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Review Essay
2009: A Watershed Year in Carver Studies

SANDRA LEE KLEPPE

Raymond Carver, *Collected Stories*, ed. William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll (New York: Library of America, 2009, $40.00). Pp. 1019. ISBN 978 1 5985 3046 9.

Robert Miltner, ed., *Raymond Carver Review*, special issue on "Carver and Feminism," guest edited by Claire Fabre-Clark and Libe Gacìa Zarranz, issue 2 (Spring 2009), availaible at http://dept.kent.edu/english/RCR/issues/02/index.html. Pp. 126.

Carol Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life* (New York: Scribner, 2009, $35.00). Pp. 578. ISBN 978 0 7432 6245 3. Paperback scheduled for release in November 2010.

Two decades after the death of Raymond Carver (1938–88), interest in his life and works seems more vibrant than ever. The twenty-first century ushered in a flood of new critical inquiries into Carver's cultural significance as his life experiences and the works that grew out of them have drawn attention in areas far removed from traditional literary studies. Carver's stories and poems are now taught in premed schools, where his texts are on the syllabus of courses that cover topics such as cancer, alcoholism, and patient–doctor relationships. The growing fields of disability studies and fat studies have embraced stories such as "Cathedral" and "Fat" as emblematic, and many scholars have found a religious dimension to his works.[1] It might seem ironic that the author best known for inventing literary minimalism in the early 1980s has come to have such extensive appeal. Yet minimalism itself made its appearance on several cultural fronts in postwar America, including in painting, sculpture, music, film and linguistics. Thus Carver can be seen

University of Tromsö, Norway.

[1] "Cathedral" is discussed in a recent issue of *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* (Georgina Kleege, "Dialogues with the Blind: Literary Depictions of Blindness and Visual Art," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 4, 1 (2010), 1–15). "Fat" is included in *What Are You Looking At? The First Fat Fiction Anthology*, ed. Donna Jarrell and Ira Sukrungruang (San Diego: Harcourt/Harvest Books, 2003). A bibliography of critical works on Carver can be found at http://www.internationalraymondcarversociety.org/bib.html.

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as part product of a much larger paradigm and also part victim, some have claimed, to editorial efforts to harness his talents in the service of what short-story theorist Charles E. May has labeled the "m-word."[2] Randolph Runyon, in his 1988 book *Reading Raymond Carver*, recognized already then a paradox at the center of Carver's works in calling him "the most influential minimalist … while at the same time the least representative."[3] By the end of his career, Carver had moved on (and/or returned) to a more expansive style of fiction, and he had also published several collections of poetry.

In 2009, three seminal works in Raymond Carver studies were published that will help readers sort through the controversies and better assess the extent of Carver's contribution to American literature: the first journal issue dedicated to the topic of "Carver and Feminism" (*Raymond Carver Review*, issue 2); the Library of America's *Collected Stories of Raymond Carver* (edited by William L. Stull and Maureen Carroll); and the first English-language biography, Carol Sklenicka's *A Writer's Life* (Scribner). All of these works were a long time in the making and perhaps planned for the twentieth anniversary of Carver's death in 2008. Both the *Collected Stories* and the biography were well received in the United States and the latter was selected by the *New York Times* Book Review as one of the ten best books of 2009. Considered together, these three recent works offer readers access to the full range of Carver's life and works as well as new ways of appreciating them – or depreciating as some will inevitably do when exposed to the details behind the literary scandals and domestic havoc of one of the most significant American writers of the late twentieth century.

Sklenicka's task in *A Writer's Life* is not to bring out the worst or the best in Carver (the notorious bad Ray/good Ray) but rather to show how the forces that worked both inside and outside him – personal talent, alcoholism, poverty, family ties – came together to produce such an important *oeuvre*. Sklenicka takes pains, for example, to show how Carver's notorious alcoholism was something that threatened to destroy his talent, his family, and his life and should thus not add to the mythos of writers who turn to substance abuse to enhance their creativity. Carver's least-productive writing years in the 1970s coincided with his most dangerous and sustained period of alcoholism. The chapter on this period is appropriately titled "Drowning," and it also treats the time in 1973 when Carver crossed paths with another writer who was at that time given a death sentence due to alcoholism: John Cheever. Coincidentally, a new biography of Cheever was also published in 2009, by Blake Bailey (New York: Alfred A. Knopf). Sklenicka documents the real-life ravages of the disease that crippled both men and thus balances the record on their drunken escapades while teaching (or trying to) at the Iowa Writer's Workshop.

[2] Charles E. May employs the "m-word" as a moniker for minimalism in his Introduction to Cynthia Hallett's *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel and Mary Robison* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), ix. One of the more recent treatments of Gordon Lish's editing as a scandal appeared in the *New Yorker*, 24–31 Dec. 2007, 92–107, revealing details of Lish's influence and suggesting that Carver did not agree with his cuts. A recent defense of Lish can be found in Giles Harvey's "The Two Raymond Carvers," *New York Review of Books*, 27 May 2010, 38–40.

[3] Randolph Runyon, *Reading Raymond Carver* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 4.

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This is the same period when Carver purportedly attempted to simultaneously hold down a teaching job at UC Santa Cruz, ostensibly paying his airfare between Iowa and California by promising to write for United Airlines. Sklenicka suggests another story behind this Carver myth: among the debts filed for his second bankruptcy in 1974 is a $726 bill to United (277).

