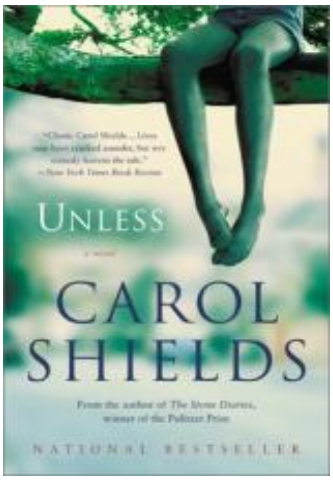
Unless

by Carol Shields



About the Book

I'm not interested, the way some people are, in being sad. I've had a look, and there's nothing down that road. Well now! What about the ripping sound behind my eyes, the starchy tearing of fabric, end to end; what about the need I have to curl up my knees when I sleep?

For all of her life, 44 year old Reta Winters has enjoyed the useful monotony of happiness: a loving family, good friends, growing success as a writer of light 'summertime' fiction. But this placid existence is cracked wide open when her beloved eldest daughter, Norah, drops out to sit on a gritty street corner, silent but for the sign around her neck that reads 'GOODNESS.' Reta's search for what drove her daughter to such a desperate statement turns into an unflinching and surprisingly funny meditation on where we find meaning and hope.

Warmth, passion and wisdom come together in Shields' remarkably supple prose. **Unless,** a harrowing but ultimately consoling story of one family's anguish and healing, proves her mastery of extraordinary fictions about ordinary life.

Discussion Guide

Goodness:

1. Many definitions for goodness are raised in the novel. Do you think that Reta ever comes to a conclusion about what goodness is? If not, do you think she has realized anything about the nature of goodness?

2. What do you think Norah means when she talks to her mother about not being able to love anyone enough because she loves the world more? Do you think that Reta understands what Norah is saying?

3. How would you characterize Norah's relationship with her mother? How do you feel about Tom and Reta's response

to Norah's leaving? Would you describe them as 'good' parents?

4. Why do you think Norah decides to abandon her life and stand on a street corner? What do you think that "goodness" means to her? Does it matter that we never learn why the woman on the Toronto street corner set herself on fire?

Distraction:

5. Why do you think Reta spends so much time thinking about Mrs. McGinn and the envelope she found behind the radiator, even after she realizes that it's just a baby shower invitation? How much of what we know about Norah comes from Reta's imagination?

6. Why do you think it's so important for Reta to buy the perfect scarf for Norah? Do you think the scarf matters?

Men and women:

7. Do you think there's any significance to the fact that Tom and Reta aren't married?

8. Consider the scene when Reta has the theory of relativity explained to her by Colin Glass. Do you think that Reta understands what Colin is saying? How would you describe the nature of Reta's tone in this exchange?

Work:

9. Compare Reta and Danielle Westerman. Name the attributes you do and don't admire in each of them.

10. How serious do you think Reta is about her work? What do you think about the fact that she writes (but does not send) various letters about woman writers not being taken seriously?

11. What's the impact of Reta Winters being introduced through a list of her literary achievements?

Writers writing about writers writing about writers:

12. Are there ever times when you feel like Carol Shields is narrating the book? If so, can you identify particular moments when this happens? Do you consider this mixed narrative style effective? Why or why not?

Silence:

13. Do you have any ideas about why Lois is silent for most of the novel? What do you think about the fact that she basically tells her entire life to Arthur Springer?

14. The novel's epigraph reads "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrels heartbeat and we should die of that roar that lies on the other side of that silence". What do you think of this quote? Do you think it's an appropriate introduction to the novel?

Author Bio

Carol Shields is the author of ten novels and two collections of short stories. She is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for THE STONE DIARIES, which was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and the Orange Prize for LARRY'S PARTY. Born and brought up in Chicago, Carol Shields has lived in Canada since 1957.

Critical Praise

"Finely detailed, thoughtful and sometimes even humorous, this book is highly recommended for all fiction collections."

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