



## *The Stone Diaries by Carol Shields*

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### **About the author:**

Born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1935, Carol Shields moved to Canada at the age of twenty-two, after studying at the University of Exeter in England, and then obtained her M.A. at the University of Ottawa. She started publishing poetry in her thirties, and wrote her first novel, *Small Ceremonies*, in 1976. Over the next three decades, Shields would become the author of over twenty books, including plays, poetry, essays, short fiction, novels, a book of criticism on Susanna Moodie and a biography of Jane Austen. Her work has been translated into twenty-two languages.

In 1998, Shields was diagnosed with breast cancer. Speaking on her illness, Shields once said, "It's made me value time in a way that I suppose I hadn't before. I'm spending my time listening, listening to what's going around, what's happening around me instead of trying to get it all down." In 2000, Shields and her husband Don moved from Winnipeg to Victoria, where they lived until her passing on July 16, 2003, from complications of breast cancer, at age 68.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

### **About this book:**

Born in 1905, Daisy Goodwill drifts through the chapters of childhood, marriage, widowhood, remarriage, motherhood and old age. Bewildered by her inability to understand her own role, Daisy attempts to find a way to tell her own story within a novel that is itself about the limitations of autobiography.

The Stone Diaries is a truly sumptuous novel that reflects and illuminates the unsettled decades of our century.

Source: Author's website (<http://www.carol-shields.com>)



### **Discussion Questions:**

1. The first chapter of this novel is the only one that is narrated entirely in the first person. Why might the author have chosen to shift narrative voices? At what points in the book does the narrative "I" return? Who do you think is telling Daisy's story?
2. What irony is implicit in the fact that Mercy Goodwill is unaware of her own pregnancy? Compare this near-virgin birth to Daisy's own catastrophically chaste honeymoon. How do this novel's female characters experience sex, pregnancy and childbirth?
3. Although Daisy describes her mother as "extraordinarily obese" and taller than her husband, a photo reveals that Mercy Goodwill is actually shorter than Cuyler and no more than ordinarily husky. Is Daisy lying? Or does she merely have "a little trouble with getting things straight?" Where else are there discrepancies between Daisy's version of her life and the book's "documentation?"
4. From the passionate Cuyler Goodwill to Barker Flett, who is smitten with Daisy while she is still a child, the men in this novel are both erotically enthralled by women and fulfilled by their relationships with them. In contrast, their wives seem bewildered by, indifferent to, or at best serenely tolerant of their husbands' ardor. Does *The Stone Diaries* subvert traditional sex roles? Where do Daisy and the novel's other female characters derive their greatest pleasure and fulfillment? How badly do Shields's women need men?
5. When Cuyler Goodwill loses his wife he builds her a tower. When his daughter loses her first husband, she never tells the story to another soul. What might account for her reticence? How deeply does Daisy seem to love either of her husbands? On the other hand, how trustworthy are these characters' public displays of emotion?
6. "Life is an endless recruiting of witnesses." This observation in the first chapter seems borne out by the constant stream of secondary characters who intrude into Daisy's life story and at times commandeer it. What role does Daisy—or Carol



Shields—assign "witnesses" like the Jewish peddler Abram Gozhdë Skutari, the bicyclist who kills Clarentine Flett, or Cuyler Goodwill's housekeeper? Why might these characters reappear in the narrative years after their initial entrances? How trustworthy are their interpretations of Daisy's life and character?

7. Although Cuyler Goodwill builds a tower in his wife's memory, he is unable to remember her name at the time of his own death. Magnus Flett is able to recite much of *Jane Eyre* from memory well into his hundreds. And, even as small children, Alice, Warren and Joan Flett "take turns comparing and repeating their separate and shared memories and shivering with pleasure every time a fresh fragment from the past is unearthed." What role does memory play in *The Stone Diaries*? How much of Daisy's diary is remembered, and how much imagined?

8. In the chapter entitled "Sorrow," a number of characters offer explanations for Daisy's depression. How accurate are any of these? Are we given any reason to trust one interpretation over others? How well do any of Daisy's intimates really know her? How well does the reader know her by the book's close?

9. How does Daisy influence her children or determine the choices they make in their own lives? Does she seem to do so at all? What kinds of lessons does she impart to them? Is Daisy Flett a "good" mother, a "good" wife or daughter? Does *The Stone Diaries* allow us to make such easy judgments about its protagonist?

Source: Author's website (<http://www.carol-shields.com>)

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