

Raymond Carver and Biography

Sandra Lee Kleppe

Now that we have entered the “post-truth” age, we can look back on a long line of biographical sources about Raymond Carver (RC)—memoirs, biographies, interviews, photographic and personal essays—with both suspicion of fabricated images and admiration for meticulous documentation.¹ James Carver’s newly published memoir, *Raymond Carver Remembered by his Brother James* (London: Austin Macauley Publishers Ltd., 2017), attempts to sort through some of the myths surrounding his brother’s life by calling out falsehoods and praising precise fact checking. However, his book is perhaps most valuable for what it adds to the piece of the puzzle of RC’s life. It is especially the childhood years, the ones both close to James’ heart and farthest from public knowledge, that are filled in here with details about the caring environment created by the Carver parents. Contrary to the popular consensus that the Carver boys grew up in a dysfunctional family with an alcoholic father, James Carver (JC) explains that his parents seldom drank, and when his father did, it was the occasional binge. However, Cleve Raymond Carver did pass on his low tolerance of drink to his son Raymond Cleve Carver, certainly a contributing factor to the writer’s later struggle with the chronic alcoholism that almost killed him in the 1970s. This connection between father and son is explored in an emotional poem RC published in 1968: “Father, I love you,” he writes, “yet how can I say thank you, I who can’t hold my liquor either” (*All of Us* 7).

For readers interested in the biographical details of RC’s life there are several sources with varying degrees of reliability that have accumulated over the years. James Carver’s memoir is an important addition to the growing number of accounts about the life and times of one of America’s most prominent writers. As the last living member of the Carver nuclear family, James has access to a whole world of information preceding even the concept of “Carver Country,” a term that took root following the publication of Bob Adelman’s photographic essay *Carver Country: The World of Raymond Carver* in 1990. This lovely book is both a biographical documentary as well as an imaginative and artistic portrayal of the people, places, and events that were significant in Carver’s life. Many of the photographs are of Carver family members and other people RC knew, while others seem included to reinforce a specific milieu long-associated with the writer: that of the struggling lower classes. For example, a photo of the “Employee of the Month at the Red Lion Inn, Yakima” from 1989 is included on the same page as a shot of a cannery worker in Yakima the same year. On the opposite page is a photo of a saw filer at a

company where RC's father actually worked. While it is true that Cleve Raymond Carver worked much of his life as a saw filer, the images here present a story we like to repeat about RC: that he grew up in the underprivileged working class and was expected to continue in his father's footsteps.

We get a more nuanced version of this topic in James' memoir, a book filled with authentic photos from his personal collection. Being a saw filer was an important job with an above-average salary, considered so essential, James explains, that Raymond senior was not drafted during WWII (JC 36). At the same time, the boys' mother Ella did indeed work in a cannery in Yakima, but James clarifies that this was a 10-hour a day volunteer job to help the war effort and keep fruit from spoiling. Thus, James offers us quite a different picture of the family background than the one we are accustomed to from various accounts. In fact, one of the many sources for false information about the Carver family came from RC himself, as James explains:

My brother's life has been sliced, diced, analyzed and dissected, with the apparent consensus that he rose to literary prominence despite drunken parents and a deprived childhood.... Ray himself may have been responsible for some of this confusion.

(JC 15-16)

For example, James points out that in an interview from 1983 RC claims that he was expected to follow in their father's footsteps. This interview can be found in the book *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, where RC says to the interviewer: "all through high school it was assumed that I would graduate and go to work at the sawmill" (Gentry and Stull 34). James refutes this "falsehood;" both parents, on the contrary, wanted a better life for their sons than the one they had lived (JC 64). RC's perpetuation of this working-class image was due both to his love of storytelling—inherited from his father—and his need to hone a façade that would promote his work. The many interviews gathered in *Conversations with Raymond Carver* and elsewhere are very rich biographical sources, but sorting the true from the fabricated is a tedious process.

