

Boston Globe Feb. 2, 1992

THE REPUBLIC OF LOVE

By Carol Shields

Viking. 327 pp.

As the number of love's multiply-burned swells among us, the question "Why do fools fall in love?" appears more and more to contain its own answer. Yet, said Robert Browning, "Take away love and our earth is a tomb."

In what is partly, but far from merely, a celebration of romantic love, Canadian Carol Shields uses a tender, upbeat touch to bring two amiable wounded souls together.

Tom Avery's vision of womankind grew fuzzy at age three weeks. His teenaged unwed mother grievously ill, Tom was entrusted to the kaleidoscopic nurture of 27 "mothers," senior-year home economics students at a nearby college. Forty years and three failed marriages later, a directionless Tom finds "this isn't where he meant to be at 40"—six bottles of beer in the refrigerator but no milk, coffee but no coffee pot—still, "he's planning to get himself organized soon and cultivate a better set of habits."

From midnight to 4 a.m., Tom's radio talk show "brightens the nights" of Winnipeg. He's a minor local celebrity, yet he's lonely. As he nears that age when the only time a man wants to make love to a woman twice in one night is before he's made love to her once, Tom's weary of loveless sex but wary of love.

Tom is linked to Fay McLeod by a cat's cradle of relationships (Tom's first wife married the man who married the woman who was once married to Fay's last lover—the labyrinthine ties of the modern mid-sized city), but they spend half the novel in solitary angst before they meet.

Fay, 35, has never married. While Tom's been impulsive about marriage, Fay's been scared. Like Tom's, however, Fay's romantic history confirms Edna St. Vincent Millay's observation: "Life is not one damn thing after another—it's one damn thing over and over." Tom kept marrying sad women he could not make happy. Fay, fearing no

marriage could be as perfect as her parents' 40-year union seems to be, kept shying away from commitment.

As Associate Folklorist at the National Center for Folklore Studies, Fay buries herself in research on mermaids. She suspects, however, that the mermaid's combination of allure and inaccessibility has become an apt metaphor for herself. Like Tom, Fay becomes conscious of aging and fears she may be "shriveling up inside her jangling singleness."

Tom and Fay meet at a party just before Fay leaves on an extended research tour, allowing their initial infatuation to incubate into overwhelming passion. When she returns, they pledge unending love. However, we know how the course of true love will run in a good comic novel.

Or do we? While never losing the witty, ebullient voice that makes *The Republic of Love* as genial a read as anything this side of *Tom Jones*, Shields does not back away from the ominous possibilities of her theme. That theme is nothing less than the nature, wisdom, mythic foundation and illusory aspects of romantic love itself.

"Love is the only enchantment we know," someone had told Tom. Once in love, he and Fay are transformed creatures, filled with "the ballooning sensation of being intensely alive." Like children, they see their world "glow with color as they move among common objects."

But, Fay finds, unlike work, war, good sex or the environment, no one she knows seems to take love seriously: "It's the one thing in the world everyone wants, but for some reason people are obliged to pretend love is trifling and foolish. . . . It's womanish, it's embarrassing, it's something to jeer at."

Worse, love seems barely possible in an age of abandoned myths. "Believers," Fay notes in a lecture, "develop an aptitude for belief, a willed innocence . . . disbelievers, those without a mythic tradition, are unable to abandon rationality." Is it possible, Shields asks, to be rational about love and still capable of it?

And once we are deeply and unreservedly loved, will we be able to stand it? Was Blake's *Little Black Boy* right that "we are put on Earth a little space./That we may learn to bear the beams of love"? Fay learns how searing the heat gets as we near the goal of "rapturous union."

Shields suggests it takes courage in a cynical age to risk loving. It takes courage, too, for a serious literary novelist to toast love with the exuberance Shields does here.

And she does it expertly. She can take a simple act—Tom vexed by a disappointing sexual encounter, Fay crying—and shape the scene into a comic gem. Always buoyed by intelligence and salted with insight, her prose is richly descriptive: a waitress is "a boil-in-a-bag kind of pretty, someone who looked like she'd just grown into her bones"; at a party "the evening ripens and swells; the walls rise into darkness and acquire a look of watered silk"; Fay about to make love with Tom "moved in closer. Her body felt bent in the shape of a smile."

Shields' dexterously blends two narrative structures. Overall, the book is a diptych: the first half a mounting droll foreplay to Tom and Fay finally meeting, the second a perceptive exploration of why fulfillment is seldom easy. At the same time, Shields braids the novel's 38 chapters by alternating between Tom's and Fay's viewpoints. Long before they meet, we've grown to know and like each from inside their own perspective, so it becomes particularly entertaining when we begin to see them from the outside, through each other's eyes.

Shields, who lives in Winnipeg and teaches at the University of Manitoba, has been writing superb fiction for a decade and half yet still languishes in obscurity. Her last story collection, *The Orange Fish*, containing a wealth of engaging characters in difficult situations, eluded the notice of most American readers. Perhaps this new and delightful novel will prove her overdue breakout book. For too long we have ignored Carol Shields, greatly to our loss.

