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for Perry, with thanks  
for your wonderful approach  
for your Carol Shields



25th Wedding Anniversary, Harvard Avenue, Winnipeg, 1982.

## *Living in the Republic of Love: Carol Shields's Winnipeg*

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FOR MOST READERS IN MOST PLACES, FICTION IS ABOUT SOMEWHERE ELSE. It occurs most often in a place made safely fiction-worthy by the thousands of stories already set there: the old West, the deep South, Paris, Shanghai, Los Angeles, New York. Or else it happens in some generic, nowhere, middle America, too perfectly generic to seem much like the place we call home. And the places like Dublin or Toronto that have produced a James Joyce or Margaret Atwood capable of persuading readers that fiction might reasonably occur there are few.

For readers in Minneapolis, Minnesota or Manchester, England or London, Ontario, therefore—and for readers like me in Winnipeg, Manitoba—the world of fiction is almost never quite the world we live in. We tend to end up believing that fiction does not—indeed, cannot and should not—describe real people like us, people living ordinary lives like ours in ordinary places like ours.

Take Winnipeg—I feel tempted to add, in this context, “please.” It’s cold here. There are mosquitoes. There are cankerworms. The land is flat and bleak. The rivers are brown. In Winnipeg, we’re too distracted by the insects to concentrate on suffering truly fiction-worthy angst; and our lovemaking never has the intensity fictional characters achieve, simply because it takes us too long to shed our parkas and long johns. Winnipeg is too real to be fictional.

Fictional places, on the other hand, are exotic: i.e., enough unlike this one we’re stuck with to seem desirably alien to us. Even when Joyce’s Leopold Bloom is doing nothing more unusual than moving his bowels, he’s doing it in a scenic Irish outhouse, and it’s adorable. Even when Atwood’s Torontonians are suffering deep depression, they’re doing it in relatively balmy weather, without cankerworms, and in close proximity to the Skydome; it’s all just too damn wonderful to seem very real to us. If fiction has any relationship to our own lives, then that relationship must be indirect: allegorical or metaphorical. For us, all fiction is fantasy.

So what happens when we *do* read a book about a place we know? If the book evokes our place well, does that make the book seem less like fiction, less fantastic, less enjoyable? Or does something different happen? Might the book even teach us how to see the wonderful exoticism of the place we thought to be so dull?

For me as a Winnipegger, reading Carol Shields’s *Republic of Love* was all about asking these questions. It’s one of a surprisingly small number of novels set in Winnipeg—a much smaller number than the number of writers in Winnipeg might suggest. I suspect a lot of Winnipeg writers suffer from a peculiar Western Canadian variation of the no-fictional-place-like-home syndrome I’ve just described above: they think of this unfortunately urban place we live in as an intrusive barrier between ourselves and the true essence of the prairie psyche, and therefore tend to write about bored farmers and bleak prairie towns rather than bored accountants and bleak Osborne village. But there are hardly any farmers at all in *The Republic of Love*. The Winnipeg it describes contains both accountants and Osborne village—and is anything but bleak, even though Shields doesn’t forget to mention the cold, the wind, the mosquitoes, the cankerworms, or the brownness of the rivers. All are there, and all are an integral part of what the novel’s about. In fact, Winnipeg is more than just background in this novel: it’s very much a presence, a character, maybe even the central character.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout *Republic of Love* there’s a relentless litany of names of real streets, actual churches, genuine landmarks—places Winnipeg readers are likely to have actually been to or can actually go to: Harvard Avenue,<sup>2</sup> Assiniboine Avenue (23) McDermot Avenue (85); neighbourhoods such as Linden Woods (99), Tuxedo Park (99), and South Drive in Fort Garry (99);<sup>3</sup> the Norwood Bridge “in the center of town”(81),<sup>4</sup> the Osborne St. Bridge (45), and the Redwood Bridge (87);

Westminster Church (90), St. Ignatius Church on Corydon (92), St. Luke's and Holy Rosary (152), and All Saints (277); The Winnipeg Inn (82) and the Northstar Hotel (281);<sup>5</sup> St. Vital Mall (99), Portage Place Mall (166), and Polo Park Shopping Centre (210).

