



MAKING WORDS / FINDING STORIES

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Biographical Note: One of a select group of stellar authors in Canada, Ms. Shields is perhaps best known for *The Stone Diaries*, winner of a Pulitzer and Governor General's Award. Other awards for her works include The National Book Critics Circle Award, Canadian Booksellers' Prize, The Marian Engel Award, Arthur Ellis Award, and CBC Prize for Drama. In addition to being a novelist, poet and playwright, Ms. Shields is Chancellor of the University of Winnipeg and Professor at the University of Manitoba. Some of her recent books include: *The Republic of Love*, *Coming to Canada*, *Thirteen Hands*, and the recently published *Larry's Party*.

When I was contacted first to come to Vancouver for this talk, I was told that they would like a title. Now, this was many, many months ago, and so I rather desperately picked a title called "Making Words / Finding Stories," thinking that if I was going to talk about "the writing life," these two components would have to be in anything that I talked about. There is the whole business of language, there is the whole business of narrative. These are what we always think of as the two parts of the recipe for writing novels.

Language is probably more important to me than narrative, but tonight I'm going to talk about narrative — where our narratives come from, the fact that we're born with a kind of narrative hunger we never quite fill up. In fact, I was one of the very few children, I think, who loved those Dick and Jane stories. You know, those terrible, white-bread American stories? I felt very warmly toward Jane with her little white socks and Dick who was the perfect brother, of course. The narrative was just as thin as could be, but it nevertheless captured me. The whole mystery of learning to read was the central transcendent moment in my life, when I realised that those little marks on the paper meant something.

I grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, which you may know is the home of Ernest Hemingway, but Ernest Hemingway got away as fast as he could from this lost stronghold and never returned.

I started my schooling in Nathaniel Hawthorne Public School and when I got a little older I transferred to Ralph Waldo Emerson Public School. I knew who these gentlemen were, because their portraits adorned the corridors of our school with their frock coats and their tiny little glasses and their beards. They were white, and they were men, and they were dead. So it seemed to me, growing up as a child, that I was locked out of the whole world of being a writer. It also seemed very much like wanting to be a movie star, to go around saying that you wanted to write a book. It was a bit presumptuous in the puritan Midwest that I knew. So of course I didn't. It was a secret — a secret I kept — that I wanted to be a writer, though I had no idea what I would write about, or who my audience would be.

Even after I began to publish novels, I didn't quite know what I was writing about. But I soon found out because I read the reviews. And the reviews said that I wrote about ordinary people. That was something of a shock to me because I never thought of myself or my friends as ordinary people, and it's a word that I still don't understand perfectly, although I'm trying to. There is a sense in which you don't know what you're writing about. It's said writers shouldn't let their right hand know what their left hand is doing, but there are some times when the right hand doesn't know what the *right* hand is doing. One example of this occurs to me — one I've often read, usually in scholarly articles because this isn't the sort of thing that newspaper reviewers tackle — that, in fact, most of the fathers that appear in my novels are rather distant and inarticulate people. That's something that I'll have to think about. You don't know the patterns you're creating. I recently had a letter from a woman in Northern California who is actually a columnist for the *National Journal for Dental Hygienists*. She wanted to know why there were so many teeth in my novels. She had gone through everything I had ever written, meticulously, and she cited — with page numbers — every reference to teeth. She wanted to know what it was about teeth that

I was so drawn to. I simply wrote her that teeth are part of life, and that's about as well as I could do with it.

Another interesting interview was with a French journalist who, again, was a very well prepared interviewer. She said, "There are no animals in your books." And it's true, but it's something that I didn't know. My mother didn't let us have cats or dogs and I married someone who was allergic to cats and dogs, so I suppose I have been out of the world of family pets for a long time.

