

Larry's Party Short Guide

Larry's Party by Carol Shields

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Characters

We watch thoroughly likable, fumbling Larry Weller grow and work through his difficulties and even his maddeningly ordinary mid-life crisis at 40. We watch as Larry passively learns "about the world, exactly as everyone else does— from sideways comments over a lemon meringue pie, sudden bursts of comprehension or weird parallels that come curling out of the radio, out of a movie, off the pages of a newspaper, out of a joke—and his baffled self stands back and says: so this is how it works." Shields clearly has a great deal of empathy for her characters as well as an ability to create characters so convincing that they could very well be living down the street somewhere. Larry represents every person, and as he makes his way through life, "his brain is always, busy, and he wonders if other people live their lives in the same state of unfolding thought; it's as though a little man lived inside his head, a loose-jointed professor jumping up and down with excitement, debating, questioning." This curiosity about what will happen to him next is what moves this quiet story along.

It is from Larry's parents, presumably, that he obtained his work ethic. His father was an upholsterer who loved his job and his mother was a housewife obsessed with cleanliness. But the poisonous cloud of unarticulated guilt in which Larry and his sister grew up certainly had its effect too. As a new bride, their mother accidentally killed her mother-in-law by serving improperly canned vegetables. She never overcame this tragedy, and they never had beans at their house again. "This is what it's like to grow up with a bad chapter of someone else's story, in the toxic glow of someone else's guilt, a guilt that became a rooted sorrow. He's had his fingers in the mouth of his mother's sick grief and now it's his; every crease and fold belong to him."

Larry has internalized his mother's guilt over a tragic accident, and it shapes him visibly. Since terrible things can occur if one is wrong, it makes him cautious, and unsure of himself and his choices.

Compared, as they are bound to be, Larry's two wives are illustrative of two stages in Larry's development. They are markedly different although both are strong and decisive women. The first is a saleswoman and the other an ambitious academic. Shields has worked with presenting events from different points of view in most of her fiction in one way or another, and Larry's Party is no exception although here it is more subtle. We meet Larry and Dorrie in their twenties, before they "knew how to be married" as Dorrie states much later, and it takes them two decades to realize what was missing from their relationship. Dorrie and Larry relate to each other in a much more mature manner by the final chapter.



Social Concerns

In her first novel since the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Stone Diaries* (1993; see separate entry), Carol Shields provides readers with a metaphor for life itself. In this later novel, the maze of Larry Weller's existence winds around itself, doubles back, dead-ends, and finally takes the right path. The novel observes Larry, an average, sort of muddled man, from ages twenty-seven to forty-seven as he heads, "straight toward the next thing that was going to happen to him."

Larry is a working-class guy from Winnipeg who has no particular goals in life other than to continue working at the florist's shop. He ended up a floral designer simply because the community college sent him information about the wrong program, and Larry being Larry, went along with it. He marries his pregnant girlfriend, Dorrie, and has a son in more or less the same hapless way. It is only when he discovers garden mazes on their honeymoon in England that Larry begins to act purposefully. He is almost willfully lost in the maze at Hampton Court and begins researching and constructing one of his own almost as soon as he returns to Canada. In fact, the event that triggers his divorce is that Dorrie bulldozes his backyard maze. It seems as good a time as any to try his hand at something more challenging, so Larry creates his own garden maze business, *A/Mazing Space, Inc.*, in Chicago. Here Larry marries again—this time to the unlikely Beth, a feminist scholar studying women saints—becomes a successful landscape designer, experiences a fairly average midlife slump, and divorces again.

When he returns to Canada, he throws a dinner party for family and friends.

The main focus of Larry's Party is the uncertainty of "being a man at this moment in history." In fact, it is one of the topics of discussion at the much anticipated dinner party Larry throws. The two decades, 1977 to 1997, of Larry's life that Shields portrays are confusing ones as far as gender roles go; traditional roles for men and women have been aggressively challenged and, if the characters in Larry's Party are any indication, many men are left unsure of what their role should be.

As one of the guests reveals, "I've been walking on eggshells since about 1980."