The main characters, Fay and Tom, both live on Grosvenor Avenue near Stafford, and Grosvenor is accurately described as being "lined with trees and with Victorian houses, now mostly converted to rental apartments, or to condominiums" (7). In the real Winnipeg as in the novel, there is a bookstore around the corner on Stafford named Murray's (194). There is also a Dubrovnik's restaurant, it does overlook the river, and it is exactly the kind of place where you might take a guest from out of town to eat something as pretentious as smoked trout salad (59). There's also a Vietnamese restaurant on Sargent (127), and there was once, a few years ago when I assume the events of the novel took place, an Act II restaurant downtown (27). There's also a movie theatre downtown on Notre Dame (291) and a Belgian bakery on Corydon (298). There's even a "radio station down on Pembina Highway" (24) like the one Tom works at. And the route Tom jogs, down Wellington Crescent past the Richardson mansion and the bridge at Academy Road to Assiniboine Park (19-20), is often frequented by joggers.

But why am I listing all of these things? Why does it matter? I'm listing them because, as a Winnipegger, I find all this fascinating; and it matters, I think, because I *do* find it fascinating, and because someone unfamiliar with Winnipeg probably wouldn't. The presence of all these real names and places makes reading the novel a different experience for me than it would be for someone who's never been here, just as reading Joyce would be a different experience for a Dubliner than it is for someone like me who has never set foot in the place and is therefore thrilled by the exotic outhouses.

The most obvious effect of these Winnipeg references is the economy with which they convey information about the characters' locations, activities, financial status and cultural background, and even their moods and attitudes—information that's often unspoken and therefore unavailable to non-Winnipeggers. This is a textbook case of what reader-response literary theorists call "blanks" or "gaps": moments when a fictional text provides a small amount of information that evokes much larger meanings for readers with the knowledge to fill them in: what theorists call a "repertoire."<sup>6</sup>

For instance, and most obviously: at various points in the novel, Shields tells us of characters who live in specific locations: a duplex on Lanark Avenue (63), a house on Oxford Street (92), a condominium twelve floors up on Wellington Crescent and overlooking the river (71), an apartment over a store on Selkirk Avenue in Winnipeg's North End (115). A non-Winnipegger might guess that the owner of the Wellington Crescent condo is better off financially than the dweller in the Lanark

duplex. But the non-Winnipegger wouldn't catch the just-barely-hanging-on-to-middle-class-respectability status of a far west River Heights address like Lanark in relation to the world of poverty, immigrants, and aboriginals evoked by the reference to Selkirk Avenue. Both addresses are intriguing additions to what Shields actually does tell us about the characters who live there.

Sometimes, the sociological information Shields implies by specific addresses is very exact indeed. Non-Winnipeggers aren't likely to catch the subtle clue signifying not just very substantial wealth, but the conventional and sedate atmosphere of old money as opposed to the exuberance and crassness of new which is implied by the fact that someone lives in a house "on the older end of Park Boulevard" rather than the newer one (106).

Winnipeggers will also realize that someone like Fay's mother who had a wedding reception at the Manitoba Club (132) some decades ago was not only likely to be quite well off financially, but also, decidedly not Jewish or Ukrainian. Nor is it surprising for such a person to have been married at All Saints, which conveys not just that she is an Anglican, but that she has ties to a specific church especially favoured by the old WASP establishment. And for Winnipeggers, the fact that one of Tom's former wives had the maiden name of Friesen strongly suggests that she comes from a Mennonite background, and therefore explains the exact nature of her parents' "narrowly religious" values (126)—and the distance of both Tom and his former wife from old establishment WASP families like Fay's. Similarly, the fact that someone works at the Grain Exchange, or eats at Dubrovnik's, or shops in Osborne Village, or performs in musicals at Rainbow Stage (113), or attends the Folk Festival at Birds Hill (162) or Shakespeare in the Park (135) evokes far more specific information about character for those of us who are familiar with these institutions and the nature of their usual clientele than for those who aren't.

But these addresses and institutions also—and in some ways I find this much more interesting—evoke mental images of particular physical places, and the particular way they look and feel.<sup>7</sup> By that I mean, inevitably, the way they look and feel to *me* in addition to what Shields tells us they mean to her characters. For instance: at various points in the novel, either Fay or Tom go to a Safeway on a corner near where they live (21), a donut shop on Osborne Street (29, 83), a flower shop in Osborne village (75). Just about any Western Canadian reader will know what a Safeway is—and maybe, understand what it means about Tom and Fay's habits that he buys his flowers at the Safeway, she hers at the flower shop. But only a Winnipegger who's seen it will be able to imagine that actual Safeway on Osborne, its geographical relationship to the donut shop across the street from it, the architectural qualities of the building that houses the flower shop not just in the village but half a block down the same street, the stores on either side of that shop that



Shields doesn't even mention. Similarly, only a Winnipegger will know, when Shields mentions the condo on the riverbank on Wellington and then, a few pages later, refers to St. Boniface hospital as being "across the river" (73), that she's talking about two different rivers.