This is what I mean when I say we don't quite know what we're writing about, what we're putting in, and what we're leaving out. One thing that I knew when I started to write novels in the 70's, was that I wanted to write the novels that I couldn't find at that time. I couldn't find novels about people who lived the kind of life that I was leading. And I felt hungry for those kinds of novels. I wanted to read novels about women who were reflective, who had a moral system, who had ties of loyalty to their community and to their families. The novels that came out in the 70's, at least the early 70's, were all about freedom — striking out for freedom — about leaving home, about trying to find oneself. (I was interested to read in the Vancouver paper today a headline that said "Freedom Isn't Free" in the article about Martin Luther King's daughter. "Freedom Isn't Free" — I thought it was a very nice way to put it.) I learned, at that time, or instinctively felt something which I should have known earlier, that writers should probably write the book they can't find in the bookstore, that they can't find on the library shelf, the book they want to read themselves.

I also knew the kind of book I didn't want to read or to write. I didn't want to write about my family and friends because I wanted them to remain my family and friends. I made that decision fairly early in my writing life. And I also knew I didn't even want to write about acquaintances — you know the old fear of being photographed and having your soul stolen — I think there's a certain amount of rationality to that theory. When I was writing my first novel — called *Small Ceremonies* — I happened to be out shopping one day in a neighbourhood mall and I met, not a friend, but an acquaintance of mine, and she was in a great rush. She had just bought herself a

beautiful, spruce green night gown. She opened the bag and she showed me this night gown. And she said, “Now, I must rush off because I want to buy some candles to match my night gown.” My jaw must have dropped because she said, “Oh, I have candles to match all my night gowns.” I couldn’t resist putting this into the novel that I was writing, but when I was reading proofs, I thought, “I’ll have to take it out because she’ll read this book and she is probably the only person in the Western Hemisphere who has carried colour-coordination to this extent.”

Often it’s terribly tempting. On the other hand, we *can* use what we overhear on the bus — and, by the way, I think it’s very important that writers take public transportation all their lives and do a lot of sitting around in coffee bars, too, to see what people are talking about, what they’re sounding like, what they’re interested in. My favourite eavesdrop of all time — which I’ve just managed to use — was in a café in Winnipeg of all places, where I was caught between two conversations. It was a kind of narrative cross-draft. At one table, two women were speaking about their love affair. At the other table, there were two businessmen with their shirts and their haircuts and ties, and the older one leaned over and said to the younger one, “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to the bottom of the barrel.” It was exactly the kind of psychic moment that I like to get down quickly into my notebook. The whole world is up for sale, but I try to stay away from those people that I might cause injury to.

I thought I’d talk a little bit about where narratives come from. This is always a great question because people who don’t write novels think that we have experienced everything in our novels; the fact is we really make a lot of it up. This imaginative part of the recipe is the part that’s always harder to explain. I’ll talk a little bit about some of the things that I’ve written and how the ideas for them came to me.

Ideas, by the way — and I always try to get my students to understand this — are all around us. There’s not a day in our lives where something doesn’t happen to us — something to do with the weather, or the dream we had, or a snatch of conversation — something that gives us not a whole narrative, but a portion of a narrative,

that starts us off thinking.

I'll begin with the first novel that I wrote called *Small Ceremonies*. I had just finished my Masters degree and my subject was Susanna Moodie, the Ontario pioneer, much better known in Eastern Canada than Western Canada. What happened is something that happens often to people who do academic work: not all the interesting material can be used, because it's conjectural. You're forced, really, to use the more conventional material, the material which has already been sanctioned. And so I finished my thesis and I had all this "stuff" left over. Well, I'm my mother's daughter — my mother would never throw out a quarter of a tablespoon of frozen peas if she had them left over after dinner. I saved all my notes for my thesis and decided to write a book about a woman who was writing a book about Susanna Moodie. In this way, I could use my leftovers, my *interesting* material on Susanna Moodie. That's how that novel came into being.

