



Larry's Party

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Larry Weller, born in 1950, is an ordinary guy made extraordinary by his creator's perception, irony and tenderness. Carol Shields gives us, as it were, a CAT scan of his life, in episodes between 1977 and 1997 that flash back and forward seamlessly. As Larry journeys toward the millennium, adapting to society's changing expectations of men, Shields' elegant prose makes the trivial into the momentous. Among all the paradoxes and accidents of his existence, Larry moves through the spontaneity of the seventies, the blind enchantment of the eighties and the lean, mean nineties, completing at last his quiet, stubborn search of self. Larry's odyssey mirrors the male condition at the end of our century with targeted wit, unerring poignancy and faultless wisdom.

Larry's Party Details

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Author : Carol Shields

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From Reader Review Larry's Party for online ebook

Kirsty Dummin says

I found this book difficult to read. Not because it wasn't well written, Shields certainly knows how to write. Having read a little of Shield's technique for structuring her work, I know that she has less of a focus on plot and more on the ordering of her chapters, which I think is very evident in Larry's Party. As the name would suggest, the novel does conclude with a party for protagonist, Larry, but it is a long and convoluted path to get there.

Each chapter begins with a recap of the previous scenes, which is frustrating as you almost feel like it was pointless to read everything prior. Or worse, that as a reader perhaps you hadn't absorbed the information given to you earlier. Each chapter covers a period of Larry's life, from age 17 to some time in his 40s, including two marriages and a son. This is all well and good, but most of these scenes are reflected back on, rather than being in the present, until we get to the party.

Sadly, I never once finished a chapter and wanted to continue on to the next. I could have happily put it down and never returned to it, which I seldom do.

Paul says

4.5 stars

This is the first novel by Carol Shields that I have read (I still need to read *The Stone Diaries*). It is set mainly in Canada and the protagonist is Larry Weller. We follow Larry from about 1976 when he is 26 until 1997. It is thematic and each chapter looks at a different aspect of Larry's life, through his two marriages, being a father, work, sex and so on. Often we see events at a distance as significant events seem to take place between chapters. The last chapter rounds off the whole with a dinner party.

Shields is writing a man's life and looking at sections of that life over 20 years and doing a remarkably good job. Shields focuses a good deal on work, the way it can fulfil and its importance. Larry starts off working in a flower shop and moves on to become a maze designer (he got his passion for mazes from his first honeymoon in England, getting lost in Hampton Court Maze). Many of the minor characters are also defined by what they do and there is dignity in work. The whole novel is a little like the mazes that Larry designs with lots of paths and byways but pretty much ending up where you started. As Eliot said; "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" There is a circularity about the whole

It's a good story with some interesting reflections on what it is like to be a man. I think Shields is subverting traditional notions of masculinity (some of which probably only exist in men's minds) and positing multiple masculinities which are more fluid and ambivalent. Larry's experience is one of anxiety combined with inadequacy. He is certainly not a "master of the universe". Shields challenges the traditional male notions of aggression, rationality and control; these are dead ends in the maze. Shields is also playing with traditional modes of biography and identity in complex ways. There is a lost and found and doubling back sense that you would find in a maze. There is some repetition and you move from chapter to chapter, but there is a sense of building rather than repeating. One critic has described this as postmodern biographical fiction. Shields plays on a feeling of ordinariness and an unexpected social mobility (it is mostly rich people who want mazes). Larry wonders how he has moved so far from being the son of a working class craftsman. The move has disoriented him and there are tensions between the masculinities he was brought up with and the

more middle class ones of his middle age. Usually biography and autobiography consolidate and reinforce the notion of self which has been developed by Western thought (read Western white male thought). Phyllis Rose has argued that biography is a tool by which the dominant society reinforces its values. Shields questions those values quite consciously by providing a protagonist who is unsure, a little muddled and unstable, not a subject of public acclaim. Nina van Gessel argues this is an essentially feminist type of biography.

And on top of all that; Larry is rather likeable.

Heidi says

The man's vocation as maze maker is intentionally apt. It mirrors his mind.