Or, like me, remember my own visits to that hospital, in which, as it happens, all my children were born. Or respond to Shields's passing mentions of Harvard Avenue and Peanut Park with a complex stew of memories of the time they lived on that street, as I did once, just across from that park.<sup>8</sup> Those memories are far richer for me in their evocation of that place than the novel is—and, for any other reader but me, totally beside the point. But I can hardly ignore them, and they get in the way: my repertoire of private knowledge wars with the connotations Shields seems to intend.

As a Winnipeg reader, so unused to reading fictions about my own place, I don't know quite what to do about that. But I do know I'm not alone in having this difficulty. I taught *Republic of Love* last year, in a first year literature course—in Winnipeg, at a university even named Winnipeg. It was the first time most of my students had read a novel set in the city they happened to be in at the time, a novel that actually mentions the building we sat in as we talked about it. The students told me they found it a disconcerting experience.<sup>9</sup>

In our first class discussion of the book, many of the students described how they'd be reading along, getting caught up in the characters and the story, and then suddenly come upon a reference to Corydon Avenue or Portage Place or even the U of W—and suddenly finding themselves pulled out of the fictional world their mind was creating. At first, they found this confusing, disorienting—I suspect because of the no-fictional-place-like-home syndrome. One student, Phil Peters, told the rest of us that he always read fiction as an escape, a way of getting away from the world, and specifically, from the life and place he knew. As he read novels he put together a different world in his head, a world satisfyingly alien enough to be worth escaping to. Corydon Avenue had no business being in that world. The vision of the real Corydon that popped into Phil's head when Shields mentioned it ripped his fictional world apart.

In a sense, I suppose, what happened to Phil is just one particular version of the main problem fiction always creates for all its readers. Because fiction requires our knowledge to make sense of it, it inevitably evokes aspects of that knowledge—matters personal to us—that seem to interfere with what it might be trying to say to us. The blanks unavoidably present in fictional texts can and always will be filled with different repertoire by different readers—including repertoire too personal to be what might seem to be required. We are doomed by the individuality of our past experiences always to misread all fiction.

But as I think about that, I realize that I could put it another, more positive way: the knowledge fiction forces us to bring to it allows us to

*invent* what it says to us. Reading fiction is always the experience of making up what is being communicated to us, of manufacturing for ourselves the Harvard Avenues or the existential agonies the novelist names for us. That's what makes reading fiction such an involving process, and so much fun.

Furthermore—and this is strange and magical—the Harvard avenues of novels are not ever exactly the ones we walk on, the existential agonies not exactly the ones we experience ourselves. Even though it's mostly made up of our past knowledge, what we invent when we read is not what we knew already, but a mysterious amalgam of that and something new, something intriguingly different—something that didn't exist either in our own minds or in the text of the fiction before we got around to our acts of reading.

I suspect many of us share Phil Peters' assumption that fiction is always escape—and not just because, for Winnipeggers and other inhabitants of unlikely settings for fiction, it is so often about somewhere other than here. In the way I've just described, it *is* always about somewhere else, even when it's made up of stuff we brought to it ourselves. It's always an evocation of someone else's vision of what is: and so reading it *is* always and significantly an escape from the world we imagine for ourselves and call real. We would have no reason to read fiction if it showed us only what we know already.

But no matter where it takes place, fiction is also in an important sense always about *here*, where we are, and no escape at all. It's hard to imagine a novel, even a fantasy, that didn't want to convince us that the world it describes is in some important way the world we really live in—that it's actually about us. While some of us don't live in Toronto, Atwood's vision of her Torontonians' lives is clearly intended as being to some extent a fair representation of the way we all live now—even in Winnipeg.

The same could be said of Shields's Winnipeg. I suspect the events she describes in *Republic of Love* bothered Phil because they didn't match his own expectations for what sorts of things might take place in the Winnipeg he knew. I also suspect she wanted to persuade him and other readers that such things *might* take place here: that the Winnipeg of the novel is actually the one Phil lives in.

Fiction is inherently paradoxical: an escape from the world we know as we begin our reading of it and an attempt to represent the world we know to us in new and different ways. Phil's experience of *Republic of Love* as an unsettled back and forth movement between escape from what he knew and documentary description of it is, then, merely an extreme version of what fiction almost always tries to do to all of its readers: it tries to persuade us that what we know already can be understood in terms of what it shows us, so that what it shows us is actually the way things are.

