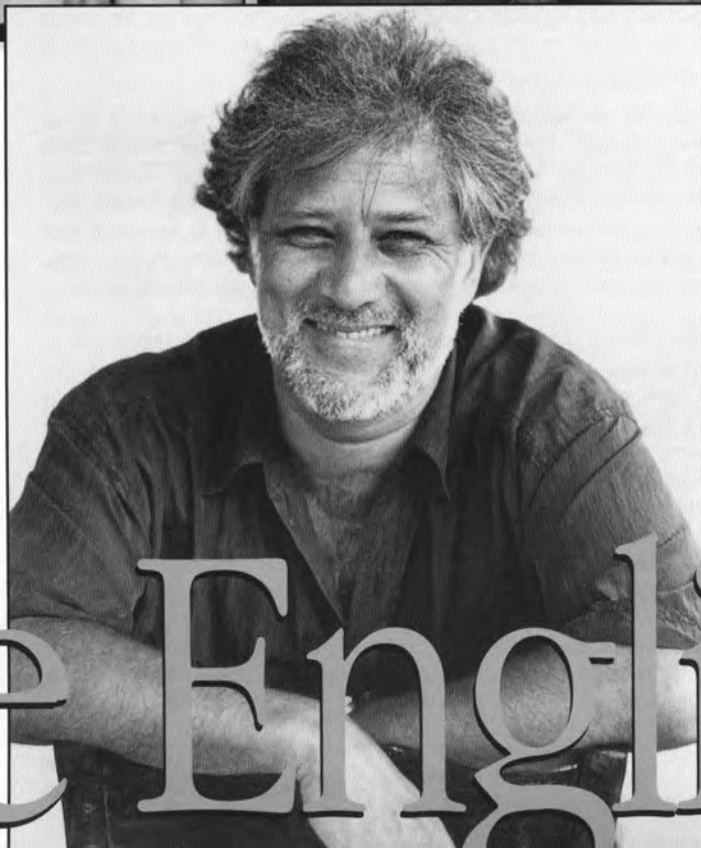
Benson Gyles is, of course, an outsider to the milieu in question. But that only doubles her ironic inattention to Shields's irony. The plot line, after all, is about how an outsider, a reformed American academic with a bestseller's lifestyle, seeks at once to placate, patronize, outwit and exploit the hicks by writing a book that will reveal Mary Swann's genius to the larger world that lies beyond the little Eastern Ontario farming community. The local librarian is Swann's best friend, Rose Hindmarch (Fricker), who is also curator of the local Swann Museum, as the town, too, attempts, in its own way, to turn the poet's life and times to good account as a tourist draw.

Shields wrote out of a strong sense of place that unfortunately has got lost in the transition to film. The bulk of the shooting was done in a couple of towns close to Toronto, but the landscape looks like the Prairies, and when Fricker attempts a Canadian accent she sounds like a Newfoundlander, leaving the audience to wonder what this Newfie is doing in Saskatchewan. Fricker does capture, however, that much-vaunted Puritan restraint of rural, small-town Canada. She exhibits a lot of skill in the way her character wrestles with keeping her emotions in check, with varying degrees of success, depending on the circumstances. Her character should be, as she is intended to be, the perfect counterpoise to the Chicago writer on the make, the one played by Richardson. She's the author of the successful book, *The Female Prism*; she's tough, slick, abused and aggressive. She is also the kind of person whose idea of Nature is an outdoor cafe. But the tension between the characters never quite works, because Richardson, although she does a credible American accent, simply is no match for Fricker's skillful performance. It's as though Richardson is performing in a soap opera, while Fricker is appearing in an art film.

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As Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* is nothing like Shields's *Swann: A Mystery*, so the film *The English Patient*, written and directed by Anthony Minghella, has virtually nothing in common with Benson Gyles's *Swann*. Minghella has deviated from the text considerably, but more in the necessary area of plot than in the vital one of intent. The novel is pure Ondaatje, a vast marketplace of the most unex-



pected and evocative word combinations. Impressionistic gives the wrong idea. Rather, the novel has as much to do with cadence as with any lineal method of construction, even though the plot (more about which in a minute) could be parsed as easily as that of any traditional novel in the old conventions of realism.

Minghella, whose two other films were as different as *Truly, Madly, Deeply* and *Mr. Wonderful*, was, of course,

The English Patient

Opposite page: Canadian author Michael Ondaatje; British star, Kristin Scott Thomas. This page: French star, Juliette Binoche.

Old-fashioned high-voltage star power and lush, startling imagery have made *The English Patient* a box office hit for Minghella and Ondaatje.

limited in the number of Ondaatje's own words he could use (lest the movie cease moving and become enslaved to its dialogue). Indeed, he could only employ cinematography the same way Ondaatje deploys language. Minghella's imagery is lush, startling and sometimes hypnotic. His film is not so much a faithful adaptation of parts of Ondaatje's book as it is one work of art paying homage to another. Which is just as it should be. That a paperback of Minghella's screenplay has been published simultaneously with the standard movie tie-in edition of the text is revealing.

Reduced to a synopsis, the story of *The English Patient* sounds like that of some soapy love story, perhaps along the lines of Brian Desmond Hurst's 1941 film, *Dangerous Moonlight*, about a Polish composer turned RAF pilot (Anton Walbrook) who gets shot down and loses his memory (only to write the "Warsaw Concerto"). Before the war, the English patient of the title (played with cunning but ultimately tiresome understatement by Ralph Fiennes) is an archaeologist working in the Sahara. At war's end, he winds up in the Tuscan hills of Northern Italy, having been horribly burned in the crash of his aircraft in the desert, a tragedy that appears to have left him without the powers of memory. Minghella resists simply alternating between the flashbacks and flash forwards to juggle the pre-war past and the war's-end present. Instead, he winds the two strands together through the medium of the patient's morphine dreams and conscious recollections. A French-Canadian nurse (wonderfully played by Juliette Binoche) tends to his needs in a bomb-ravaged monastery. (How the contemporary imagination loves ruined temples and monasteries...think of *Apocalypse Now*. They appeal to our combined sense of smugness and poverty in matters of spiritual equilibrium.)

Hanging around the desanctified folly is a Canadian soldier who has lost both thumbs to a heartless interrogator. This man without the apposable appendages is played rather poorly by Willem Dafoe, in what might be the least successful impression of a Canadian since Humphrey Bogart's Charlie Allnut in *The African Queen*. The true star of the film is Kristin Scott Thomas (previously seen in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Angels and Insects*, and Robert Lepage's *Le confessionnal*). She is the married lover in the patient's past. Certain people are loved by the camera. Scott Thomas's eyes dance, her devilish smile seems to have been put on crookedly, a bit like Groucho's moustache. Whenever she's in a scene, the film is elevated to another level of accomplishment. It's as though some scenes in colour and sound had been spliced into an old silent film. That's how much the wattage increases when she's on screen. For this reason alone, *The English Patient* is a film well worth watching. Another would be the way Minghella, while necessarily rendering down and simplifying the plot, nonetheless reinforces Ondaatje's characteristic theme—statelessness in a world of national borders. In the process, he even preserves some touches of Ondaatje's unmistakable humour. ■



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