



Dropped Threads: What We Aren't Told

Carol Shields (Editor) , Marjorie Anderson (Editor)

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The idea came up over lunch between two old friends. There was a need for a book that, eschewing sensationalism and simplistic answers, would examine the holes in the fabric of women's talk of the last thirty or forty years. The contributors, a cross-section of women, would be asked to explore defining moments in their lives rarely aired in common discourse: truths they had never shared, subjects they hadn't written about before or otherwise found a place for. What Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson wanted to hear about were the experiences that had brought unexpected pleasure or disappointment, that somehow had caught each woman unawares. The pieces, woven together, would be a tapestry of stories about what women experience but don't talk about. The resulting book became an instant #1 bestseller.

"Our feeling was that women are so busy protecting themselves and other people that they still feel they have to keep quiet about some subjects," Carol Shields explained in an interview. *Dropped Threads* takes as its model the kind of informal discussions women have every day – over coffee, over lunch, over work, over the Internet – and pushes them further, sometimes even into painful territory. Subjects include work, menopause, childbirth, a husband's terminal illness, the loss of a child, getting old, the substance of women's friendships, the power of sexual feelings, the power of power, and that nagging question, "How do I look?" Some of the experiences are instantly recognizable; others are bound to provoke debate or inspire readers to examine their own lives more closely.

The book is a collection of short, engaging pieces by more than thirty women, from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island. Many are mothers, some are grandmothers, and many are professionals, including journalists, professors, lawyers, musicians, a corporate events planner and a senator. Readers will find the personal revelations of some of their favourite authors here, such as Margaret Atwood, Bonnie Burnard, Sharon Butala, Joan Barfoot, Joan Clark and Katherine Govier. Other contributors include:

- Eleanor Wachtel, CBC radio host, talks about her early fears of speaking in public.
- June Callwood, journalist, social activist and a Companion of the Order of Canada, at the age of seventy-six is surprised at her failure to find answers to the imponderable dilemmas surrounding human life, and of her lack of connection to the "apparition" in the mirror.
- Isabel Huggan, short story writer, muses on what she considers the impossibility of mothers passing on knowledge to their daughters, and on her own feeling that "we are girls dressed up in ladies' clothing, pretending."

With writing that is reflective, often amusing, poignant, emotional and profound, *Dropped Threads* is the first book to tackle the lesser-discussed issues of middle age and is the first anthology the editors have compiled together.

Dropped Threads: What We Aren't Told Details

Date : Published January 23rd 2001 by Vintage Canada

ISBN : 9780679310716

Author : Carol Shields (Editor) , Marjorie Anderson (Editor)

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Short Stories, Cultural, Canada, Writing, Essays

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Mom says

This is a fascinating collection of essays by middle-aged women about "the things women don't talk about." The authors -- writers, historians, politicians, poets, professors, lawyers -- write about a range of topics, including childbirth, deciding to have an abortion, child-rearing, professional limits, marriage, suicide, our relationships with our bodies, societal expectations. While some of the writing was just okay, much was insightful and touching.

One of my favorite essays was "If You Can't Say Something Nice" by Margaret Atwood. Starting by describing how "long ago, in the land of small metal curlers" women were told many things, she then lists dozens and dozens of things we were told, and yes, I was told every one of them. What a hysterical essay! Two other affecting essays were "The Worth of Women's Work" by Nina Colwill and "Still Life With Power" by Anne Giardini.

The writing is uneven but almost every woman over 50 should find something in here that resonates.

Niya says

The concept of the anthology, women telling stories they've wanted to tell but haven't found the space to, is an excellent one. It results in a diverse collection of narratives, all from deeply personal experiences, about the neglected or silenced topics in women's lives. Each story is powerful - whether it's about abortion, the space that women occupy in the political sphere, the relationships (blood, spit, or water based) that form the bedrock of so many lives. As with all anthologies, some narratives are more powerful than others, some writers more succinct. The fact that not all the contributors are professional writers adds to the complexity and charm of the collection. It's nice to see the voices of female scientists, lawyers and other non traditional roles represented.

CynthiaA says

I first read this book within the first year it was published, sometime in late 2000 or early 2001.

Reading it now, almost twelve years later, it is interesting for me to see which of these essays still resonates. I didn't relate to all of them. There were some where I didn't agree with the essayist. But I did enjoy the collection a great deal. Lots of food for thought here.

My favourites are:

Joan Barfoot's "Starch, Salt, Chocolate, Wine".
Margaret Atwood's "If You Can't Say Something Nice..."
Katherine Govier's "Wild Roses"
Lily Redmond's "Mrs. Jones" and
and June Callwood's "Old Age".