No longer unquestionably the dominant sex, men are left wondering how to behave. We have different expectations now of what a man is supposed to be and do, and often it is not clear what those expectations are. In some ways, this can be liberating, but in others it is just confusing. For instance, Larry is, as his sister puts it, the first generation of male soup makers in their family, and the dinner guests joke about how men get such extravagant praise for doing nothing more than what women have always done as a matter of course. As one of the female guests wryly asserts, "What we all really want is to marry the men we'd be if we were men." Male aggression, once necessary for the continuation of the species, has become obsolete, and now men and women have had to adjust.

Perhaps, "men and women at the end of our century should treat this period of uncertainty as an experiment." Shields is not so much attempting to "explain" men as she is exploring the problem of manhood.

Several reviewers have made the claim that Shields has a particular appeal to women, and it is possible that *Larry's Party* is an attempt to break out of this imposed limitation, expanding her appeal, by trying her hand at a male protagonist.

Not that her previous works lacked fully developed male characters; in fact, Shields has successfully created the characters of Tom Avery in *The Republic of Love* (1992; see separate entry) and Jack Bowman of *Happenstance* (1980) who engage in fully half of each of those novels. The difference is that this one is only about Larry.



Techniques

The form of *Larry's Party* is quite interesting. It is presented in thematic vignettes or episodes, such as "Larry's Work," "Larry's Words," and "Larry's Kid," encapsulating key periods in his life, each one marked with a distinct maze design. These chapters often repeat basic information or flashback to Larry's past, as if they were separable short stories, or perhaps a new place to begin Larry's story. Each chapter adds new perspective, new details, or a distinct emotional focus.

Each one tells us a bit more about Larry; for instance, the chapter entitled "Larry's Threads" reveals quite a bit about his experiences as a child when his clothes were always slightly wrong, yet he would prefer not to hurt his bargain-hunting mother by telling her. This structure could be considered a bit self-conscious, but Shields is, as always, playful—anyone who can call a chapter "Larry's Penis, 1986" is not without a sense of humor.

As in *The Stone Diaries*, the big events of Larry's life—his weddings and divorces, the birth of his son—all happen in between these chapters with flashbacks to fill in what we might have missed. The big events are not so much Shields's focus as the daily grind.

Shields is an accomplished poet and playwright and it shows in the attention to language and convincing dialog. The last chapter entitled "Larry's Party" reads very much like a play; much of it is dialog in fact. And, as in *The Stone Diaries*, this novel incorporates incidentals such as the handwritten menu planned for the dinner party and even a seating chart for the table to lend authenticity to the events described.

Themes

There is nothing remarkable about the facts that make up his life, yet Larry manages to make his way through the maze of life to a kind of self-understanding. As Larry points out, "the whole thing about mazes is that they make perfect sense only when you look down on them from above." The pattern of life, its twists and unexpected turns, can only be seen as a whole when it is completed. With the perspective of years, Larry has gained experience and is more sure of himself, sure enough to invite both ex-wives to his first dinner party when they happen to be in town on the same weekend in the final chapter.

We are reminded throughout the novel how very average Larry Weller is. He is "an absolutely normal and typical human being," "statistically average," even "standard issue." When a suggestion he makes to a customer is criticized as "banal," he looks up the definition and recognizes something of himself. Shields has made him into a contemporary Everyman: An awkward child, a typically self-conscious youth, Larry wanders aimlessly, doing the best he can, wherever the garden path leads him until he reaches midlife, and then, like most of us, ends up re-evaluating himself. There is a measure of wry humor in the way the very ordinariness of Larry's midlife crisis annoys him. As in *The Stone Diaries*, Shields writes about her character's everyday dilemmas without elevating them absurdly. It is more of a validation of life's feelings, musings, problems, and solutions and one that has struck a chord with readers everywhere.

There are only so many choices one gets the opportunity to make, but reading about other people's stories is a way of expanding our own experience by entering their moments of pride, happiness, shame, fear, and despair.

