

The Republic of Love Short Guide

The Republic of Love by Carol Shields

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Characters

Tom Avery and Fay McLeod are not stock romance characters; they are a bit too ordinary and self-aware for that. Nor are they strikingly handsome, although not unattractive; they are middle-aged and have achieved a degree of independence. Most notably, they both have a history of failed relationships which takes the story out of the realm of fantasy and into the contemporary world. Both are cognizant that they are actively seeking romance, someone to love, but they're on the outside looking in. As Fay notices, "The lives of others baffle her, especially the lives of couples, the chancy elusive cement of their private moments. What exactly do Iris and Mac Jaffe think when they lie down together at night in their glittering midnight-blue bedroom?" She wonders the same about her parents, married for forty years, and her godmother, Onion, who marries her longtime lover, Strom, only after he has had a stroke. Certainly, Shields does not allow her lovers to find happiness too easily, though. Fay even calls off their wedding after her parents' marriage fails, causing her to doubt the strength of any such commitments: Every thing she pronounces or thinks seems to come winking off a set of diluted song lyrics A numbing self-consciousness has made her doubt every word that leaps off her tongue. Not to mention every word that enters her ear.

Love, love, how can we possibly speak of love in the last decade of the twentieth century. . . ? There are the usual stops and starts, and plenty of other couples in various stages, some waxing relationships, some waning, and they combine and recombine in ever-changing configurations. Most people's lives don't wrap up nearly as neatly as they'd like to think. Fay's sure of that. Most people's lives are a mess.

Shields emphasizes the interconnectedness of people's lives. Tom and Fay know some of the same people long before knowing each other. The numerous peripheral couples' overlapping stories enrich the main one, lending it resonance.

Winnipeg seems to be a place where everyone knows everyone else's story, good or bad, and whether one likes it or not, one is on display.



Social Concerns

The Republic of Love is a romance, first and foremost, but these are unlikely lovers; Tom Avery, 40, a late-night radio show host is three times divorced, much to his chagrin, while Fay McLeod, 35, a folklorist studying mermaids, is single, unable to commit to a relationship and unsatisfied with her long string of more or less acceptable partners. Both are lonely and weary of looking for "the real thing," and both find solace of a sort in their work: Fay works at the National Center for Folklore Studies where she has numerous friends looking out for her.

Her typical day is described as mornings for public tours and afternoons for "her mermaids." Tom is the host of a late night radio show with a large listening audience of oddballs and insomniacs.

Both Fay and Tom seek a union that does not smother the independence they have gained as individuals, and when they finally meet halfway through the book, at a child's birthday party, it is love at first sight and the end of the "mer-condition: solitary longing that is always being thwarted." The setting for this romance is Winnipeg, Manitoba, an ordinary, "flat, midcontinental [Canadian] city with its half million people and its traffic and weather and asphalt parking lots . . . right here, the miracle of it." Love, in other words, does not require romantic scenery, and their romance is very much grounded in the Saturday morning jogging routines, the choral practices, the northern weather, and the commutes to work that make up their lives.

The element of suspense that keeps us reading is: Will they or won't they?

Friends, family, and circumstances conspire to put an end to their relationship.

In fact, one friend tells Fay, "I think that you're far too intelligent a woman to be having a romance. Only deeply fluffy people have romances. Besides, wasn't it you who told me that it was impossible to speak of love in the 20th century except ironically?" But this time is different.

Even when Fay calls off the wedding and moves back in with her mother when her father leaves after forty years, Fay and Tom cannot deny that they love each other and are destined to be together.

The Republic of Love is an interesting undertaking for Shields. She tackles here what is often thought to be a frivolous subject, romance, and treats it respectfully and positively, yet with her customary gentle irony. Writers of all degrees and calibers have been exploring the topic of love since writing was invented; now Shields joins their ranks and does so with wit, grace and vitality.

Techniques

The genre of romance novels almost requires a happy ending, and Shields does not disappoint her readers. Of course, Fay and Tom get together. Of course it is love at first sight. Why not? It is what we want to happen for them, and sometimes fiction seems more believable than the disappointments of real life. If sentimental, it is convincingly so, and tempered by a wry, seasoned narrative voice that allows Shields to have some fun even as she chronicles the dilemmas of single middle-age. For instance, she gently rnocks academics (of which she is one) by having Tom attend a lecture on "The Ghettoization of the Single in Contemporary Urban Society."

In alternating chapters, Shields chronicles the lives of Tom and Fay through their daily struggles with loneliness, so that when they finally meet near the middle of the book, it appears to be destiny. Each character is well developed by this point and the reader is really hoping something good will happen for this likable pair.

Shields's facility for detailed description is present in *The Republic of Love* as it is in her other works. The precise choice of words seems effortless. For instance, she captures exactly what it is to wake up alone in the middle of the night in a hotel room far from home finding herself suddenly in love. Likewise, Shields moves readers through Fay's anniversary party seemingly without effort, from one snatch of conversation to the next; Shields is able to pack in much detail without burdening her delicate prose.

Themes

To be a romantic, notes Fay's brother, "is to believe anything can happen to us."