One of James' aims with his memoir is precisely to help correct some of the inaccuracies that continue to propagate about the writer and his life. He takes issue with the tendency to collapse actual facts and fictional stories. Stories such as "Elephant" and "Boxes" both present poignant episodes in family lives where RC used certain details from real life events to enhance the overall effect of the fiction. In "Elephant," the narrator feels hounded by a long line of family members wanting money from him. The brother in the story is not much like the real James, who both borrowed and lent money to RC throughout the brothers' adulthood. In "Boxes" the mother is constantly moving and never feels settled; Ella Carver, on the other hand, eventually settled comfortably in Sacramento, near her son James. In both of these stories, RC

takes bits and pieces of real information that he adapts, his brother states, “to serve his creative purposes” (JC 16). This is a process that most good writers employ; it is a token to the power of RC’s neo-realism that readers are lured into believing it is all or mostly true.

One way to discern truth from fiction is to consult Carol Sklenicka’s comprehensive biography, *Raymond Carver: A Writer’s Life* (New York: Scribner, 2009). James has also evaluated this source, noting that “her biography is the only serious and credible one so far and I am sure it will stand the test of time” (JC 15). Sklenicka’s main task in *A Writer’s Life*, however, is not to debunk myths but to present the writer in light of a rich web of personal, literary, and cultural forces that came to bear on his life and works. Her knowledge of Carver’s life and times is simply encyclopedic; indeed, James states that, “I learned so much about my brother’s life that I did not know about my brother in later years” (JC 15). There are a number of other biographical sources that are not strictly factual, but present RC’s life from a particular perspective. Among these are Philippe Romon’s journalistic account *Parlez-Moi de Carver: Une Biographie Littéraire de Raymond Carver* (Paris: Agnes Viénot Editions, 2003), as well as two books of interviews with people Carver knew, *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver* (edited by William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll, Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1993), and *Raymond Carver: An Oral Biography* by Sam Halpert (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995). The latter two works contain interviews by family members, friends, and writers who admired RC and they offer the reader a picture of his impact on everyone around him. Almost all interviewees agree that RC was generous, shy, and quick to steal any story from anyone and turn it into a honed piece of fiction. These character traits are also pointed out by James Carver: “Ray always remained gracious, gentle, and kind. Without a doubt, my brother’s keen sensitivity to his surroundings and human nature contributed to and shaped his writing” (JC 97).

Both of Carver’s wives, Maryann Burk Carver and Tess Gallagher, have written extensively on their relationships with the writer. Burk Carver was married to RC from 1957 until 1982, though they had separated a few years before their final divorce. Burk Carver’s memoir *What It Used to Be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006) is a detailed account of more than 20 years spent together with RC. Their relationship was both loving and chaotic; Burk Carver understood the aspirations of her husband even as those same aspirations ultimately destroyed the marriage. RC always put his writing first and considered family life a distraction from his work, though he dearly loved his family. RC’s second wife, the poet Tess Gallagher, had similar writing rituals and the two of them set up separate offices—and sometimes separate homes—to pursue their careers. Gallagher’s own personal essays, gathered in *Soul Barnacles: Ten More Years With Ray* (Ann Arbor: The University

of Michigan Press, 2000), present the final ten years of RC's life when he finally achieved both sobriety and success after years of hard work.

RC's dedication to his craft was apparent already from an early age; James informs us that at age 17 his brother "turned a section of the basement into his bedroom and began writing on his typewriter" (JC 63). By this time, their father had already instilled in the brothers a passion for the outdoors that informs much of RC's work. James gives an example from the story "Everything Stuck to Him" (also called "Distance")ⁱⁱ, featuring a young couple with a newborn baby. The narrator's desire to go hunting clashes with his new responsibilities as husband and father. "My brother writes of the conflict that arises between the two," states James, noting that, in "many of Ray's stories, the essence of the core . . . originated from some part of his life" (JC 74). In many of Carver's poems, however, there is less conflict and more appreciation for the outdoors of his childhood. Poems about fishing trips and the love of lakes, rivers, and the sea dominate his production, witnessed in his choice of titles for his poetry collections such as *At Night the Salmon Move* (1976), *Where Water Comes Together with Other Water* (1985), and *A New Path to the Waterfall* (1989). After reading James' memoir, there is no doubt that it was the boys' father, Cleve Raymond Carver, who provided RC with the passion for nature that is one of the undervalued themes of his work.