I always worry, of course, about putting too much of my academic interests into my novels and I once wrote a book called *The Republic of Love*. The heroine is a folklorist, and her speciality is mermaids, which just happened to be something I was passionately interested in at the time. I was reading about mermaids, collecting pictures about mermaids; I was interested in the whole iconography of mermaids; looking at mermaids from a feminist point of view which I don't think anyone has done yet. I had one of my daughters read the manuscript — my daughter Anne who lives in Vancouver — and I said, "Anne, have I got too much mermaid stuff in here?" And she said, "Well, let me put it like this — don't put any *more* in." I always feel that I have to be a little careful about weighing down novels with my own particular passions and trying to remember that this has to be a story about people engaged in something else besides their academic interests.

My novel, *Swan*, in a way came out of Susanna. I have a lot to thank Susanna Moodie for and, actually, Margaret Atwood who originally led me to Susanna Moodie. When I was writing about Susanna — as you know, she wrote two wonderful Canadian books, *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings*, but she also wrote

a whole pack of execrable novels, novels set in England — set in an England that no longer existed; melodramas. They were the Harlequin romances of their day. And because they were disposable, not many of them have survived. But there are a few and they're in special university archives. I found the books I wanted at the University of Western Ontario and I sent for those books through inter-library loan. They arrived, I read them with my hair standing on end, sent them back, and then just before my thesis defense, I panicked, as one is wont to do in these situations, and I ordered the books back again to have another look. I received the message that all of the Moodie material had disappeared. So I tucked that away in my mind. I thought that was an interesting thing to happen to such rare material. And then two or three years later, I happened to be listening to the radio, and heard a young economist speaking, who had actually conducted a rather innovative experiment. He had cornered the world market on Mexican jumping beans, and I realised at that moment that if you choose a commodity that is small enough, you can corner the market on just about anything, which is what I felt that the thief who had plundered the library at Western must have done. By the way, that material is still missing from Western, and nobody knows quite where it has gone to.

So, *Swann*, which is a novel about a disappearing manuscript, a disappearing work of a minor poet, really came straight out of this experience, which I recorded not on paper, but in my mind. That's one of the plots, the mystery of the disappearing manuscripts. The larger mystery is the mystery of who makes art, who gets to name the culture. The trick was to get those two mysteries moving together like a set of gears, and that took me a little longer to figure out just how to do that.

A couple of others: there are some short stories — I can usually look at a short story when I write it and I can find the moment that was the original yeast that started it going. There's a story called "Chemistry" and this came out of my first teaching experience. To my surprise, the University of Ottawa, when I finished my M.A., hired me to teach an evening course in creative writing. I'm sure many of you here have taken evening courses, and you know

what they're like — they're very different from day courses, especially in a cold climate like Ottawa. People come through the cold and the dark to be together, and there's a special spirit in those classes. This first class I ever taught became a kind of a lovefest. We all adored each other and we all loved each other's work. Everyone got an A+, of course. I could never quite explain why this was, whether it was because it was my first exposure to teaching, whether it was the climate, the darkness, or what it was, but I put it down to chemistry. Many professors will talk about this. Certain classes, certain gatherings of people have a particular chemistry, and we can't really analyze that too closely. I moved this story, called "Chemistry," to Montreal to a YMCA, I changed it from creative writing to a course in the recorder, and the story became something different, but it was still about this mysterious chemical nature that bonds people together.

There is another story called "Hinterland," about a couple who go off to Paris, and it was based on an experience that I had in Paris in 1986. If you remember, that was the period of great distress. There were bombings in Paris almost every day and, in fact, there were a number of people killed in these bombings. Everywhere we went, we had to have our handbags checked. We found ourselves in a museum one day, and the guard came over to us and said very quietly in French, "You must leave the museum." So we began to saunter toward the doorway, and other people were sauntering toward the doorway, and then someone started to run, and then everyone started to run, and people picked up their children under their arms and ran as fast as they could, and people were stumbling over each other. It turned out it was a false alarm. I felt ashamed afterwards that we had joined into, and contributed to, the panic. The story was written out of that sense of shame.