I was several dozen pages in before I latched. I felt lost in the mental maze and fatigued by the density of the story's stream of consciousness style, the obsessive thoughts, ruminations, and people who didn't seem to matter, such that when those who did matter reappeared on the scene I felt sweet relief.

And then I surprised myself by ultimately loving this book and the sleuth work it demanded. I loved Larry, and the satisfaction of knowing his heart before he did. I loved his people, infuriating as some of them could be. I loved Shields' inventive approach to chapter making, with its shingling overlay and reintroductions.

Persevere with me in this circuitous path, Shields seems to say. Follow in Larry's footsteps, and you'll arrive at the centre to claim your reward.

Burd says

I was given this book when it first came out in 1997. After reading the first few pages, I put it back on the shelf. There it sat for 17 years with a bookmark at page 20. I'm so glad I came back to it. At this stage in my life I am so much more receptive to Larry's life lessons! I think the reason I didn't like it at that time was that I had read The Stone Diaries and was expecting something similar. I've learned not to do that. An author's books should be like his or her children. They should each contain a part of them but they should also be different.

Larry Weller is a normal, average guy living a mundane life just like so many of us. Carol Shields has taken this ordinary man's existence and given it meaning. It gives us hope, doesn't it, that no matter how simple our lives may seem, they truly have a meaningful place in the realm of human existence.

The book is laid out in chapters focusing on specific years in Larry's adult life from 1977 when he was 26 years old to 1997. There is a lot of reiteration of key elements about Larry from chapter to chapter. At first I found this redundant and annoying but then it occurred to me that we all do that. Repeat little parts of our bio to others and to ourselves; our occupation, where we live, our relationships, interests. These details define us as unique beings. It reinforces who we really are. Even our names, as was the focus of one chapter, has an effect on how others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves.

"He never really liked his first name. It's Larryness has always seemed an imprisonment and a sly wink toward its most conspicuous rhyme: ordinary...He was just one more citizen of the Larry nation, those

barbecuers, those volunteer firemen, those wearers of muscle shirts..."

Larry's fascination with mazes was the perfect vehicle to reflect his feelings of "willed abandonment" when lost in the maze of his own life. He feels "the unexpected rapture of being blindly led" and "the futility of "pushing through the tunnel of an ever-receding future".

Hmmm... A bit of a depressing outlook but in the end, good ol' Larry comes to realize that with all his self-perceived shortcomings and disappointments, he has his own unique story that just keeps unfolding before him. And it's not all that bad. In fact, it's quite beautiful.

The final chapter contains lots of choppy dialogue amongst nine characters at Larry's party. There is a sense of tension and drama that wasn't present in the previous chapters. I think it would have been cool if that one chapter were written in play format. After all, Larry looks at his life the same way Macbeth did. It's a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. But is it? Read [Larry's Party](#) for some food for thought.

Rebecca McNutt says

This odd but interesting Canadian novel is a very different sort of reading experience. I really liked it for the most part, and its 20th century settings throughout the story made it even more creative.

Paula Maguire says

I really enjoyed this book which was, as you would expect, beautifully written and full of wonderful observations and perceptions on life. I was on my bookshelf for years as it was a freebie from RUTC library and I didn't like the cover of green topiary (mazes) but it was a real treat.

Amy says

I can't help it. I love Carol Shields. I miss her voice in the world. I deeply feel her loss to breast cancer 5 years ago.

Larry's Party is a novel that won Shields the Orange Prize. I'm impressed at her tackling an in-depth, from-the-inside look at the life of an average North American man. I feel she only stumbled by falling into a feminine sensibility in a couple of lines, so overall, I'm still giving this book 5 stars. Basically, I want to give all Shields' work 5 stars.

And yes, if you're looking for plot... look elsewhere. Shields even wrote that she grew to "distrust" plot. Instead, she uses theme (in this novel it's mazes, and the main character is a landscape designer of mazes) to structure her novel and give it "organic movement" similar to that of a whole life or lived experience, rather than formulaic "rising action" or "narrative arc." It seems to me, readers either go with Shields' style in this

regard and love her, or they hate it and find it too boring and plotless.

I'm in the first group.

