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“A PLACE OF SOLITUDE”

## AN INTERVIEW WITH **BLANCHE HOWARD**

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**BLANCHE HOWARD** (pictured left, with daughter Allison) came rather late to writing after having a career as a Chartered Accountant. Her first novel, *The Manipulator*, was published in 1972 and won The Canadian Booksellers' Award. Altogether she has published four and a half novels, *The Manipulator*, *Pretty Lady*, *The Immortal Soul of Edwin Carlyle*, and *Penelope's Way*, besides co-authoring

a novel with Carol Shields, *A Celibate Season*. Of her twenty or so published short stories and essays, "Chaos" was an honourable mention in the Canadian Author's Association contest and was published by *The Queen's Quarterly*, which submitted it as their Journey Prize candidate. An essay, "The Interstices of Time", was an honourable mention in the *Event* contest and was published by *Prairie Fire*, which submitted it for the Western Canada awards. A play, *A Celibate Season*, was adapted by Blanche from the novel and was staged in North Vancouver. Her latest publication is *A Memoir of Friendship: Letters Between Carol Shields and Blanche Howard*, published by Penguin Canada in the spring of 2007.

**The Puritan:** As a writer of fiction, seeing *A Memoir of Friendship* (2007) in print must be a profoundly different experience from what you may be accustomed. A work of indirect autobiography closes the gap of intimacy between yourself and your readers, eliminating the distance that inevitably manifests between the author and her work of fiction. Can you describe the experience of revealing familial history to such a personal degree? What were your anxieties and hesitations?

**Blanche Howard:** Yes, as you say it was a profoundly different experience. And I did have my hesitations about familial revelations. I was helped, however, by the fact that my daughter Allison was my co-editor, and since she had been the one of my family most intimately involved with Carol she had little hesitation in agreeing

to letting us use the references to some of her personal issues. Because Carol knew her, there were also more references to her and her difficulties than to the occasional troubles of others, of the children, and so the fact that Allison agreed to leave them in was a decision that was important to the integrity of the book. As for my own history, neither Carol nor I spoke a great deal about any emotional suffering we endured so I had no problem with recounting the facts of my husband's decline and my frequent bouts of stress-induced illnesses. The Shields family, however, had difficulty with the letters that talked about Carol's treatments and fears during her last illness and so much of those references in the final letters were taken out at their request.

**The P:** Your letters to Carol Shields conjure a woman fueled by a variety of passions. It seems that your creative, reflective life is divided between two major concerns: those of art and politics. Was this always a careful balance of impulse? Do you now have any regrets about time spent pursuing one, rather than the other? Or were the two conjoined, meaning your writing was consciously political and your politics creative?

**BH:** I don't know if I managed to maintain a careful balance. I do know that, because writing is a notoriously lonely occupation, my involvement in politics got me out into the real world and provided a sort of necessary social milieu in an arena in which I had strong opinions. I don't have any actual regrets, although as I edited the letters I did wonder if perhaps politics had been too front and center with me. Oddly enough, politics did not provide the fuel for my other writing; I tried once to write a novel about the excitement surrounding the Trudeau election and found that I couldn't maintain the necessary detachment.

I don't think my writing was consciously political and unfortunately neither were my politics as creative as they might have been.

**The P:** In an essay you wrote for *Prairie Fire*, which you reproduced in part in *A Memoir of Friendship*, you wrote that "writing is a search that may lead us into secret labyrinths where thoughts we have never suspected are discovered, where ancient and forgotten fears thrust themselves, like stalagmites, into consciousness, where we catch glimpses of desires so evanescent that they scatter like cockroaches before the light". As you re-read the letters exchanged between you and Carol, did any of these fears resurface?

**BH:** Oddly enough, it is fiction that so often reveals ourselves to ourselves, and yet as I read through the letters, many of them from periods twenty or more years earlier, I found echoes of thinking and emotions—as you say, fears—I have moved away from, finding instead that I can now observe them with detachment. It seemed to me that I rediscovered a younger version of myself, and I found myself reading Carol's letters with an intensity bent on discovering the things in her that may have been as hidden from her as they were from me.