There's another story called "Fuel for the Fire," which is the first story I wrote set in Winnipeg. We moved to Winnipeg in 1980, and I was a little worried about going there. The real reason I was afraid to go to Winnipeg was because in all the years of my long and happy marriage, I had never lived in the same city as my in-laws. But it turned out to be a fine experience. They used to love to come to our house for dinner, not just to see the children but because we

had a fireplace. My father-in-law, who was a working class man, had never had a fireplace. He used to like to sit in front of the fireplace and he'd say, "Better than TV." But because he was a very practical and resourceful man, he believed that he should bring the fuel for our fires. He was horrified at the thought of Prestologs. So one day he turned up with a bunch of old lilac roots that we burned. He also found some railway ties full of nails that he chopped up and brought over for our fires. And one night he came with a cardboard carton filled with bowling pins. I don't know if he found them or was given them, but he looked at them and he must have thought, "They're wood. They'll burn." So that evening, and it was Christmas Eve, we burned those bowling pins one after another. Now, if you ever get a chance to do this, you should try it because a bowling pin is not what you think it is. It is not a solid lathed object. It's made in four quarters — lateral quarters — which are glued together, and there's an oval emptiness in the middle — a hollow spot. So the fire first of all burns off the paint — in a gorgeous blast — then it finds its way into the hollow place where it glows a beautiful golden colour and then, bang, it cracks open. So one after another into the fire went the bowling pins. The story is about this, but it's really not about burning bowling pins. It's about someone making an offering, and the story came from that moment.

One of the stories is called "Hazel." I'm very interested in writing about work, by the way. It's the one thing that I find missing from most novels. I don't know if you saw the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, but in fact I came out of that movie in a rage because everyone had pots of money and nobody went to work. It seems to me that what we spend most of our waking time doing should enter into our fiction. You probably notice that most novelistic events happen on weekends or in the evenings. But our lives don't. This story came to me when I was living in Vancouver. I was in one of the downtown department stores and I saw a woman demonstrating cookware. You know, one of those sort of magic slicers that those women are always dicing vegetables with. There's something about those cooking demonstrations which is very dramatic to me. These women gather huge crowds around them when they dice

their carrots and onions. And I'm always right there, right in the front row watching them do it. I wanted to know what the lives of those people are like, and when they go home, where do they go home to? I always want to go up to them and say, "How did you come to be here and doing this at this moment?" But of course our society doesn't allow us to ask those kinds of questions. So the story called "Hazel" is my attempt to try to construct an imaginative life about something that I don't really know — something that I can only guess at. And that brings me to *Larry's Party*, which is also about something I don't really know, and that is men.

There was a bit of a gap between *The Stone Diaries* and *Larry's Party*, when I was trying to think of what I wanted to write about. I've never had that problem before — the subject for the next novel has always risen up earlier and I've had to set it aside. This time I didn't know what to write about. I have lunch every Thursday with three women friends. We call ourselves the Critical Theory Group. And it is true that once or twice we have talked about critical theory, but mostly we talk about how to lose five pounds or other interesting subjects. One day one of these women said, "I wonder what it's like to be a man at the end of the 20th century." And so our two-hour lunch stretched to about three hours, but I don't think we solved anything. I began thinking about this, and I began asking some of my men friends, especially men who may be younger — men in their 30s or 40s — what is it like? I knew some of this, of course. I knew that men were threatened in the job market. I knew from my New York editor that publishing a novel by a white male is asking for a very low readership these days. Men are in a period of transition, I think. Most of the supports that men have enjoyed have been withdrawn — their role as bread winner, their refuge in those lodges, the Elks and the Rotary — I know membership in all those organizations is going down. And even the kind of hunting and fishing life that men have enjoyed makes many women roll their eyes.