One difference between RC's story and poetry careers is the influence of the powerful editor Gordon Lish, who helped catapult RC to fame with the publication of *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1981). For decades, scholars have been arguing over the extent of Lish's influence on this and other story collections. Though Lish did not touch RC's poetry, he made huge cuts and edits to the short fiction. James presents one of the more balanced evaluations of this writer-editor relationship to date: "Some say Ray's stories became better because of Lish, other's say Ray's stories were much fuller and better without Lish's excessive editing. In either case, Ray ultimately did get to the point where he trusted his own judgment, gaining enough confidence to cut Gordon Lish loose" (JC 99). In the post-Lish period during the 1980s, RC published what his brother calls "better and meatier" stories in collections such as *Cathedral* (1983) and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). The title story of the latter collection features a recovering alcoholic at a rehab center; RC himself eventually did reach full recovery from the disease, yet only a few years passed before he was diagnosed with the cancer that would take his life.

One of the most poignant sections of James Carver's memoir is the description of the final visit with his brother two months before RC died in 1988.ⁱⁱⁱ The brothers had been very close, especially during childhood and youth, and the impending death of the writer weighed

heavily on both of them. Despite this sad memory, the gist of the book offers us glimpses into the oft-misunderstood early years of growing up in Yakima, Washington. These were mostly happy and exhilarating years for the brothers where they forged an inseparable bond. They also received a solid foundation from their parents that served them well into adulthood. RC's love of stories, for example, came from his father's habit of entertaining the young brothers: "several times a week, Dad told us great stories. He was a marvelous storyteller with a great imagination Ray and I were mesmerized" (JC 59). This shared experience between James and Ray is one of many described in his memoir, a book that refutes the largely exaggerated accounts of domestic violence and alcoholism in the Carver family homes in Yakima.

Compared to other biographical sources on Raymond Carver, James' book is precisely most valuable for what it fills in about the family milieu growing up in Washington in the 1940s and 50s. We learn, for example, that their father was a strong union man and that both parents were democrats who greatly admired the accomplishments of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. There were also many books in their childhood home besides the notorious Zane Grey novels sometimes cited by scholars as the only reading material to stimulate the budding writer RC.^{iv} Mostly, we learn that big brother Raymond, despite being 5 years older, was James' best friend and mentor throughout childhood and well into adulthood. RC has paid homage to his brother in his poem "Drinking While Driving," where he writes that "I am happy/ riding in a car with my brother" and that "I could gladly lie down and sleep forever" (*All of Us*, page 3). A moment later he adds, "My brother nudges me,/ Any minute now, something will happen" (ibid.). This atmosphere of imminence and expectation is one that the brothers shared their whole lives. James explains that it was a private joke between them that soon things would "bust wide open" and that they "laughed about that phrase a year before Ray died" (JC 92). Perhaps RC had the last laugh with the wave of enormous success that he finally witnessed during the final years of his all-too-short life. Luckily, we have his brother's memoir to fill in some of the gaps of this fascinating writer's life, the ups and downs, myths and truths, and the ultimate busting wide openness of RC's career.

ⁱ Oxford Dictionaries named "post-truth" the word of the year 2016, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/?utm_term=.71b050c1626a

ⁱⁱ Several of Carver's stories have two or more variant titles depending on the collection in which they were published. "Everything Stuck to Him" appeared in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* in 1981 in a pared-down Lish version; Carver called the story "Distance" in *Fires* published in 1983. To compare different versions of stories readers can consult the Library of America *Collected Stories* from 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ The final meeting between the brothers in 1988 is depicted in the chapter called "Glimpses" on pages 115-119 of James Carver's memoir.

^{iv} James Carver discusses the books in the Carver home on pages 58-59 of his memoir.

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