**The P:** Throughout *A Memoir of Friendship*, you bemoan the contemporary critical "shunning" of epistolary novels. As seeming evidence, the epistolary novel you co-authored with Carol Shields, *A Celibate Season* (1991), was difficult to place. This disappointment is part of your wider concern for the art of letter writing, of diligent, committed correspondence, which has deteriorated in the advent of e-mail and global instant messaging (among other factors). Was your decision to put together this memoir in any way a defense of epistolary writing or even a rebuke of what you see as the publishing world's lack of interest in the genre?

**BH:** No, I wasn't really trying to muster a defense or to push a different generation onto a superior track. Yet having said that, I do think we have lost something with the near-eradication of letter writing. I am not in a position to preach of course; in the memoir Carol and I both embraced e-mail and its ease with considerable enthusiasm, but readers have mentioned to me the difference they found between the real letters and the e-mail letters. The latter have a sense of immediacy that the former lack, but the real letters embrace more of the atmosphere of the condition the correspondent finds herself in. It is interesting that a number of people have written to me rather than e-mailed me after the publication of the book. It has been fun to get these 'real' letters.

**The P:** For writers who may wish to follow you down the path of co-authorship, what are the major challenges or pitfalls that may be avoided? How are personal relationships endangered by aesthetic or philosophical choices in the crafting of fiction?

**BH:** That is an interesting question and one that any two or three sets of co-authors might answer differently. I have heard tales of hurt feelings and fractured friendships and it is easy to see why. I think one of the reasons that Carol and I managed it so well is that neither of us interfered with the other's work. In *A Celibate Season*, Carol was penning the letters from the husband Chas, while I was writing those of Jock. This was a set-up that made for a minimum of disagreement and also insured that two voices would come through in the work. Our few disagreements were usually centered on punctuation, and since Carol was much more versed in the niceties of English usage than I was, I usually (although not always) agreed with her. There were plot differences occasionally but each of us was willing to see the other's point of view. But I do see that not every co-authoring would go as smoothly.

**The P:** You have called the act of letter writing "ephemeral" in "the way it contrives to be simultaneously revealing and concealing". What is concealed in your letters to Carol? How was your letter writing affected by your growing awareness of Carol's fame? At any time, did the thought of posterity influence the content of your correspondence?

**BH:** In my letters to Carol I think I tried to conceal my insecurities that, in common with all writers, I would occasionally find overwhelming (the usual 'Who do you think you are?' whispers in the back of your mind.) Also I did tend to write about those things I knew would interest her, the books we read in common, the assessments of other writers' works and so on. Without intending to conceal perhaps I did omit those parts of my life that wouldn't necessarily find an interested audience in her.

Yes, my letter writing was affected by the growing awareness of Carol's fame. When I had rejections I would find myself unwilling to make too much of them, just as when I had acceptances I didn't necessarily flaunt them for fear that they would seem mundane to her. And then, as I mention in the memoir, I began to be over-awed by her achievements to the extent that I would wonder why she would want to bother with me other than out of kindness. I know this sounds pretty faint-hearted, but you can't underestimate the insecurities of writers. In the end she wrote one letter that set these insecurities to rest, a letter where she told me how much our friendship and my editing of her novels meant to her—I did go through all her later novels before they were published and she more often than not accepted my suggestions for change.

As for posterity, I think the fact that each of us saved the letters as an indication of the way most authors think, that if at some time one writes the 'Great Book' they will be an invaluable resource. Carol had hoped we would publish the letters together and at one point she said she was sure she had never written anything that she would want to hide. And so I suppose at the back of our minds this did limit slightly what we confided, although there were still enough judgments in them about other writers that some references had to be edited out in deference to the living.

**The P:** Reading *A Memoir of Friendship* allows the reader a very candid perspective on the frustrations and joys of writing in Canada over the course of the last three decades. One aggravation in particular seems to arise from working away from the somewhat 'Toronto-centric' mentality of the Canadian publishing world. What are your thoughts on the state of Canadian publishing, from the larger, more commercially successful publishing houses to the smaller, more independent equivalents?

**BH:** Western writers still feel a certain alienation from the eastern publishing scene. Writing is not substantially different from any other business in that networking helps, and because the majority of the country's writing is either written or published in Toronto the networking opportunities are greatly diminished. Also of course it is more difficult for a western writer to get the same publicity in the east since it involves paying for the writer to come to Toronto, not something a lot of publishers are willing to do.