In order for a fiction to convince us that its reality is the only reality there is, it has to persuade us that events like those it tells of might actually take place in real places we know. Doing just that is central to Shields's agenda in *The Republic of Love*. It's a story of love—deep love, bone-rattling love, love at first sight. It is, in fact, a romance, not really all that much different from the kind Harlequin publishes; and if there was ever a kind of experience that many of us believe takes place only in the exotic other worlds of fiction, then romance is it: surely the whole point of Harlequins is that they are unreal enough to be suitably wish-fulfilling fantasies. As Shields's protagonist Fay tells herself, "It's possible to speak ironically about romance, but no adult with any sense talks about love's richness and transcendence, that it actually happens, that it's happening right now, in the last years of our long, hard, lean, bitter and promiscuous century" (248). Fay then goes on to express a faith that explains much about the novel and the key role of Winnipeg within it: "Even *here* it's happening, in this flat, mid-continental city with its half million people and its traffic and weather and asphalt parking lots and languishing flower borders and yellow-leaved trees—right here, the miracle of it" (248). Romance *can* happen here, even here. The alien, exotic place in which fiction takes place might be Grosvenor Avenue, in Winnipeg.

Phil Peters helped the rest of us to understand that possibility by working on a class presentation with two of his classmates. Phil, Brandi Dearlove and Cory Dmytrow visited some of the locations mentioned in the novel. They came back with maps and photographs, and told the rest of us what it felt like for them as readers to be in the same places as the fictional characters, and how the reality they saw for themselves did and did not match Shields's fictional descriptions of it.

My students' response to this exercise was, I suspect, exactly the one Shields intended. Travelling the streets Shields says her characters travelled, seeing photographs of houses like the ones Shields tells us her characters inhabit, removed the fiction from the realm of fantasy. Confronted with an actual condo on Grosvenor, a building you can take a photograph of, it's not possible to escape into a fantasy world—but it *is* surprisingly easy to imagine Fay and Tom inside the condo, living and thinking and feeling exactly as Shields describes them. For someone standing in front of the condo with a camera, Fay and Tom's story seems as much like documentary as it does like fiction: and that means that romance *is* possible, even, maybe especially, here.

I say "especially" because the here Shields describes is already romantic. In *The Republic of Love*, Winnipeg becomes exactly as glamorous and as fiction-worthy as Joyce's Dublin or Atwood's Toronto—exactly the kind of place in which people might fall passionately in love. As the fiction becomes real, the reality becomes fictionalized.

Shields makes this fictionalizing happen, in part, by being very selective about how she describes her setting. Her characters tend to confine their activities to just a few neighbourhoods—River Heights, Osborne Village, the Exchange district—and only these parts of the city are described in any detail. It just so happens that these are the oldest, most tree-filled, most conventionally “romantic” parts of the city. Only when love seems dead do we hear much about boringly square modern apartment buildings in bland commercial districts near the airport.

Furthermore, Shields focuses her descriptions of her neighbourhoods of choice on qualities that make them sound attractive enough to be a target for touristy bus tours. She pays particular attention to the ways in which the large old trees form canopies over the streets of River Heights and Crescentwood. She speaks, for instance, of Yale Avenue, where “overhead a double row of elms met” (190), or of Wellington Crescent, where “the tall trees seemed knitted together, tobacco colored, squashed gold, swinging their branches in long easy arcs” (232)—or of River Heights in general, where “overhead the branches of the separate trees gattered together, oak, elm, ash, poplar—city trees with black tarry rings painted around their trunks, put there to discourage the cankerworm larva. The uniformity of these dark markings turned them into a tree army, marching straight up to a point of perspective” (193).

Shields also provides a frontispiece illustration depicting just such a canopy of trees, albeit without their unromantic cankerworm rings. When I first opened the book, I took only a cursory glance at this picture and assumed it represented some sort of Medieval or Renaissance garden, the sort of place where courtly lovers in fancy costumes might discover their republic of love. It was only after I read the book and then came back to the picture again that I actually noticed the River Heights sidewalks and houses under the trees. In their class presentation, furthermore, Phil and Brandi reported turning their car onto Grosvenor from Stafford and experiencing a moment of *déjà-vu*: the actual street looked to them exactly like this frontispiece. Our various experiences of this picture nicely signal how the novel manages both to move the escape of romance into a real place and to make that real place seem a romantic place to escape into.