I wanted to write about a man who was born in 1950, so that he would be 50 or so at the turn of the century. I like the kind of neatness of the arithmetic. I wanted him to experience the major existential questions such as: Is this all there is? Or, how did I get

here? I wanted him to be introspective, a man with limited education, but an inquiring mind; someone who was always thinking, thinking and never stopping. It was an interesting exploration for me. I don't know if I learned a lot about men, maybe one or two things. I used to think that when men talked about sports and cars that they were using a metaphor, but now I just think they're talking about sports or cars. I also think — and I have to be very careful how I say this — that many men most of the time tend, more than most women most of time, to compartmentalize their lives more than women. I think I knew this before I began, but I ended up believing this more than ever. There's something Darwinian about that — something that is hardwired into the male body. I wanted to try to understand that a little bit. That's why the novel is in compartments — in compartmental chapters such as *Larry's Love*, 1978; *Larry's Folks*, 1980; *Larry's Work*, 1981; *Larry's Words* — so that it moves along in time. But it also moves in what I think of as CATscan slices. When I was writing this book, I was invited to one of our large hospital research facilities for a tour. I was shown beautiful pictures that come out of CATscan machines — wonderful slices of heart and liver, kidney and vein, aortas and so on. And I found them very beautiful. I decided to slice Larry's life up into sections and see if I couldn't catch something in those particular categories.

Now, the whole business about women writing about men is an interesting one — and men writing about women too. I think inevitably we fail. Women can get right up to that male body, but they can't get inside to really understand it. I think men, and you must know this if you've ever read a male novelist writing about childbirth, get things wrong. They get things wrong about women's lingerie. They get a lot wrong. I nevertheless think it's worth doing, otherwise we're going to end up with a separate literature for men and for women. And, to a certain degree, we already have. If you don't believe me, you can ask this question to your men friends: Who is Jo March? It's a question that almost all women can answer, but very few men.

I wanted to write about a man who was not a buffoon. You may have noticed if you put on the TV or go to films, that men have

become the buffoons of our age. They are the ones who take the pratfalls, they are the fools. They are the ones who slip on the banana peels. It was very different when I grew up in the 50s with mother-in-law jokes. I thought there was nothing wrong with mother-in-law jokes or maybe I sensed something wrong, but couldn't put my finger on it. The dumb secretary joke, the various ways in which women became figures of fun. Women who went out to buy hats when they were depressed. Women who wore certain kinds of aprons. I think men have now taken this role, and I didn't want my Larry to be a buffoon. When I finished the novel and read it, it felt as if I were going over it with a fine piece of sandpaper to get rid of those particular edges that I didn't want to be there. (By the way, I should tell you that when this novel was launched in New York at Barnes and Noble, a man came up to me after the presentation and said, "I want to show you my business card." He put it down and it said: Larry Weller — Consulting Engineer. Born in 1950 as he confided to me. And I said, "I hope this isn't going to spook you." And he went straight into his male talk and said, "I can handle it.")

I'm going to read you just a very short piece. Larry grew up in a working class family in Winnipeg. His parents had immigrated from England as many people did at that time in the late 40s and early 50s to work in factories. There's a secret in his family and the secret is his mother's sense of guilt. She has accidentally killed someone. Her mother-in-law, in fact. Her name's Dot Weller. This part takes place when Larry's about 30 years old.

The history of Dot Weller, and how she killed her mother-in-law, came to her son Larry in small pieces, by installments as it were. He can't remember a time when he didn't know at least part of the story, and he's not sure, in fact, if he's ever been presented with a full account, start to finish, all at once.

In one of his mother's albums there's an old photograph of Larry himself taken at nine months. Little Larry wearing a white smocked nightgown is wedged into an old-fashioned wooden highchair

which for some reason has been carried out of doors. Blurred trees and a suggestion of lawn fill in a background lit with a glare of ominous light that falls across the infant's fine frizz of hair and on to the glossy wood of the chair. Can a head think when it's that size? Can a baby's face be this wise and unfoolable? His hands, which look like nothing so much as a pair of crimped shells, gripping the edge of the highchair's tray, and his expression is pulled into a knit of absorbed anguish. He can't possibly know at this age, or can he, that a calamity has occurred in his mother's life? And yet, the comprehending orbits of his soft eyes, the small roundness of his mouth, already hold a full level of bruising knowledge. He has a mother who cries in her sleep. A mother who's missing the kind of cold, saving curiosity that would hold her steady after a tragic event and whose contagion of grief has spread to him. Through her milk, through her skin and fingertips.