Publishing, as we all know, is fraught these days with peril, given big box stores and the strength of Amazon and the threat of electronic publishing. Yet many good small presses survive and flourish, and I'm thinking particularly of Coteau Books in

Regina, which first published *A Celibate Season* and then my novel, *Penelope's Way* (2001). I am an optimist, I believe, in thinking that books will continue to be a big part of our culture.

**The P:** Aside from the work of fiction you have kindly sent our way, what other writing have you been working on? Should we expect to see another novel anytime soon?

**BH:** At the moment I'm revising a novel called *So Long, Judas*, which was a near-miss when my agent presented it a few years ago. Many of the people who saw it—including Carol—wrote lengthy critiques and I have gone back through them and paid attention to their ideas. Whether or not it will make the grade is anyone's guess—I'm elderly now and there is a certain hesitation on the part of publishers to go with elderly writers unless they have a very recognizable name.

**The P:** *A Memoir of Friendship* reveals the degree to which both you and Carol Shields benefited from having stable, friendly relationships with editors, as well as having an editorial relationship with a friend. How necessary is good editing to a developing writer? What is the best kind of editing?

**BH:** I think good editing is essential with larger works. I have been fortunate in finding excellent editors with *A Celibate Season*, *Penelope's Way* and now *A Memoir of Friendship*. The most hands-on of these was the editor of *A Celibate Season*, who found some aspects of Jock's character too harsh, a failing I had myself recognized. She helped me greatly with toning her down. I think with these three books I had the best kind of editing, which is the kind that respects the writer's vision completely and doesn't threaten to override anything, but confines the editorial work to mentioning the places where he/she feels it doesn't work, and also spots the places where the work needs to be enlarged upon. I haven't experienced the harshness of the editor's interference that Carol gave her fictional heroine in her last novel, *Unless* (2002).

**The P:** In one of her letters, Carol writes that it is "as important to find one's shape" as it is "to find one's own voice". What do you make of the distinction between the voice and the shape of the writer? How have you striven to find both shape and voice throughout your writing career?

**BH:** I think by 'shape' Carol meant the way the entire work holds together and assumes an entirety that defines the work. For instance in *Penelope's Way* I took a year in Penelope's life and wrote each chapter about the month she was living through and the changes she was seeing on her daily walk—this gave it a shape into which I was able to fit her thoughts and adventures.

Voice is trickier. What is it? I suppose it is that way of writing your material that is

unique to you alone, and of course I think of Hemingway and Virginia Woolf and almost everyone else of note. Finding your voice rather than using a pale imitation of someone else's voice is the thing all writers strive for, getting away from the voices of mentors. Although almost all writers show traces of the origin of the writers who most influenced them.

I can't say how I strove to find my own voice, only that when I found it I knew it. I think that is a discovery that is common to many writers.

**The P:** In *A Memoir of Friendship*, you call writing "a long apprenticeship". Many writers seem to peak at a certain stage of their career, unable to repeat or surpass past success. How does the aging process contribute to the writer's sense of freedom and responsibility amidst the "daunting" progression of time?

**BH:** Time is, of course, both the necessity and the enemy. I read an interview with Carol recently in which she talked of the freedom she had found in the short story to experiment with new techniques and make changes she might not have had the temerity to try at an earlier stage, and she did experiment with style in her later novels as well. Aging has its benefits and its hazards. There may be a loss of passion, but that may be tempered by the ability to write more clearly and with less fury. It is interesting that Carol, on each of her birthdays, would find them depressing and worrying, as though she might be denied the chance to fulfill her extraordinary talent. I think all writers are like that, afraid that there won't be the time or energy or insight to carry on. Yet some writers—John Updike, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Penelope Fitzgerald—continued or still continue in old age to turn out enviable insights into the human condition.

**The P:** As you and Carol aged, your letters became laden with a sense of impending mortality. At one time, you mention a feeling of resignation as a characteristic that corresponds with age. To what degree does writing help brace against or even resist this sense of acquiescence? Or, conversely, do you find that writing assists the author (and reader) in fully accepting certain inevitabilities?

