

T S ELIOT Teachers' Prize

Teacher Review : Sharon Olds 'One Secret Thing'

On the back of my copy of 'One Secret Thing' the blurb from the New York Times declares that Olds 'has made the minutiae of a woman's everyday life as valid a subject for poetry as the grand abstract themes that have preoccupied other poets.' I can only assume that the writer of this comment is a man and he considers death not to be a grand abstract theme. In the terms of this assessment it is not without irony that the reader can open this collection, in five parts, and find the first entitled 'War'.

I first encountered Sharon Olds in 1996, with the publication of 'The Wellspring'. I vividly remember my first reaction as a teacher of poetry; 'Why isn't she on the syllabus?' Syllabuses are gone and there has been an attempt to change the range of poetry that we present to our students, but to get Olds 'in there' we have to use circuitous means.

'They are crowded in line being shoved towards a truck.' is the opening line of this collection. The verbs resonate, 'crowded' and 'shoved', this is not going to be a comfortable journey. The first section takes us through images of war like a photograph album, the focus, always, on the people. In 'The Dead', 'the dead were covered with something/and taken on a child's sled to the cemetery'. The rhythm here has a regularity that belies the content. Olds' reputation for powerful, often seemingly unformed verse, is cemented with a punch.

The five sections, like five acts, talk to each other like characters in a play. We have everything here we expect; the painful exploration of relationships, intelligent intertextualisation and the apparent laying bare of the self that is, perhaps, the triumph of Olds' poetics.

What has always made Sharon Olds the woman poet's woman's poet, I believe, is her profound ability to get to the heart of the mother – daughter relationship, something Shakespeare never did. I defy anyone to read the title poem and not be moved, possibly to revulsion but certainly to the real. In 'One Secret Thing' we are presented with a daughter lubricating her finger to separate the 'parched' lips of the dead mother from her gums. The power of this image is both physical and disturbingly memorable. The mouth that spoke and smiled, is set free in death by the 'humanhood' of the daughter. This is closeness in the raw and a testament to what Olds has done for women's poetry.

My favourite poem in the collection is also about mothers and daughters, 'Diagnosis.' The clarity with which Olds presents misunderstanding and endurance in this most underwritten of relationships strikes the reader like the apparent ease of her poetics. 'What your daughter has/ is called a sense / of humour.' You got it wrong mother but we love you anyway. You need a sense

of humour to love Olds and you definitely need a mother, certainly not traits exclusive to women. Everyone is included. She is not 'One Secret Thing'. She is genius. Tell everybody.

Jane Bluett (Teacher)
Bilborough College, Nottingham