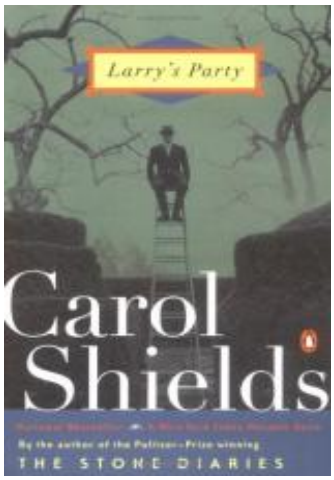
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Larry's Party

by Carol Shields



About the Book

MEET LARRY WELLER

What is this mighty labyrinth?the earth,
But a wild maze the moment of our birth?
("Reflections on Walking in the Maze at Hampton Court," British Magazine, 1747)

Meet Larry Weller. Born in 1950 to working class parents, he's an ordinary guy. His life is punctuated by unremarkable events: marriage, the birth of a child, divorce, job changes, illness, and the death of his parents. Even the pockets of his own tweed jacket are stuffed with leftovers from his ordinary life: nickels, dimes, old movie stubs, and a gathering of gritty little bits of lint collected in the seams. The only extraordinary thing about Larry Weller is that he is the subject of Larry's Party, the new novel from Pulitzer Prize-winning author Carol Shields that celebrates the twisting?and often chaotic?path of his life.

"By mistake, Larry Weller took someone else's Harris tweed jacket instead of his own, and it wasn't till he jammed his hand in the pocket that he knew something was wrong."

Larry's life unfolds before him as a series of mistakes and coincidences. When Red River College sends him a brochure for Flower Design, instead of the requested Furnace Repair, Larry learns how to arrange flowers for a living. When his date to a Halloween party wears an unappealing pirate costume, Larry's eye wanders and falls upon a cute Martian named Dorrie. A year later, Dorrie accidentally gets pregnant and becomes the first Mrs. Larry Weller. Perhaps the most significant coincidence occurs on their honeymoon in England, where Larry allows himself to get lost in the Hampton Court garden maze. While halfheartedly navigating his way through the lush green labyrinth, Larry realizes that he revels in taking wrong turns, that "getting lost, and then found, seemed the whole point." Mazes become not only Larry's passion and life's work, but also a mirror for Carol Shields's winding, looping narrative and the episodic structure of

Larry's Party.

Carol Shields knows that life's breathless moments of clarity arise unexpectedly, and that we all must cull wisdom?like Larry?from "sideways comments over 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." Larry's odyssey through life?and the reader's journey through this novel?is random yet patterned.

At the end of the novel, Larry gathers all of his friends and lovers together for a party. Over roasted lamb and fine wine they banter about the meaning of life. Life, they say, is the ultimate maze, and a maze is "our thumbprint on the planet." One guest observes that "at the center of the maze there's an encounter with oneself...a sense of rebirth." Ah...yes, Carol Shields seems to be saying. In spite of fate's marvelously unpredictable inner compass, people often seem to get to the right place, which is the center of the self.

Discussion Guide

1. Larry's Party is written entirely in the third person. How does this affect the tone of the book? Who do you imagine is telling Larry's story?

2. Why do you think Carol Shields presented Larry's life in episodic flashes? Does the structure of the book reflect Larry's obsession with mazes? How?

3. All of the major events in Larry's life?marriage, divorce, childbirth, job changes?are omitted from the novel. We read, in passing, that Larry has had a child. We never witness Larry actually getting divorce papers, or packing up his desk. Why do you think Carol Shields chose to do this? Do you feel it is effective? Is it true that often it isn't the actual event that bears significance, but the days, months, and years that follow?

4. In Chapter Five, titled "Larry's Words," the narrator says, "What else, really, does [Larry] need in his life but more words? When you add up the world and its words you get a kind of cosmic sandwich, two thick slices of meaning with nothing required in between." Consider the importance of words in Larry's Party. How does Larry's evolving vocabulary affect his relationships?

5. How is Larry's marriage to Dorrie unlike his marriage to Beth? How and why does Larry experience these marriages so differently? Several times the narrator refers to Larry as having left Dorrie. Is this really true? If Dorrie had not dug up Larry's garden maze, do you think that he would have resigned himself to staying in a mediocre marriage?

6. "They were about to be matter-of-factly claimed by familiar streets and houses and the life they'd chosen or which had chosen them." This theme, fate as a controlling fact in our lives, pervades Larry's Party. Are there any instances of Larry controlling his own fate, or making a precipitous decision? If not, does this make Larry a passive person, or merely a person at peace with the maze of life?

7. Do you think that the women in Larry's Party are more in control of their destinies than Larry is of his?

8. Work plays an important role in the lives of the people in Larry's Party?the most obvious example being Larry and his

garden mazes. What about Dorrie and Beth? Do their jobs mirror their own personalities and the paths that their lives have taken?

9. With the exception of a few uneasy visits with Larry and Beth and reading Larry the newspaper while he was in a coma, Larry's son doesn't play a significant part in the novel. Larry's relationships with women often seem to take precedence. Is this unrealistic, or is it an unfortunate consequence of modern divorce? Do you think that Larry's son will learn more life lessons from his mother than from his father? Is Larry a good father?

10. In the final chapter, dinner conversation revolves around the question, "What's it like being a man these days?" Has Carol Shields answered this question in Larry's Party? Is Larry a typical man of the '90s?

11. At one point a dinner guest observes that, "at the center of the maze there's an encounter with one's self." Has Larry encountered himself yet? When?

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

"[Shields] has a knack for turning the ordinary into the extraordinary....Arrestingly real. "

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