Abigail Smith says

I felt like the first several essays were great, then after that I feel like they changed focus and emphasis and tapered into the politics of traditional hetero gender roles, which, though very real imo, do not make for very interesting reading, at least not in this context. There seemed to be much more focus on the roles of woman as "mother/wife" than pretty much any other way to experience your womanly identity...just vaguely disappointed, by the end. I think the scope was both too narrow and too vague.

Stefan Garcia says

A lot of beautiful stories in this book, but I think the commentary missed out that these stories are not really "female" but universal. Some essays will affect me for ever. The story about the vegetarian son for example helped me to understand my mother better. The email article did not work though, just not realistic. You would expect more random detail.

Sally says

3 1/2 stars. A collection of personal essays by Canadian women, covering a wide range of topics, all centering around the female experience. Quite a number were not of particular interest to me, a few were excellent, the overall effect was something of a grab-bag. Nonetheless, I'm glad I read it, if only to be reminded how differently people think and feel and react from me (it's hard not to take yourself as some kind of norm, even if you know very well it's not true.)

Jessica says

My Amazon review: A series of just over thirty short essays by Canadian authors, Dropped Threads 2 is a continuation of the first Dropped Threads book which began the discussion of women's lives from childrearing (or choosing not to) to rape to love to death and beyond. Each essay is a snippet of these women's lives, of things they have witnessed and done and thought - a mini memoir, if you will.

While the topics and ideas in these essays no longer feel like items that cannot be and should not be discussed in the 21st century, they are certainly still often found to be taboo and stifling - stuff not to be discussed in "polite company". The overwhelming emotion in the essays is the relief on behalf of the authors to have an outlet for their insights - insights that are often born of tumultuous conditions. Every woman who reads these essays will find familiar ideas and actions and will be inspired to take note of her own experiences in life.

Given the various topics and writing styles there is something for everyone in this collection of brilliantly compiled essays. It is a thoughtful gift idea for any young woman making her way in the world.

Krista says

The holes we leave for our daughters are for them to darn with the yarn of their own lives. Just as we did. Just as we are doing.

Apparently, Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson were having lunch one day, and although as good friends they talked about *everything*, they realised that there were some topics that never came up and, as writers, that intrigued them: are there still taboo topics, even among women? What are the things our mothers never told us? They put out a call for contributions and compiled the results in *Dropped Threads*: a collection of essays and short fiction, written by known Canadian authors, academics, professional women, and housewives. The variety of voices makes for an interesting – if uneven – reading experience, and for the most part, I'm uncertain if these pieces universally fit the brief: *these* are the taboo topics?

Some authors told me what I already know, but in an interesting way:

I thought that when I was old I would be confident, that somehow there would be within me an accumulation of experience, an accretion of knowledge that would form such a solid, dense core that my being an adult woman would flow from that source in some, I don't know, molecular or electromagnetic way. Instead, it feels much more as if I have made a grown-up-looking shell around a space in which the same me as I've ever been dwells, hidden from view.
(Isabel Huggan, who also wrote the opening quote)

And:

What continues to perplex me is that all these years of existence have taught me so little. I had hoped for wisdom, but I don't even know what wisdom is. (June Callwood)

And some authors, by treating topics like infidelity or the death of a child in fictional form, failed to connect with me: had those topics been treated in a more confessional tone, I might have felt that a taboo had been confronted instead of danced around. Also, there's a piece on inequality in the workforce that's written as an email exchange between a woman and her adult children that falls absolutely flat. On the other hand, Margaret Shaw-MacKinnon wrote a piece on the spiritual dimension of giving birth that completely resonated with me – and this is the only essay that feels like something I should pass on to my own daughters, because, as Shaw-MacKinnon writes: *I could not surrender to, or engage in, the spiritual intimations I so clearly felt, precisely because there was no cultural preparation for this.* Yes!

I am also, by nature, interested in the metaphysical, so was open to Martha Brooks' experience of the numinous (her connection to the divine through nature) and Sharon Butala's experience of “*making contact with some power, or with the 'collective unconsciousness', or, as I like to think of it, a manifestation of spirit that flows through the universe behind daily life and is available to all of us*”. Butala in particular was writing about the apparently widely known yet little discussed fact that women become more psychic as they approach menopause, and is that even true? I was really interested in the historical connection between ageing women and accusations of witchcraft (and men's fears of these ageing women), but can recognise that these bits might not be of wide interest. I'm also likely in the minority of readers who was told the titular joke from Anne Hart's “Lettuce Turnip and Pea” by my own mother (who got it from her father) – and I was

charmed right from the title.