**BH:** Writing moves you into a place of solitude where the realities of your present condition don't intrude until you surface again. Carol once remarked that writing for her staved off neuroses, and I find that it is a respite from contemplation of the fading of the physical senses. It is a fortunate thing to be a writer at any time but especially when you are old, because it provides a continuing focus and excitement that normal life would be hard pressed to duplicate. Perhaps in this way it does contribute to acceptance, or possibly acceptance is nothing more than some obscure gene that says stop worrying, you can't do anything about it and we'll shut it down when it's time.

**The P:** In one of your exchanges with Carol in 1997, you discuss the notion of

Canadian writing as "dispatches from the frontier". Eleven years later, how have your thoughts changed (if at all) on this subject? Does this label still apply? How does Canadian literature, in general, engage with the notion of 'frontier'?

**BH:** That's an interesting question. I suspect that we were both very influenced by Margaret Atwood's work *Survival* (1972) in which she finds a thread of surviving in the wilderness in Canadian Literature. At that time I believed it but I think now that much of our literature has moved into a more urban realm, life in the cities. Having said that I think any country's literature is affected by the traditions that went before. It is perhaps easier to see this in Australian writing, and I'm thinking of the works of Patrick White where the frontier is front and centre and is the overriding theme. I think even in our urban writing we engage the subject of frontier at a subconscious level. In my own novel, *Penelope's Way*, I frequently talk about the hazards that still threaten us outside the confines of our urban islands.

**The P:** Throughout *A Memoir of Friendship*, you (and especially Carol) often change location, moving across (and occasionally out of) the country. To what degree does moving offer a writer a change in perspective? What city do you find most beneficial to your writing process?

**BH:** The freshness of one's observations become jaded when you live a long time in one place so that moving gives one a fresh delight in new surroundings. I think this translates to those little particularities that alleviate the occasional dullness of description. And perspective does change; individuals in other places have their own local ways of responding which, because they are new to us, may bring us to rethink the human condition. In some ways my own city of North Vancouver is most beneficial for me to the writing process, I suppose because here I have routines that get me up and at my computer. On the other hand I know that Carol found her talent easily exportable and did much of her writing in France.

**The P:** What is the role of the female author in Canadian Literature today? What has been the most profound shift in feminine (or feminist) consciousness in Canada since your correspondence began? Which authors (male or female) have helped facilitate this shift?

**BH:** I think, thanks to the plethora of excellent and internationally acclaimed women authors, that there is a great acceptance of them in Canadian Literature and that the role of the female author is as well accepted as that of the male. This has indeed been a profound shift in my lifetime. Although it wasn't as bad as in the days when George Eliot and George Sands changed their names and Jane Austen was afraid to reveal her identity, when Carol and I first began our correspondence we were well aware of the difficulties of being taken seriously—I remember Carol's consternation when a publisher spoke of her novels as "housewifely". At that time we had just emerged from a post-war period when women's place was firmly in the home, a mind-set that

made it difficult to be taken seriously and that relegated the milieu of the family to one of unimportance. Carol particularly seemed sensitive to the possibility that a male-dominated society would give more credence to a male than a female, which was the reason for her odd venture into poetry using a male alias.

For me the first author who facilitated this shift was Margaret Laurence, although to give males their due Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House* (1941) was a novel that amazed because of its sure depiction of the female protagonist's life, as was D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913). After Margaret Laurence along came, of course, that other Margaret, Margaret Atwood, who brought us the all-important international acclaim.

**The P:** What was Carol's most significant contribution to your writing life? Since her recent passing, what have you found to replace this missing contribution?

**BH:** Carol's most significant contribution to me was her suggestion that we co-author a novel. At the time I had been going through a familiar writerly loss of confidence and her suggestion made me realize that she took my work seriously enough that she wanted to be identified with it. Also as we wrote *A Celibate Season* I picked up small nuances that had escaped me, among them her determination to avoid the dreaded cliché. I remember us arguing about the use of the dash which I had sprinkled too liberally in my letters, and this and other suggestions brought the importance of grammatical usage to the fore. Since her death I have not found anyone who is as hands-on as she was, although I have numerous good writing friends. She was at once down to earth and meticulous about her work. I was lucky to have her guidance for the time that I did.

**The P:** Kroetsch or Bowering?

**BH:** I'm going to have to skate away from this one because I'm not a person who understands poetry. I do read it and have read Bowering with pleasure, but that's as far as my expertise goes.

*Interview conducted by Spencer Gordon and Tyler Willis  
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[ Photograph by David Corbeil ]*