From the point of view of tourism, even the eccentric peculiarities and uglinesses of a place can seem attractive: evidence of uniqueness, of the endearingly visit-worthy idiosyncrasy of a locale and its perversely but charmingly abnormal inhabitants. In Shields’s Winnipeg, as we’ve seen, even tarry rings on trees become charming—unique and artistic contributors to a painterly perspective. Indeed, even the cankerworms themselves are worthy of a lengthy, scientifically exact description:

Just when the trees have finally filled out their crowns with great glossy leaves, the cankerworms go on the march. The

larvae make their way up the tree trunks and then the munching begins. It takes no more than two days to transform an avenue of foliage into ragged lace, and ten days to strip the trees bare. At night there's a steady drizzling rain which is not rain at all but the continuously falling excrement of billions of cankerworms, chewing and digesting. The streets and sidewalks are covered with slippery syrup. The air turns putrid; the worms, grown fat, spin themselves long sticky threads, and on these they descend, like acrobats, to the ground . . .<sup>10</sup>

Like acrobats, indeed: bring on the tour buses. Then there's the "flat blue light" (59), which makes accurate landscape paintings of Winnipeg hard to sell: "It seemed people wanted a few fluffy clouds in their skies" (342). Nevertheless, Shields finds a phrase to make the "hard flat blue" (342) beautiful as she tells how us how Tom "loves this light-filled city" (101).

Similarly, the bleakness of the city's downtown becomes a source of exotic uniqueness: "Downtown Winnipeg has its city-share of graffiti-spattered back alleys but is mostly made up of wide formal boulevards lined with handsome stone buildings, piteously exposed despite repeated attempts at landscaping" (100). Indeed, "From the bus window the streets have the gray-and-amber freshness of a foreign city, stretching purposefully toward the doors of serious institutions and office blocks where the intricacies of commerce and learning unfold" (57).

I find these descriptions interesting because I recognize them, and yet I don't recognize them. They claim Winnipeg locations I'm familiar with in the name of a vision, an attitude unlike the one I've thus far had toward them. The Winnipeg of the novel is not quite the Winnipeg I know.

In fact, that's quite literally true. For all the exactness of many of its details, there are a surprising number of inaccuracies—what appear to be silly mistakes. I've discovered in conversations with other Winnipeggers that these errors really bother a lot of readers.<sup>11</sup> How could Shields be so accurate about so much, evoke such a convincing picture of our city—and then screw it up by getting other things so wrong? I'd like to propose an answer to that question: she did it on purpose. She wanted us to be bothered. She had a trick up her sleeve.

The inaccuracies are particularly bothersome, I suspect, because they are so close to the truth. It's not as if she moved Lindenwoods to St. James or let her characters meet in a charming but actually non-existent park at Portage and Main. There's nothing as jarringly wrong as that; instead, Shields invents perfectly possible variations on Winnipeg realities—things much like what does exist, things which could quite easily exist without greatly disturbing the fabric or feeling of the real Winnipeg we Winnipeggers know.

For instance: while there is a radio station on Pembina Highway like the one Tom works at, it's not called CHOL. The National Folklore Center Fay works at doesn't exist at all; but if it did and was on Market Avenue as reported, its windows would indeed "overlook a sliver of the old warehouse district and a section of disused railroad track and, beyond that, clear to the sky, the curved crust of the Red River, which is really brown, sliding its way northward" (32).

Some specific geographical details are equally variant, and just a little more bothersome. In my Winnipeg, there is no "Knox Church over on Broadway" (20), but there is a Knox Church, and there is a Broadway. There is no Poster Plus store on Stradbrook (83), but there is one on River, one block north. There is no "Ballentyne Street" (112); there is however a Bannatyne Avenue, and there is indeed a warehouse there converted into condos. There is no Roblyn Road (124); but there are both a Roblin Road and a Roslyn Road with a large old-fashioned apartment on it. There is no Ash Avenue, no Waterloo Avenue (121), no Vaughan Avenue (297), no Smith Avenue just off Wolsley (147): but there are Ash, Waterloo, Vaughan and Smith Streets, and there is a Wolseley (note the different spelling again), albeit nowhere near Smith Street. On a stroll through her neighbourhood, Fay could indeed walk down a street named Gertrude, "and then up a parallel street called Jessie" (38), but she would be walking east and west, not north and south as Shield reports; and it isn't true that "many of the streets in this part of the city were similarly named: Minnie, Agnes, Flora, Bella and Lizzie," although there are streets with some of these names and similar ones elsewhere in the city, and local mythology suggests that they may well be "immortalizing, [as] Fay has always supposed, the patient or demanding wives of early-twentieth-century developers" (38). Elsewhere in my Manitoba, meanwhile, there is no town called Amiota, but there is one called Hamiota (46); and there is no town with a pulp mill called Duck River, but there is one called Swan River. These are almost the real places, but not quite—and the differences are too close to reality to be mere errors.