And that's really the key point: there is such a variety of experience and opinion in *Dropped Threads* that, while there might be something for everyone, not *everything* will be for *everyone*. And that's its great strength as well – I can recognise that Marni Jackson's piece about mothers and sons is clever and insightful even if it means little to me personally; can see that Margaret Atwood brought her great gifts to bear on her piece about not experiencing sexism within the Canadian publishing industry, even if it seemed to miss the mark for me within this collection – and there should be something for every reader here; every woman at least. This is the first of three such collections, and I'd be interested to read them all.

Jann says

I think this review is the most difficult I have tackled. It wasn't because I didn't like the book, although I would say I appreciated it, rather than liked it. This is because it is a collaboration of essays and memoirs with each author's interpretation of the theme of things which took them by surprise as adults which hadn't been told to them as they were passing from childhood to womanhood -things which may never have been discussed within their family or social group, or which caused them to wonder as a child when an adult suddenly went silent or even as adults when their friends might change the subject abruptly in the middle of a conversation.

I will say that many of these pieces were quite poignant and I found myself aching with sadness as I recognized the feelings which were written about and others made me laugh out loud in enjoyment of the amusing sections. At times I thought, 'Well, our group talks about all manner of subjects – sensitive, intimate, private and revealing anecdotes from our lives, past and current and if not at the group level, then in two's or three's'. But after honest reflection I realized that not all of us were contributing all the time and so there could have been some of us who found the topics too sensitive or intimate to discuss and the rest of us may have missed that in our absorption with the 'theme-de-jour'. And can we honestly say that there are not subjects that we may still be too shy to discuss with our daughters, hoping that they will just automatically glean the knowledge from books, school or friends?

Surprisingly, even after having finished the book with all its emotional high and low points, the section which stuck with me and troubles me is called, The Imaginary Woman by Betty Jane Wylie. I am sure this is my failing rather than the author's. She refers to herself and women in general as 'Pataphysicians'. I couldn't tell if she intended this seriously or with tongue-in-cheek, but I just couldn't wrap my head around the concept of pataphysics. As Wylie explains it, "Pataphysics is the science of the particular; relating each event to the singularity that makes it an exception. The hard part is that everything, every single day, is an exception." Perhaps it is too obvious and I am trying to make it too complicated. I looked it up at Wikipedia and read that entry through completely, and became more completely befuddled.

That selection was the midway through the book and although I know that I truly enjoyed reading many before and after The Imaginary Woman, the very provoking pataphysics conundrum leaves me unable to comment on the particulars of other pieces. Call it brain fog if you must. Suffice to say that I think there is something for every woman to appreciate by reading the book, either one section after the other or one at a time, leaving time to ruminate on each contributor's story before taking the next one up. As a whole they reinforce what I gained from the 'women's movement' and that is, whatever our differences, there are more similarities that make us a sisterhood. I don't mean at all that men are the enemy, but that, by supporting and encouraging each other we are all the better for it.

D Gibson says

A book every woman should read!

Jessica says

Loved his book years ago, and just discovered there's a sequel?! Excited to dig into volume 2.

Quiltyknitwit says

A Canadian friend recommended this collection of essays written by female Canadian authors. The question they all address is, What was it that caught you unprepared, what weren't we told or warned about while growing up? The themes explored are varied and interesting, and also present great opportunities for personal growth. This book is to be slowly savored.

J.M. Bridgeman says

Essays by Lorna Crozier, Martha Brooks, Sharon Butala, and Miriam Toews stand out for me in this collection about the things we women avoid talking about and thus, "what we aren't told."

Leah says

This fabulous collection of essays and short stories cut across age, experience and regional differences in the Canadian landscape, describing the truth left unsaid in the lives of the authors. While the contributions were a little uneven in their insight (some authors seem to have just phoned something in because they didn't want to turn down the invitation to participate), some were fantastic. Many of the authors were new to me, while others like Margaret Atwood, remain among my favorites. I think either of the Dropped Threads collections would make great titles for a book group discussion. There are so many themes ripe for picking apart.

Shawn Leslie Dixon says

This is some of the most intriguing and informative collection of stories I've ever read. I hadn't even considered many of the topics covered and I've received an enlightenment on some wayward assumptions I've thought correct.

Wildly interesting, sometimes harsh, but most of the way round worthwhile, especially by those not just moonlighting with their pens.

There were so many answers to questions that I hadn't asked, I'm now full of curiosity.

It's hard to imagine the lifestyle changes witnessed over the decades by these authors, the ground broken and

barriers overcome, so very interesting a read. There were a few in particular that I found wildly interesting or moving or just wonderfully well written... in no particular order, If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything at All, A Father's Faith, Mrs. Jones and especially Edited Version. It's hard to consider the world from another view, especially ones from harder times and experiences, but it's a worthwhile glimpse.
