



## Carol Bly gets her Oprah moment



Carol Bly

It's a little hard to imagine Carol Bly sitting on Oprah Winfrey's couch. Not because she wouldn't have had much to talk about with the media mogul; these two smart, book-loving women would have had a rollicking conversation, says Cynthia Loveland, Bly's friend and publishing partner. The problem would have been getting Bly to sit still for all the fussing and makeup that goes along with going on TV. The modest, down-to-earth Minnesota writer just didn't have the time of day for that kind of stuff.

"She would have loved to be interviewed by Oprah," says Loveland. "She would have seen it as an opportunity to talk about the things dear to her heart, and she wouldn't have been intimidated at all. We actually sent Oprah one of the early books we collaborated on for our own small press [[Bly & Loveland Press](#)], and Carol joked about the very idea of us getting made up for TV. She had such a good sense of humor."

Bly, who died of cancer at age 77 in December, gets her Oprah moment next month, when her first novel and final book, "Shelter Half," will be a summer reading pick in O magazine. It's not quite Oprah's Book Club, but the featured review will be the largest national exposure Bly's work has ever had; the magazine prints 2.4 million copies of each issue.



"Shelter Half," a darkly humorous literary novel set in a fictional Minnesota small town, took Bly four years to write. It is out this month on

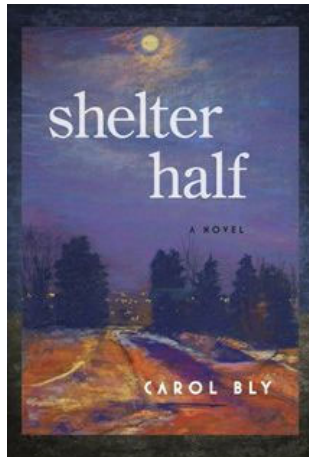
Holy Cow! Press, in Duluth. Loveland says even though Bly had never written a novel before, her voice is "all over the place" in this one, and longtime fans will be pleased to get the chance to spend more time with the author's work.

"The novel combines all of her artistry as a short-story writer, along with all the political and ethical concerns that she explores in her essays," says Jim Perlman, Bly's friend of 20 years and editor and publisher at Holy Cow! Press.

#### **Big deal for little press**

Oprah's word on the printed word holds tremendous power. So how does a small press prepare for the potential stampede of Oprah readers? Perlman is cautiously optimistic.

"Publishing is a wonderfully romantic activity, and it's easy to overestimate the appeal of a book. Just because you like it, doesn't mean everyone else will," he says. But if Oprah likes it, chances are good that her fans — not to mention Bly's fans — will want to check it out, so Perlman has ordered a print run of 10,000 copies, the largest printing in Holy Cow!'s 31-year history. A typical printing for the literary-minded, occasionally experimental press is about 2,000 to 4,000 copies, although its titles "Brother Songs," an anthology of male poets, and "Strength to Your Sword Arm," by Brenda Ueland, have sold close to 15,000 copies over multiple printings.



"If those first 10,000 all sell, we'd have the income available to reprint the book," says Perlman. "We've had poets read on 'Prairie Home Companion,' books reviewed in the New York Times Book Review, and authors interviewed on NPR, so I consider this in league with that, but I don't really know what to expect, since this is the first time we've ever been exposed to such a large and devoted audience."

"Shelter Half" will also be promoted in independent bookstores this month as a Midwest Booksellers Association "Midwest Connections Selection."

#### **Grant led to Oprah**

Oprah entered the picture when Holy Cow! received a publicity grant last year. "We were the beneficiary of 12 free hours of time from a professional publicist. We used her mailing list to send uncorrected galleys to reviewers in January, and Oprah was on that list," says Perlman. "In April we got a call from Oprah's people asking if the publication was still on track. Then we heard nothing until early May,

when they sent an email saying they'd made a decision to review it in their July issue. Of course, I was extremely excited."

The challenge was that the magazine wanted a copy of the book immediately, and it would be two weeks before Perlman would have copies. But he wasn't going to miss this chance. "We made one up. I went through my library and found a book with the same thickness and the same dimensions the finished book would have. Then I had our designer paste the cover and the spine and the back cover to a copy of the inside pages, so from the outside it looked like a real book."

They overnighted the fake, it seemed to fit the bill, and in about two weeks, Oprah's magazine subscribers will receive their summer reading instructions: Read Carol Bly.