Some of the character's interactions with the city are not so much geographically inaccurate as they are unlikely—and therefore, for a Winnipegger, very surprising indeed. On her way home from work, Fay would indeed be "turning right on Portage, bucking the worst traffic of the day, [then] turning left onto Osborne"—but if she then turned "right again onto Stradbrook," (35) she would be going the wrong way on a one-way street. Later, Fay catches her bus to work at River and Osborne (77)—a good many blocks from where she lives; for no clear reason, Fay avoids the Stafford bus she might catch on the corner of her street or the Corydon bus that runs just a block away from it. Similarly, when Tom goes to the corner to mail a letter he walks all the way to River (214). Perhaps most peculiarly, Tom gets stung by an insect while looking out his window (164); because of my local experience of



mosquitoes, it's hard for me to imagine a window in my Winnipeg like this one, without a screen in the middle of summer.

It's possible, I suppose, to conclude that Shields either didn't care about these inaccuracies, or didn't realize they were inaccurate: as a relative newcomer to the city she writes about, she simply might not know that streets which run north and south like Ash and Vaughan could never be called Avenues in a city in which all the Avenues run east and west. But if we assume that the inaccuracies are deliberate, that they might be an intended part of what the novel is and does, then thinking about them offers some interesting insights into the world Shields has created.

Above all: the inaccuracies make it crystal clear, for Winnipeggers at least, how paradoxical Shields's vision of the city is. It is both itself and something else, both real and not quite what it really is—and as such it is Shields's best representation of her main topic: love itself.

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As Shields describes it, love is problematic for a variety of reasons. Most obviously, and as I've already suggested, the surprise and the wonder of romance are at odds with the familiarity of normal life. The thrust of the book is to bring the two together, which requires that the strange enter the familiar. What better way to signal that connection than by setting events in a city almost but not quite like Winnipeg—a city just different enough to be unsettling, strange—romantic?

Love, Tom comes to believe, is "the only enchantment we know" (70). Romance, Fay thinks, keeps people "on edge, taunts them, then slitheringly changes shape and withdraws" (37). The Winnipeg of the novel is equally enchanted, equally slithering—both itself and something else, a meeting place of the real and the imaginary, of the self and the world. It represents Shields's success at duplicating what she herself calls "the curious and brave efforts of children to charge their immediate world with brilliance, making it glow with color as they move among common objects, bringing those objects alive with incantatory music, alive with texture and outline, alive with life" (194).

But it is more specific than that, and a more specific representation of the nature of love. Love is specifically problematic for Shields's characters because, as she insists on pointing out, they—and, presumably, all the rest of us—have to wrestle with two equal but opposite facets of the human condition:

1. We human beings, enmeshed in our own thoughts, are all, to our cost and our glory, completely and utterly isolated from each other. Connection to others is a delusion.
2. We human beings, enmeshed in our dealings with others, are all, to our cost and our glory, completely and utterly connected with each other. Isolation is a delusion.

Each of these truths individually suggests why romance might be problematic; together, they suggest why it might appear to be impossible.

If we are truly as isolated as the logic of the first truth suggests, then we cannot actually have the contact with another that romance requires. We might imagine that we do, but it's all in our minds, all something we invent ourselves, as Tom invented the three women he believed he loved and married, and then had to leave when they turned out not to be who he imagined.

Before meeting Fay, Tom ironically tells himself that he is "part of a Camus fable, a lost soul, loveless" (19). For all the irony, he is indeed depicted as "a man attached to no one" (172), despite heroic efforts to connect: he has had his three marriages, and "friends have entered and left his life. But he has no children, no relatives, no property, none of the blown aftermath other people attach to their arrangements" (100). He concludes, "All I have is this self. Not another thing. Just this irreducible droning self" (44). Unless love does actually exist, self is all there ever is.

Fay seems to represent the opposite problem: she even wonders if there is such a thing as a self. "Fay, a reasonable, intelligent woman, has long recognized that reverence for individualism is one of the prime perversions of contemporary society. It is illogical and foolish. Oh, yes. We are bound to each other biologically and socially, intellectually and spiritually, and to abrogate our supporting network is to destroy ourselves" (267). She asks, "Are human beings really so locked into their own cherished anxieties that the only vibrations they feel are solitary and private? Aren't people capable of more than this?" (183). Fay believes they are; in fact, she sees herself as so completely and utterly connected to a web of family and friends that she has no room left to be a solitary or private self. She believes she is "too dependent on the response of others and incapable of sustaining any kind of interior life for more than a few seconds at a time" (9).