Shields's view of work is also of interest in *Larry's Party*, as well as in her other novels. In *The Stone Diaries*, Daisy's stint as a gardening columnist (her only paid employment) is one of the most fulfilling times in her life. Like Daisy, Larry's work, while fulfilling, is not deliberately chosen by him: chance plays a big role in Larry's decision-making process, or lack thereof.

He comes to floral design almost by accident. He doesn't plan, set goals, or evaluate his skills, or make career choices based on facts. Rather, he allows circumstances to determine what direction he will take. To Larry, allowing chance to determine life's course is an act of hope, not despair. He is confident all will work out for him in the end. This haphazard way of choosing a career is not so much an unusual occurrence, and it does not lessen work's importance in his life.

There's no getting around it: the rhapsody of work hums between Larry's ears, its variables and strategies, its implements and its tightly focused skills . . . Work can be dirty, noisy, dangerous, degrading, but it's still work, and that's what turns the gears of life. He understands this spare, singular fact better than he will ever be able to understand the un-guessable secrets of love and happiness.



Larry spends many years in floral arrangement before he takes a risk and begins landscape architecture, specializing in maze-making. Somehow this otherwise unimaginative individual is captivated by the oddities of maze design and excels at it. While each maze Larry creates is distinct—some have historical or personal significance tailored to the wishes of his clients—he remains fascinated by their mystery throughout. Larry's first encounter with a maze, that of Hampton Court, left him lost in it for some time, but with his own mazes he controls the mysteries and surprises; unlike his life, he is sure which path to take.



Key Questions

When reading a novel as minutely focused on the details as *Larry's Party*, it is most gratifying to pull back once in awhile and look at the overall scheme of things, realizing its design. Readers will certainly want to discuss such matters as the maze symbolism, Larry's role as a representative being, and Shields's facility with portraying the daily nonevents of human existence.

1. A neighbor in Chicago, also named Larry, says, "There's a sense in which, deep down, all the men in the world are named Larry." In what ways is Larry Weller an Everyman? Does he represent men only or people as a whole?
2. One topic of discussion at Larry's party in the last chapter is "what it's like being a man these days." How have men's roles changed in the last two decades? Are different things expected of them now?
3. At the beginning of the book, Shields acknowledges twenty-two men with whom she consulted while creating Larry. Is Larry an authentic man? Can a woman write successfully in the voice of a man, and vice versa?
4. What effect does the guilt Larry's mother feels over the tragic accident involving her mother-in-law have on the Weller family?
5. Larry mentions that he and Dorrie, in their inexperience, "just didn't have the words." How important is language to the characters' development? How would you compare their interaction at the beginning to that at the end of the story?
6. Looking mostly at the chapters entitled "Larry's Penis" and "Men Named Larry," what power is there in the naming of things?
7. A critic once accused Shields of "engraving beautiful script on the head of a pin" (Andrew Garrod, *Speaking for Myself*, 1986). Why the precise detail given to what could be called mundane subjects?

Literary Precedents

Larry's Party has been likened to the early work of John Updike, both stylistically as well as thematically. Several reviewers have pointed out that Larry Weller could be the 1990s version of Updike's Rabbit Angstrom. Shields acknowledges an admiration for Updike in an interview early in her writing career, so this is not surprising, and they share an interest in portraying the ordinary, everyday lives of their characters. Additionally, the insightful third person, present-tense narration of most of Larry's story is reminiscent too of Updike. But long before even Updike, the figure of the Everyman—in this case, Larry— has been quite common in literature.

Related Titles

Other titles by Shields that readers may enjoy are *Happenstance*, which is the story of a relationship told in two separate parts from the perspective of the husband and the wife, and *The Republic of Love*, a romance about two middle-aged people who have just about given up on love. Both of these have well developed, convincing male characters, precursors to Larry Weller. Tom Avery of *The Republic of Love* is a late-night radio show host with no less than three divorces when he meets Fay McLeod, a folklorist studying mermaids. Jack Bowman of *Happenstance*, a precursor to both of these male characters, works at a research institute and struggles with the challenges of keeping his marriage to Brenda vital during difficult times. *The Stone Diaries* may also be of interest because it is Shields's most highly acclaimed work and it also contains the same interest in portraying the ordinary, day-to-day events of life.



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