Brenda Beckman-Long, *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic*

Armelle Parey

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/4696>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.4696
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2017
Number of pages: 125-126
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Armelle Parey, "Brenda Beckman-Long, *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 39.2 | 2017, Online since 03 April 2021, connection on 04 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/4696> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.4696>

This text was automatically generated on 4 June 2021.

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Brenda Beckman-Long, *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic*

Armelle Parey

REFERENCES

Brenda Beckman-Long. *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2015. 161 p. ISBN (pb): 978-1442613959. CA\$ 29.95

- 1 Even though Carol Shields's work has received considerable attention, very few monographs have been devoted to her: Adriana Trozzi's was the first one (*Carol Shields' Magic Wand: Turning the Ordinary into the Extraordinary*, 2001) and the second and most recent one so far was Alex Ramon's enlightening *Liminal Spaces: The Double Art of Carol Shields* (2008). Contrary to these, Brenda Beckman-Long's *Carol Shields and the Writer-Critic* does not examine Shields's work exhaustively as she leaves aside the short fiction, the poems and also some novels (*Larry's Party* is briefly mentioned in the introduction and hardly any mention is made at all of *Happenstance*) in order to focus on six novels that portray women writers to illustrate her analysis of Shields as "writer-critic."
- 2 The concept of the "writer-critic" comes from Quebec writer Nicole Brossard and conjures up the idea of the novelist as critic, author of novels that are also critical texts, works that employ strategies that challenge the usual distinctions made between reality and fiction and can, eventually, question political and social realities. Indeed, Beckman-Long wants to offer what she considers as a necessary reassessment of Shields's work in the context of evolving feminist criticism and autobiography studies to foreground its political dimension: while Shields's experiments with narratives are a constant over her writing career, their critical exploration ranges and expands from feminist to cultural critique.
- 3 Chapter one focuses on *Small Ceremonies* and *The Box Garden*, Shields's less examined early novels that are remarkable, like her later works, for their blending of genres: autobiography, fiction and criticism, a blending which, Beckman-Long argues, serves

Shields's purpose to voice feminist critique. Beckman-Long notices that Shields builds on Philippe Lejeune's view of the autobiographical mode as a narrative effect but adds on an ideological dimension. She reads these novels as acts of resistance that draw attention to women's life writing and challenge dominant discourses of autobiography.

- 4 Chapter 2 examines *Swann*, a novel that questions the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, in "a parody of biographical and autobiographical modes" (43) that enables Shields to subvert reductive readings of women writers' literary legacies. The study examines how Shields's narrative displays Foucault's "author-function" via the search carried out or the narratives told by its different characters who exert attribution, appropriation, circulation or valorization. Beckman-Long pairs this reading of *Swann* as parody of the author-construction with the evocation of Pat Lowther as possible template for the character of Mary Swann which, because of Lowther's real life status, provides another level of parody. This chapter therefore offers long descriptions of the parallels between the two women poet's lives and works.
- 5 In *The Love Republic*, which Chapter 3 explores, the dominant discourses that are renegotiated by Shields the "writer-critic" are romance fiction and hyperrealism. She achieves this via the character of Fay McLeod, a woman and a scholar who comes to realise how much her self-representation is steeped in romantic narratives, and via a third-person narrator who adopts the stance of a feminist revisionist. The result,
- 6 Beckman-Long says, is "a political call for a timely re-emergence of women's writing on the historical horizon of Western culture" (85).
- 7 In her study of *The Stone Diaries* (chapter 4), Beckman-Long returns to Shields's much discussed departure from the autobiographical genre through the unsettling to-and-fros from first to third-person narration that display a generic ambiguity indicative of the fictionality of the narrative. Having gone through several characters as potential narrators, Beckman-Long develops the view that the narrative is compiled by Judith Downing, author of the epigraph placed at the start of *The Stone Diaries* and Daisy's grand-daughter. Beckman-Long argues that Judith's narrative is parodic, marked by "exaggeration and contradiction of feminine stereotypes" (100) that contribute to subverting the vision of a unified self in traditional autobiography.
- 8 In *Unless*, discussed in chapter 5, feminism is at stake via the first-person narrator from whose view we are invited to distance ourselves, through self-reflexive narrative strategies, in order to rethink the issue. Rosemary Hennessy's work provides the critical framework here for a novel that adopts a third-wave feminism stance.
- 9 Beckman-Long rejects the notion of discontinuity in Shields's writing but, contrary to other critics whose point of view is challenged in the conclusion, argues that, over her writing career, Carol Shields coherently and consistently asserts herself as a writer-critic who resists broad categories (historical writing, the autonomous self, feminism as a universal subject) as well as established discourses on autobiography, gender stereotypes, and critical theory, and can suggest directions for political and social change. Her narratives engage the reader in their enquiry into language, representation and culture.
- 10 In a study that draws on the novelist's archival fonds, that quotes novels and interviews abundantly, and that embraces a variety of critical frameworks, Brenda Beckman-Long returns to already much discussed aspects of Shields's work: her deconstruction of life writing, her critical exploration of woman's self-representation. But she convincingly

offers new readings in the light of evolving theory in order to highlight the writer's move towards an ethical criticism. Despite repetitions and a certain lack of clarity in the presentation of critical notions (some of which are presented in the introduction only to reappear in the conclusion), this study offers valuable insights into Shields's "elegant puzzles."

AUTHORS

ARMELLE PAREY

Armelle PAREY is Senior Lecturer at the University of Caen-Normandie (France). Her research embraces narrative endings, memory and rewritings of the past in contemporary English-speaking fiction with publications on Peter Carey, Carol Shields and Kate Atkinson. She has co-directed four collections of essays (*Happy Endings and Films*, Michel Houdiard, 2010; *Literary Happy Endings, Closure for Sunny Imaginations*, Shaker Verlag, 2012; *L'inachevé ou l'ère des possibles dans la littérature anglophone, Récits ouverts et incomplets*, PU de Caen, 2014; *Character Migration in Anglophone Literature, E-Réa, revue électronique d'études sur le monde Anglophone*, 2015). She is currently co-editing a collection of essays on A. S. Byatt.