But that creates another problem: it means that Fay's sense of self is totally dependent on others. When Fay claims that "she's sick of her identity; in fact, she's afraid of it" (154), it's telling that she defines herself in terms of how others see her: "she has all the identity she wants, all she can absorb. Daughter, sister, girlfriend, all her Fay-ness. . . . She's learned, too, how unstable identity can be, how it can quickly drain away when brought face to face with someone else's identity" (154). Fay feels that being connected to others deprives her of a sense of her separate being.

In terms of these concerns, love is doubly—indeed, paradoxically—problematic. It's either an illusion, a merely illusory move beyond the eternally isolated self; or else it's the essential contact with others that gives us the only sense of self we have—a false sense, of course—while depriving us of any real way of being separate and individual. If it's the former of these, then it is, as Fay suggests, "a form of vanity . . . . You

know, the wish to be adored. To be the absolute center for someone else" (108). If it's the latter, it's both illusory and suffocating, as Fay's mother's equation of being centred with being possessed implies: "there's something to be said for having a center, for belonging to someone, your own family, not just one person living for himself or herself" (13).

For love to actually exist, then—and for it to be real rather than illusory, and enlivening rather than suffocating—it must represent some paradoxical mid-state between total isolation and total connection. The love that Tom and Fay find for each other represents exactly that paradoxical condition. Tom moves past his isolated self into a connection with someone else, and Fay moves past the self she knew in her connections with others into her truer, barer self:

So this was what it was like. To open her body completely and to feel another's opening in response. She felt all his loneliness coming toward her. This was how it happened.

For once, to lay ourselves bare. (235)

Fay and Tom find a state in between isolation and societal absorption that leaves them both wholly individual and wholly connected to each other.

Nor is that all, for the novel does not end with this expression of love. It continues long enough for Fay to make the important discovery that maintaining love requires the hard work of balancing isolation and connection. Fearing "the fragility of human arrangements" (331) and seeing Tom as completely separate from her, a "dangerous stranger" (332), Fay tells herself that "she cannot open her body to such harm" (331): too much isolation, and love ceases. But on the other hand, too much connection, and the people you love might end up like Fay's father, who leaves his wife of fifty years because "I got *lost*, that's all, in all that warmth and loving" (318), because "his long peaceful marriage had somehow overnourished him. He couldn't breathe. He felt watched, insulated, incapacitated" (349). At the end, together with Tom again, Fay wisely concludes that she needs his separation from her as much as his connection: "She prizes his on-air self, his else and his other—his absence, in fact—and wonders if other people come to depend on this currency of separation" (365).

It's interesting how often Shields uses geographical metaphors to represent a state of balance between connection and isolation. At one point, Tom says that his ideal land form is a peninsula, "because it was separate yet joined" (121). Later, he sees the "coming together" of his friends and Fay's at an engagement party as "Two rivers meeting, a symbolically charged wha'd'ya-call it?—a confluence" (321).

A confluence such as that in the centre of Winnipeg, where the Red and Assiniboine meet. In fact, Winnipeg is Shields's main metaphor for the confluence of separation and isolation. It's a city which is "a bit too

small" (32), so that you don't know everybody but often run into people you didn't expect to see; a city in which Fay has never met Tom but Tom's former wife was once married to the man who later married the woman Fay's former boyfriend Peter was once married to. In a central passage, Shields describes Winnipeg as the perfect balance of isolation and connection:

The population of Winnipeg is six hundred thousand, a fairly large city, with people who tend to stay put. Families overlap with families, neighborhoods with neighborhoods. You can't escape it. Generations interweave so that your mother's friends (Onion Boyle, Muriel Brewmaster, and dozens more) formed a sort of squadron of secondary aunts. You were always running into someone you'd gone to school with or someone whose uncle worked with someone else's father. The tentacles of connection were long, complex, and full of the bitter or amusing ironies that characterize blood families.

At the same time, Fay has only a vague idea who the noisy quarreling couple on the floor above her are, and no idea at all who lives in the crumbling triplex next door, though she knows, slightly, two of the tenants in the building across the street. Her widowed Uncle Arthur lives one street over on Annette Avenue, but she knows no one else on that street. . . .

Geography is Destiny, says Fay's good friend Iris Jaffe, and Fay tends to agree. (77-78)

As a balance between the isolation of not knowing others and the tentacles of connection, the geography of the recognizable but perversely strange Winnipeg of the novel does represent Fay and Tom's destiny together. As Shields describes it, Winnipeg is, exactly, the republic of love.

