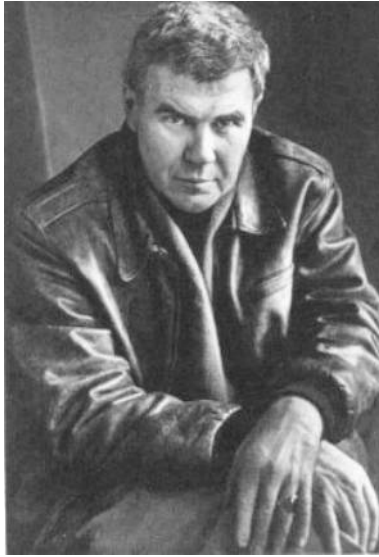


INTRODUCTION



Raymond Carver

(1938-1988)

In his relatively short career as a professional author, Raymond Carver established a critical reputation as the most powerful and innovative short-story writer of his generation. He was born on May 25, 1938, in a small town in northwestern Oregon; however, before he started school his family moved to Yakima, Washington, where his father worked as a logger. Carver once declared that the most important, although in many ways the most negative, influence on his early hopes to become a writer was the fact that he married and became a father before he was twenty. The need to support his family made the work he really wanted to do practically impossible.

Carver moved his wife and two children to California in 1958, where he enrolled at Chico State College, a small school in the California State College system. There, he enrolled in a creative writing class taught by John Gardner, who was soon to make a name for himself as a writer; Gardner encouraged Carver in his own writing efforts. Carver transferred to Humboldt State University, a northern coastal school, where he received his degree in 1963.

Although Carver was busy writing during the 1960's and publishing his poetry and fiction in various small magazines, his big break did not come until 1970, when he was honored with a National Endowment for the Arts Discovery Award for Poetry. With the money he received, he could spend time revising many of the stories which appeared in his first important book, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Although Carver was soon publishing in reputable journals and gaining recognition, he was also plagued with the disease of alcoholism. In 1977, when *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* was nominated for the National Book Award, he was hospitalized several times. Yet Carver said that June 2, 1977, was the date he would stop drinking forever; it was a decision that had a significant effect on his writing style and career.

Carver's professional career began to blossom in the late 1970's and 1980's: he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979, published a highly praised collection of stories entitled *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* in 1981, and published another significant collection, *Cathedral*, in 1983. Moreover, his personal life improved significantly. Following his divorce from his first wife in the late 1970's, Carver met and began living with the writer Tess Gallagher. In 1987, after he had put together yet another collection of

both old and new stories, Carver, a heavy smoker, was diagnosed as having lung cancer. He died in Port Angeles, Washington, on August 2, 1988.

Raymond Carver's first two collections of short stories shocked readers with their violence and puzzled them with their laconic Chekhovian style. *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* contains twenty-two stories which provide stark images of lives lived in quiet desperation. In many of the stories in this collection the characters are thrown out of their everyday routine and caught in situations where they feel helpless and estranged. Whereas the stories in Carver's first important collection are relatively drained of imagery and recall the style of Ernest Hemingway, the stories in his second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, are even more radically spare in their language; indeed, they are so minimal that they seem mere dehumanized patterns with no life in them at all. Whatever theme they may have is embodied in the bare outlines of sometimes shocking, sometimes trivial events and in the spare and reticent dialogue of the characters who seem utterly unable to articulate the nature of their isolation. The most basic theme of Carver's stories is the tenuous union between men and women and the mysterious separations that always seem imminent.

The stories that appear in two of Carver's later collections, *Cathedral* and *Where I'm Calling From*, are more hopeful than the earlier stories, perhaps because they were mainly written after Carver had been cured of alcoholism and had met Tess Gallagher. They are also more voluble and detailed, exhibiting an increasing willingness on the part of Carver to discuss, explain, and explore the emotions and situations that give rise to the stories. Instead of separation, Carver's later stories move toward union or reunion.

Raymond Carver is, in the opinion of many critics, the most important figure in the renaissance of interest in short fiction sparked in American literature in the 1980's. He belongs in a line of modern short-story writers that begins with Anton Chekhov and progresses through such masters of the form as Sherwood Anderson, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Ernest Hemingway, and Bernard Malamud. On the basis of a small output of stories, Carver will remain a significant figure in the history of modern American literature.

Charles E. May
"Raymond Carver"
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