Sarah says

Carol Shields liked to write about ordinary people with ordinary problems. On the face of it, that's just about the last thing I'd want to read! But hers are not the loud, robust "common men" we hear so much about in country songs. These are the unsung ordinary people, quietly living their lives: The gentle souls.

I like Larry, and Shields is becoming my favorite novelist.

Pat says

I really enjoyed reading this book. At first I thought the subject matter was going to put me off but in the end I came to like Larry. I like the idea that a person can find inspiration in a particular situation and then go on to build a life on that inspiration. Larry goes in to his first maze at Hampton Court while on his honeymoon and it is a life changing experience for him. I did find the idea of surrounding ones own house with a maze a bit weird and obviously it was more than Dorrie could bear. I found the ending of the book appealed to my romantic soul and the whole thing was a very satisfying experience.

Suzanne says

I did not finish this. I still feel like reviewing and rating though. This was odd. The narrators voice to me was a mocking tone, but I didn't know if it was meant to be, and I was mocking the mocker. I felt it was slow and things only started to pick up a little when Larry's first wife took a back hoe to his prize shrub maze in the front yard. Cue divorce. Larry was a florist. Larry kept talking about words to describe his penis, or his erection. Diatribes of word after word after word. This happened at the end of a disc then again at the start of the next disc. That pretty much did it for me. I'm not a prude, it was just off, odd, weird, strange, silly. That was the way he told of his penis but substitute those for pecker, Jack, Weiner, hot rod. I'm going to be the final mocker. Obviously I don't get it. Back to the library this went earlier today.

Jayne Charles says

There was an awful lot of wisdom packed into this story about Larry, sometime nerd and hedge enthusiast, so many neat little observations that had me saying 'wow'! It has to be admired as a feat of writing, if nothing else. Each chapter moves Larry along in his life chronologically, but at the same time each section has its own theme - his kids, his job, his health, etc. Strands of chronology are drawn through each of these themes, the story dipping back into the past as necessary, so it was almost as three-dimensional as the mazes Larry designs for his clients. I was thinking whilst reading that it must have been incredibly difficult to plan out and write, and yet it almost had the feeling of something written for fun, for the joy of writing.

Carol Shields has a tremendous talent for harnessing the abstract, and her writing is almost like a series of musings - interesting musings that make you think 'yes, that's exactly how it is'. Oddities in the book - the way that each section recapped the events of previous ones, not as though to bring you up to date with things you may have missed, more as though you hadn't even read the previous chapters. Deliberate, I'm sure, but it will no doubt irritate some readers. On the other hand I'm sure it means you could dip into the book at any chapter, and understand what is going on, or even read a single chapter as a short story.

Characterisation is strong throughout the book- I grew to know and like minor characters within the space of a page. Curiously enough it is only Larry himself who remains oddly faceless throughout, despite the fact we know almost everything about him. The final chapter is much trumpeted amongst the blurb, and it is a good challenging read. I didn't particularly buy or welcome the final 'twist', but overall an excellent book.

Bandit says

After two lovely collections of short stories it seemed only right to check out the author's long form and it didn't disappoint. Actually it was notably similar, unfolding in such a way as to be composed of short interconnected stories right down to the (slightly annoying) revisits of previous chapters, so that each one was logically self sufficient. But really, this was a proper novel, it followed a very average sort of man named Larry Weller for 2 decades of his life, from mid 20 to mid 40s. Each chapter was arranged chronologically and thematically, concentrating on a specific subject and/or salient event of Larry's life. Larry is a very mild sort of protagonist, unassuming, unimposing, he goes through life with a sort of innocent bewilderment, just riding the waves out as they come. The most original thing about him is his obsession with mazes, which he eventually turns into a lucrative business. Things do occur, but much like the author's short fiction, this really isn't a plot driven narrative or, actually, more like the plot isn't the main strength, that belongs to the writing itself in all its gloriously rendered minutiae of everyday life. It's weirdly hypnotic in a way, just being so engaged with these precise lovingly crafted descriptions of the most ordinary things. Then again, it can get tiresome, make a book dense and slow going, with dialogue barely entering until the last chapter. Definitely something you'd have to be in the mood for, but well worth the time. There are so many clever observations, such awesome wordsmithing, almost like making art out of nothing at all at times. Just interesting and different perspectives on conventions, much like Duchamp's toilet becoming Fountain the artwork. No, actually, this is, as an accomplishment, considerably more superior to reimagining a toilet. Because much like the Truman Show we are, all of us, stars in our own movies or tv shows, and this is the movie of Larry's life and there's a vicarious appeal to witnessing a life so meticulously analyzed. Larry makes an affable, likeable star, but in a way he's almost a placeholder for an average North American white man of a certain age, you can view it as a study of changing masculinity concepts and expectations throughout the late 1900s much like an anthropologist or a social sciences buff...or you can just enjoy it as a well written novel. Either way, it works.