Or it may have been in the beginning, no more than a series of silences that accrued around certain topics, which in the life of his mother could not be approached openly. Looking back, Larry seems almost certain that the story, when it came, was presented through the agency of intense whispering toneless voices — but whose? his father's? his sister's? — and that behind the recital of events lay a sense of driving urgency: this was information that he was going to need in order to live in the Weller family, in order to walk around in the world. The calamity that occurred in the autumn of 1949, one year before he was born, was inescapable, housed as it was in the walls like a layer of formaldehyde insulation, and always present, tightly lashed narrative embracing everyone who lived under the family roof. And so Larry knows his mother's suffering. He's always known it,

filling in around the known bits with his imagination. He would like to put his arms around her, and she would like this too. But he doesn't know where to begin, doesn't know if she knows that he knows or how much he knows or what weight he attaches to it. So he's silent and she's silent. He sits fiddling with his beer bottle, until it's firmly taken from him, and she checks the clock for the umpteenth time, as if each ticking minute places an extra weight on her sadness.

Dot Weller was twenty-five years old at the time of the accident and married to young Stu Weller who worked as an upholsterer for British Railways in the northern town of Bolton. Their infant daughter Midge, short for Marjorie, had just taken her first steps, a happy little kid tottering from chair to chair, and chortling in tune with her acrobatic daring. The most contented baby in the world, everyone said. A perfect sweetie.

The family lived in a newish council house, four airy rooms and a tiny garden where in the summer Dot grew lettuce, radishes, carrots, blackcurrants, and a wavy row of runner beans. She would have preferred a patch of fine lawn and a bed of flowers — she was partial to lupines — but an anxious, learned frugality kept her concentration on what she and Stu and baby Midge could consume. The blackcurrants she made into a rather sour jam, since sugar was still rationed and hard to come by, and the runner beans she stewed up and preserved in sealed jars. This made her happy, gazing at her row of bottled fruit and vegetables, twelve pints in all, the beans blue-green in colour, gleaming from the pantry shelf.

Stu was down at the Works six days a week, but on Sundays he stayed at home and made morning tea for his pretty young wife and himself. The least he could do, he liked to say. He tossed little Midge in

the air, read the Sunday Mirror straight through, and cleaned out the grates, and just before noon went up the road to the pub for a quick gin and tonic, which he fancied in those days to be a gentleman's drink. After that he and Dot and their little dumpling of a daughter boarded a bus and crossed town to where his mother and dad lived in their two-up, two-down, and where a Sunday joint awaited them. These were happy days. Each of them felt the privilege of it. "But they ought to come to us for Sunday dinner the odd time," Dot said. "It isn't right, your mother doing all the work."

She prevailed on them, and at last they agreed. The Sunday journey was reversed, Mum and Dad Weller crossing town one late October morning on the number 16 bus and arriving at the door drenched from cold rain, but cheerful, and ready for a hot meal. There was roast beef and mash and gravy and a choice of Brussels sprouts or runner beans. There was horse-radish sauce served in a little sweet-dish, a wedding gift. And for pudding a home made sponge topped with golden syrup.

It was a blessing, people said afterward, that they didn't all choose beans over sprouts. Only Mum Weller helped herself, and rather generously, to the beans. "And Dot here's the one who bottled them," said Stu, the proud young husband, "Have a little more, Mum, you haven't made but half a dent."

An hour later, drinking a cup of tea, the old woman complained of double vision, of having trouble swallowing. Nevertheless, Stu and his father bundled a sleepy Midge into her pram and wandered off to the stretch of waste ground by the railway yards, leaving Dot alone with her distressed mother-in-law. Dot offered more tea, but it was waved away. She produced a hot-water bottle and a blanket to fold over

her mother-in-law's trunky knees. Mum Weller rocked back and forth a few times, then groaned suddenly, and fell forward with a crash on the hearth rug, her head missing by an inch the metal fender. Dot ran to her side, kneeling on the rug. Mother Weller's head was twisted grotesquely to one side, and her face held a look of throttled purple. Dot remembers crying out, but doesn't know what she said, ([Probably help, help, but who was there to help?]) And then she passed her hand back and forth before the dead woman's eyes.