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For those of us who live here, and who like to complain about the cold and the mosquitoes and the brown-ness of the rivers, thinking about our perversely unromantic city as a metaphor for what love's all about is something of a reach. I suspect that's at least part of the reason why Shields's geography is so often so perversely strange. She wants us bothered enough by the inaccuracies to make the reach. She wants us to see the possibility of this still recognizable but transformed place, this weird combination of what we previously knew and what she has invented and is forcing us to invent. If the impossible but not improbable Winnipeg of the novel can exist in the imagination of Shields and her readers, then love, also theoretically impossible but not all that improbable, might exist too, might exist here in our normal, mundane lives—does, in fact exist in the minds of Fay and Tom and those who

read about them, right in the midst of the mosquitoes and the canker-worms.

And if the love described in the novel exists, then why not its Winnipeg also? There may never be an Ash Avenue on any official map of the physically real city, just as there may never be a Fay McLeod or Tom Avery listed in the real phone book. But the metaphorical Winnipeg of the novel—the city as Shields represents it—might well become for us Winnipeg readers an accurate vision of the place we live in.

For my student Brandi Dearlove, the most mysterious evidence that Shields's fiction might actually be describing her real world occurred as she and Phil Peters drove down Wellington Crescent into the park, following Tom's regular jogging route as Shields reports it. As they stopped to take a picture, a real jogger running by tapped on the car window and greeted Brandi by name. At that moment, Brandi told us, she felt that she'd somehow entered the world of the novel; for in the novel, after meeting Fay's former partner Peter, Tom keeps running into him wherever he goes, in confirmation of Shields's view of the city being not quite big enough. On one occasion, in fact, Tom actually does meet Peter while jogging in Assiniboine Park.

Brandi reminded herself that of course it couldn't possibly be Tom out there, or Peter. But she still hadn't quite escaped Shields's version of Winnipeg, for a closer look told her that the man knocking on the car window and calling her name in a part of the city she rarely frequented was someone she'd worked with the previous summer and not seen since. In the real Winnipeg as in the fictional one, "the tentacles of connection were long, complex, and full of the bitter or amusing ironies that characterize blood families." On Wellington Crescent that winter morning in 1994, the real Winnipeg became, for a moment at least, an exact replica of Shields's republic of love.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>After I wrote this sentence, I came upon a piece in *The New Yorker* by Ian Frasier, called "The Novel's Main Character." In it, Frasier quotes a variety of reviews and articles which claim that Cicely, Alaska, Troy, New York, Bridgeport, Connecticut, Dublin, Ireland, New York City, The Bob Marshall Wilderness Area in Montana, and mortality itself are actually the main characters of various novels and TV shows. Apparently, I have replicated a cliché, without even knowing it. Too bad; I don't know about Cicely or Bob Marshall, but as I certainly will have persuaded you by the time you finish reading this article, Winnipeg is the main character in *Republic of Love*. So there.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to the Random House hard cover edition.

<sup>3</sup>In the real Winnipeg, Linden Woods is more usually Lindenwoods, and Tuxedo Park more usually just plain Tuxedo. I say more later about Shields's intriguing variations from standard Winnipeg reality.

<sup>4</sup>Winnipeggers and other Canadians might be interested in noting the American spelling in this book about a Canadian city published in Canada: in the real Winnipeg outside the novel, what Winnipeg has usually is a "centre." Maybe it has something to do with NAFTA?

<sup>5</sup>The former Northstar is currently the Delta Winnipeg; perhaps this places the novel a few years in the past?

<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Iser's *The Act of Reading*.

<sup>7</sup>The questions of whether fictional descriptions do or do not evoke mental visual images for readers, and whether or not such images are of any importance in the act of reading, have much exercised theorists in this century. In *The Reader's Eye*, Ellen Esrock offers a careful summary of the issues.

<sup>8</sup>Or for that matter, know that the official name of this little plot of green in the midst of substantial Edwardian dwellings is Egerton Park—that the name doesn't actually represent an uncharacteristic moment of whimsy on the part of the dour grain merchants who built this neighbourhood. Everyone just calls it Peanut Park because it's small.

<sup>9</sup>I'd like to thank the students in English 1001-1, section 4, Popular Reading and Serious Literature, fall and winter session 1993-94, for letting me tell about their experiences. I'm particularly grateful to Phil Peters, Brandi Dearlove, and Cory Dmytrow, whose responses to *Republic of Love*, discussed in more detail below, led me to the speculations that form the basis of this article.

<sup>10</sup>100-101. The paperback edition amends the texts of this description, presumably for the sake of entomological accuracy; instead of "The larvae make their way up the tree trunks," it says, "The beetles make their way up the tree trunks, the larvae are hatched," and so on (87).

<sup>11</sup>I've had conversations about these matters with, among others, Billie Nodelman, Kay Unruh Desroches, Neil Besner, and David Pate—Winnipeggers all. My thanks to them.

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