Jean says

In the end, I liked this book far better than I imagined I would. My first thoughts as I read centered around what I felt was Carol Shields' smugness to believe that SHE could actually have any true insight into the working of a man's brain/thoughts. I had a professor once who stated, "A brain soaked in testosterone, does not function like a brain soaked in estrogen!" Having lived all these years, I have to agree. Men and women function differently and neither really understands the other, even when we think we do. Having said that,

Shields does a good job of imagining what is going on in Larry's mind.

It is the story of Larry's internal and external life told in chunks from the age of about 26 to about 46 - a rather interesting 20 years. Shields writing style for this novel is interesting in that for all the well written prose, with great descriptions and wonderful vocabulary - the sections seem to be written independent of each other; often as if the reader had no other knowledge of Larry's history. I found that a bit disruptive to the story, but then just got used to it.

The ending came as not a surprise exactly and in retrospect I probably should have anticipated it a bit more than I did. The ending made the book for me, without it, I would have only given this book a three star review.

It is worth the read, enjoy!

Linda Prieskorn says

Larry is a typical boring human who plods through life. The author uses 100's of comparisons to benchmark Larry against average people. She repeats many scenarios about his life, his first marriage, his life as a child as he progresses through life. As boring as the language is in the book you feel compelled to continue reading because Larry's life is your life. You are not a famous statesman, you are not an olympic athlete, you are not in the news weekly, you write on Facebook and goodreads and that is the pinnacle of your fame.

Great quotes From Larry's Party -

Men. These curios upholstered assemblages of bones, the fearful morality that attends them, the clutter of good luck and bad, the foolish choices, the seeds of the boys they'd all been - and those seeds sprouting inappropriately even as their hair thins and their muscles slacken. Fighting for a little space in the world. Needing a little human attention. Getting it up, getting it off. When does it stop? Does it ever stop?

It seems that once there's enough money, enough recognition, enough love - not that he loves Charlotte Angus, exactly - then there's nothing to look forward to except the next minute.

And the most timely of all -

He's noticed that the heft of of money makes the bodies of the wealthy more dense, more boldly angled and thus threatening even when suited, dressed, coated - and wrapped in the soundlessness of their immense, padded, and luxuriously ventilated office spaces. The rich are underpinned by ignorance, he's noticed. They know nothing of the authentic scent of dust and dowdiness. The rich- except for the self made rich- believe they're biting at the apple of life just because they know enough to appreciate pre-Columbian art and hand pieced quilts. They're out of touch, they breathe the dead air of their family privilege.

Larry is you and if you are as lucky as Larry your life will end with a satisfying twist.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

A few professional reviews likened this to her The Stone Diaries, but from a man's viewpoint. I did not see the commonality. In the Diaries, I always felt as if the person was real, while in Larry's I never did. From the

beginning, it felt as if a woman trying to write from a man's point of view and not quite making it.

Throughout, Shields repeats parts of the story given in earlier chapters. It's almost as if she thinks you will take a long time reading it and might forget what has gone on before so she has to remind you. The shining moment in this is the final chapter. Sometimes an author doesn't quite know how to end a novel. Shields certainly knows and does it in fine style.

That doesn't mean I didn't find this a nice interlude from some of my other reads. I did. And I'll likely read her again, though I think I'll put some space between this and the next one.