Despite sometimes remarkable odds, people find love and happiness in this world. *The Republic of Love* is a celebration of love as ordinary occurrence, and it is an ambitious task in this age of cynicism.

The subject of love is treated neither with pure romanticism nor with out-and-out mistrust. Shields is very much aware of the fashionably dim view of love taken today. As Fay notes: We turn our heads and pretend it's not there, the thunderous passions that enter a life and later its course.

Love belongs in an amateur operetta, on the inside of a jokey greeting card, or in the annals of an oldfashioned poetry society . . . It's womanish, it's embarrassing, something to jeer at, something for jerks.

Just a love story, people say about a book they happen to be reading, to be caught reading . . . They think of it as something childish and temporary, and its furniture—its language, its kisses, its fevers and transports— are evidence of a profound frivolity.

It has become foolish to believe in romance nowadays, yet Shields remains unfashionably optimistic about this universal quest. As the title indicates, Shields believes love to be "a republic, not a sovereignty" held in reserve for a chosen elite. Rather, nearly everyone loves and is loved at some point. Some of the critical reception for this novel pointed out that the characters are a little too happy to be fully believed, yet throughout their happiness is tempered by evidence of love's fragility. Although many of the couples are secondary characters, they are important for the many and various ways love can go awry: from illness, indifference, disillusionment, betrayal, and even death.

It is hardly a Jane Austen novel in which everyone is paired off neatly in the end.

This is an affirmation of modern love, with the emphasis on the modern.

Another important element in *The Republic of Love* is work. What we do for a living informs who we are, and Shields's characters like to work. They have vocations, projects, and creative undertakings, whether it is writing books about mermaids or menopause, cooking, making quilts, or growing garden mazes. They like to be busy, and Shields skillfully integrates this very important part of life into her fiction. Fay's book *Mermaids of the Inner Mind*, her project throughout the novel, is finally published in the last chapter. Their work is fulfilling but just like most of our jobs there are good days and bad. On bad ones, Tom finds his insomniac fans annoying, and Fay tires of mermaids after studying them for so long. "Their writhing bodies. Their empty unblinking faces shrieking for love . . . Not one of the mermaids she's seen has had a whit of intelligence about her." Now that Fay has escaped their solitary mer-fate and found love, they do not



intrigue her like they used to, but she perseveres. In fact, she has this quote from Leonardo da Vinci, "Art lives from constraints and dies from freedom," taped over her desk at work, and she wonders if the same isn't true of love. While a case can be made that the mermaid's perpetual longing for love is symbolic of Fay's own state, Fay recognizes that her romance with Tom is the first time she has ever been "intelligent" about love.

Adaptations

Penguin Audiobooks produced a twotape adaptation of *The Republic of Love* (1996) read by Carol Shields.



Key Questions

As a result of her having gained international attention for *The Stone Diaries*, Shields's earlier works are getting some belated attention. Among them, *The Republic of Love* is her foray into the romance genre. The ways in which this novel fits the genre and departs from it are topics readers will want to discuss.

1. How does the security of lasting love weigh in compared to other attributes such as a fulfilling career or independence in this novel?
2. What clues does Shields give us that Tom and Fay are ready to give love another chance?
3. Fay and Tom are from very different families. Fay's family lives in Winnipeg where she has breakfast at the doughnut shop with her father every week and sees her sister on Wednesday nights. Tom talks by phone, but rarely visits his once single mother, now married, living in rural Canada. How does this affect the way they approach relationships?
4. What does the mermaid symbolism add to the story? What does it tell us about the characters' condition before they meet? What happens to Fay's interest in mermaids after they fall for each other?
5. Do you agree with Shields' conclusions about love? Do you believe in love at first sight? Can anything else account for Tom and Fay's instant attraction?
6. What role(s) do the many peripheral couples that populate Winnipeg have in this novel?
7. Tom is friendly with two of his exwives, and Fay works fairly comfortably with her former lover, Peter. Do these characters handle break-ups with remarkable maturity or simply have trouble disconnecting altogether?

Literary Precedents

While there are innumerable precedents for romantic fiction, other convincing contemporary love stories include *The Shipping News* by E. Annie Proulx (1993; see separate entry) and *Possession* by A. S. Byatt (1990; see separate entry). While they are quite different, both use modern, hard-working characters to revisit the timeless subject of love. Byatt's and Proulx's prose will probably appeal to fans of Shields since they both carefully attend to language. The strong female characters, still susceptible to romance, provide a common thread among these novels.

Related Titles

If what appeals to the reader of *The Republic of Love* is the romance, the rest of Shields's novels may be a disappointment.

They may have sections or elements of romance in them, contented couples, but *The Republic of Love* is her only novel to take on the romance genre. However, *Larry's Party* (1997; see separate entry), has the same themes and humor and work ethic that this one does. While some of the same themes occur in all of her novels, one of the refreshing things about her work is that she is always trying her hand at something new, and if that is what appeals to the reader, then *Swann: A Mystery* (1987) might be one to try. It was considered very experimental when it was first published.



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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994