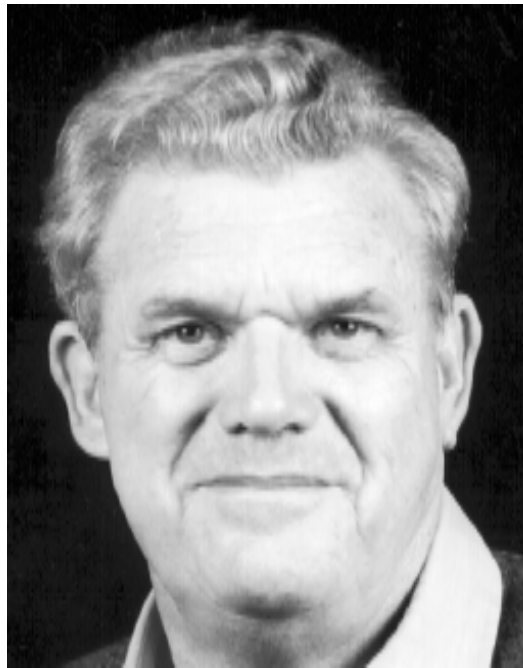
She was indeed dead. The young Dot had never seen a dead person, but she knew this bulky presence on her floor had passed to the other side, as folks said back then. There she lay, face down on the ash-strewn carpet, a heavy woman, stiffly corseted, and padded with layer upon layer of woollen clothes, her checked skirt immense across her buttocks and her knitted jumper rucked up. Her hips and calves were bunched clumsy and lifeless as meat beneath her, and the pink edge of her knickers obscenely revealed. A queerish smell of rubbish rose from her body. It can't be, it can't be, Dot remembers thinking as she tugged at the inert figure, it's solid, immovable heft. Then a thought occurred to her: heart attack. The words formed in her head, bringing a rush of relief — so this is what happened! and, even in the midst of her comprehension, she experienced a whiff, no more, of shameful self-congratulations, for she had recognized and named the phantom before her. She had been witness, moreover, to one of the body's great dramas.

But it wasn't a heart attack that brought on her mother-in-law's cataclysmic end. Oh, if only it had been, if only! Mum Weller's death, — as was revealed later through laboratory testing, was caused by severe type C botulism. The source of the botu-

lism was Dot's stewed runner beans, inadequately sealed, insufficiently heated — the same beans that had been standing in their pretty glass jar for the last two months, as purely green and sweet as innocence itself.

I should tell you that I have three English language editors. One is in the U.K., one in the U.S., and one in Toronto. They all belong to different companies and they don't always agree on things, and I'm always trying to make peace between them. Some of the editing for this book was done in the U.K., and by a freelance editor who lives in the wilds of Oxfordshire. We did this by e-mail, a wonderful technology perfect for editing — back and forth, back and forth. One day I had an e-mail from her that said, "We've got a problem." At this time, the Sunday dinner was in August. She said, "You have an August dinner and you can't have Brussels sprouts until October." We either had to change the month or the vegetable. I got in touch with the New York editor who said that she hated Brussels sprouts, but when she did eat them, she bought frozen ones and she could have them any month of the year she wanted. However we did come to an agreement. We moved the dinner to October, but it made me think: you work on a novel for maybe two years, maybe more, and you think perhaps there's a vision there; you like to think that. But really it comes down to getting the right vegetable in the right month.

Excerpt from *Larry's Party*, published by Random House of Canada, copyright Carol Shields, 1997.

INSTITUTE MEMORABILIA

Canada's Nobel
Prize Winner
in Physics,
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will speak on
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