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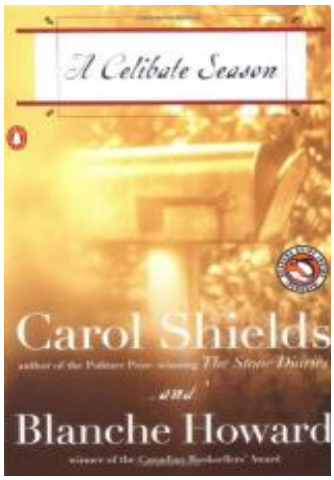
A Celibate Season

by Carol Shields and Blanche Howard



About the Book

Carol Shields, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and Blanche Howard, winner of the Canadian Booksellers' Award, teamed up to write this delightful epistolary novel that probes the inner life of one couple's rocky marriage. Faced with a job-related ten-month separation, Jocelyn and Charles choose to maintain contact through letters--an economic decision that paves the way for two very different and very entertaining sides of the same story. As the months progress, the couple's letters grow less frequent and more revealing--and their "season of celibacy" becomes more of a challenge than either Jocelyn or Charles had imagined. Posing important and timely questions about commitment, monogamy, and the pressures of career and money, this insightful novel by two extraordinary writers offers a perceptive and hopeful look at how men and women really communicate.

Discussion Guide

1. What makes a marriage? How does Jock and Chas's relationship fit into your definition? How does their marriage change over the course of their ten-month separation?

2. How important is sex to a marriage? What do you think Jocelyn means when she writes (in a letter that is never sent): "I felt known?that strange biblical term. It really does mean something after all." What has Austin's proximity given her that Chas could not?

3. Discuss both incidents of infidelity. What do you think made each spouse stray? How does Jocelyn's experience with Austin differ from Chas's experience with Davina and Sue? Is one more "guilty" than the other? Is it better that these incidents weren't confessed, or would honesty have been a better policy?

4. Do you think Jock and Chas are good parents? What effect does their separation have on their children?

5. At first, Jock and Charles both agree that letter writing will serve them well because of its economy. Later on, Charles says, "Writing these letters to you all year has had a curious effect on me, letting me know, in fact, what I'm thinking." How do these letters inform the writer as well as the recipient?

6. Consider the characteristics and limitations of the epistolary form. What effect does this genre have on the story and what the reader learns about the characters and plot? What happens to the point of view? What are the effects of two first-person narrators? How might this story be different if told through only one first-person narrator? An omniscient narrator?

7. How do Jock and Chas use their correspondence to express their feelings? How are their feelings better served through written, as opposed to oral, communication? Do you think Jock and Chas's relationship would have changed over the course of their separation if they had only communicated with each other via the telephone? Is it easier to ignore someone's written words, or their spoken ones?

8. What sorts of devices do the authors use to move the plot along and give the story its shape? Some things to consider: use of fax, references to telephone conversations, simultaneous letters, letters not sent, dates, etc.

9. Does Jock and Chas's preoccupation with their own achievements and dilemmas seem selfish to you? Do you think they would have pursued their respective challenges had there been no separation?

10. What will become of Jock and Chas's marriage? Has the "celibate season" made it weaker or stronger? How do you think each has changed over the course of ten months?

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.

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