Raymond Carver (1938-1988)

Raymond Carver was America's preeminent short story-writer during the 1970s and 1980s, a time that witnessed a great renaissance of the art of the story. In his stories, and also his poems and essays, Carver recorded with poignancy and humor the financial and emotional bankruptcies that beset the working poor.

Raymond Clevie Carver was born in Oregon on May 25, 1938, the son of C.R. and Ella Carver, Depression-era migrants from Arkansas. At the time of his birth, they were living in Wauna, a lumber company town of 700 people, twelve miles west of Clatskanie, on the Oregon side of the lower Columbia River.

Three years later, C.R. Carver moved his family to Yakima, Washington, where he worked as a saw filer at the Cascade mill. Though Carver never again lived in Oregon, he had deep emotional ties to the Pacific Northwest. In addition to the sixteen years with his parents in Yakima, he maintained a home in Port Angeles, Washington, for the last six years of his life. In a 1983 interview for *Paris Review*, he told Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee, "If I've ever gone about consciously locating a story in a particular place...I suppose that place would be the Pacific Northwest."

Carver's adolescence in Yakima is well-documented in his writing: the joy he took in fishing, his job delivering prescriptions, his deep attachment to Maryann Burk, whom he met at the Spudnut Shop when she was fourteen and married two years later. She is the mother of his two children—Christina (1957-) and Vance (1958-)—and the lifelong inspiration for numerous poems and stories that speak of the tenacity of an idealistic love, long after alcohol and adultery might have done it in.

Carver bounced around Northern California, living in Paradise, Chico, Eureka, and Arcata, until he finally earned a bachelor's degree at Humboldt State College in 1963. He supported his family by working "crap jobs," as he would describe them: picking tulips, sweeping hospital floors, and working at the big local sawmills.

Amid the chaos of poverty, childrearing, and moving from town to town, Carver wrote stories. "Furious Seasons," the second story he ever published, was short-listed by Martha Foley in *Best American Short Stories, 1964.* For ten years, his work appeared in literary quarterlies until 1971, when fiction editor Gordon Lish published "Neighbors" in *Esquire.*

Carver's work was much celebrated in his lifetime. His stories appeared in important anthologies, including three editions of *Best American Short Stories*; his first collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, was a finalist for the 1977 National Book Award. He was the recipient of a Harold and Mildred Strauss Living Award, which permitted—in fact, required—him to write for five years without teaching; and he was inducted, shortly before his death, into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His work has been translated into twenty-two languages.

With celebrity came the Carver legends: the enduring, if volatile, love of Maryann Burk (they did not divorce until 1982, after twenty-five years of marriage); and his alcoholism, which began "in earnest" in 1967, as he would date it, and crescendoed in the mid-1970s, with arrests, hospitalizations, and detox centers. At age thirty-nine, he quit drinking forever, a decision that marked the beginning of a consistently fruitful period of work and achievement.

Carver edited and polished his stories tirelessly, sometimes producing twenty drafts. "Art is made to seem effortless, but it takes some work," he told Jim Spencer in a 1982 interview. The word "minimalist" became attached to his name, by which admiring readers meant the concision and aim with which he could throw an emotional punch and by which critics meant an impoverishing simplification. For Carver, it was a label under which he chafed, and beginning with his 1981 story "Cathedral" he made a conscious attempt to give more language to emotion.

The last of his eight *New Yorker* stories was "Errand," a radically different kind of work for Carver, about the days surrounding the death of Chekhov from tuberculosis at a Badenweiler hotel. The publication date was June 1, 1987, and three months later, Carver was himself coughing up blood: lung cancer was confirmed on October 1, when a lobe of his left lung was removed during surgery.

Always a heavy smoker, Carver died of the disease on August 2, 1988. Two months before his death, he married poet Tess Gallagher, his companion of ten years. He is buried at Ocean View Cemetery in Port Angeles.

Written by Martha Gies

Further Reading:

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