Sklenicka's main focus 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. And she is up to the task: her knowledge of Carver's life and times is encyclopedic. The book is thus a cultural and literary biography as well as a personal one. Each decade from Carver's birth in the late 1930s to his death in the late 1980s is reconstructed with an acute sense of the geographical/social location where the Carver family lived and struggled to make ends meet. The logging and sawmill industry that lured Carver's parents and other relations from Arkansas to the Pacific Northwest is one milieu that nurtured him in his early years. His 1950s courtship of Maryann Burk reads like a gloss on 1950s America: a teenage romance led to pregnancy, a hurried marriage, and a second child, Vance, less than a year after the birth of the Carvers' daughter Christine in 1957. With the 1960s came the contraceptive pill and thus a sense of liberation for the young couple, but it was also a decade of hand-to-mouth existence while the Carvers tried to feed their family, get a college education, and find the time and space for Ray to write. Sklenicka shows how Carver was both part of and estranged from the West Coast literary scene in the 1960s after a failed year as a student at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Failure is relative, though; when he was later awarded tenure from Syracuse in 1982, Sklenicka notes, "No one questioned his claim to an MFA degree from Iowa" (398). Too old to be a hippie and too young to be among the established American literary elite, Carver nevertheless cultivated writers and artists and met Gordon Lish in California, the powerful editor who would later come to wield such extensive influence on Carver's work. These are the years that produced strong stories of young couples struggling such as "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" and "The Student's Wife."

The 1970s saw both the rise of Carver's success as a writer with the critically acclaimed collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) and his personal, financial, and familial disintegration. Not until 1977 did Carver's path to self-destruction finally change course when he took his last drink, but the damage to his marriage was done and his health was still borderline. This period of shaky recovery coincides with the years of editor Gordon Lish's iron grip on Carver's manuscripts, which he in some cases cut to half their original size, most notably for the publication of *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1981), the work that generated the trendy minimalist label. Sklenicka's treatment of the Lish–Carver relationship brings to light many details of what is still debated as a scandal in American letters. Her assessment is a balanced one and she points out how "Lish's heavy editing and Carver's alcoholism combined to make the whole process ambiguous" (357). Ultimately, though, Carver "was loyal to Lish and averse to any position that might compromise his publishing opportunities" (327). Carver's relationship with Lish quietly deteriorated after this time, though, and the tale of the many versions of his pre- and post-Lish work is well documented throughout *A Writer's Life*, exposing how his career was much more complicated than a development from so-called minimalism to more expansive prose.

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Sklenicka also provides a detailed and balanced treatment of another troubled chapter in the Carver saga: the dubious management of the Carver estate by Carver's second wife, writer Tess Gallagher (covered in the Epilogue). The extent to which Carver's children and ex-wife Maryann Burk Carver have been disinherited is alarming, though Sklenicka certainly recognizes that Carver's relationship with Gallagher was one of symbiosis between two writers and corresponds to the post-recovery period he referred to as his second life or "Gravy" years. In the 1980s he experienced a remarkable period of restored health and creative energies, allowing him to produce three collections of poetry as well as the much-praised and more expansive volume of stories titled *Cathedral* (1983). In the final section of *A Writer's Life*, Sklenicka provides separate, insightful chapters on each of these major works from the 1980s, and she also examines the genesis of the final seven stories Carver wrote before he fell fatally ill (included in *Where I'm Calling From*, 1989). The closing chapter is a gripping account of the final year of Carver's all-too-short life, from the time he was diagnosed with lung cancer in September 1987 to his death in Port Angeles in August 1988. *A Writer's Life* is an invaluable literary resource to Carver scholars and students, as well as a treasure trove of anecdotes for his acolytes or indeed anyone interested in post-World Warr II America.

Sklenicka's biography, combined with the new Library of America's *Collected Stories*, offers readers unprecedented access to crucial textual and biographical material that was previously unavailable to the general public. The *Collected Stories* gathers for the first time all of Carver's prose fiction in one volume and is thus an important classroom resource in addition to being a key source of the genesis of his stories. A main asset is the inclusion of the entire manuscript of *Beginners*, the title editors William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll have given to the book Carver submitted to Gordon Lish in 1980 that became the iconic minimalist volume *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (Knopf 1981). Though the prose of *Beginners* is more sentimental and less stringent than Carver's edited works, the argument for including it is transparency: readers can now compare and decide for themselves the significance of the radical differences between the two versions of this short-story collection. Stull and Carroll have worked meticulously with Carver's texts for two decades and have restored *Beginners* from Carver's manuscript in the Lilly Library at Indiana University. They comment that Lish

> cut the stories radically, reducing plot, character development, and figurative language to minimum. Some stories were shortened by a third, several by more than a half, and two by three-quarters of their original length. The overall reduction of the manuscript in word count was 55%. (991)

The notes to the Library of America's restored text of *Beginners* include a lengthy letter from Carver in which he implores Lish not to publish the book in such an altered form. But Carver later changed his mind and agreed to go forward with Lish's version. Thus minimalism in American fiction was born.

In *A Writer's Life*, Sklenicka reveals that Carver's original title for the manuscript that would become *What We Talk about* was actually *So Much Water So Close to Home*. In choosing *Beginners* as the title for the authoritative version of the manuscript for the Library of America volume, the editors are perhaps perpetuating an already ambiguous publication history. Their logic is that "the story 'Beginners'

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corresponds to the title story of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*" (990). The fact that Carver never chose to restore "Beginners" to its full version the way he insisted on doing with other stories from the volume such as "A Small, Good Thing" (Lish's "The Bath") and "So Much Water So Close to Home" might be evidence that he found his editor's version a compelling one, just as subsequent readers have been drawn to the clipped power of that Lish–Carver prose. In any case, the *Collected Stories* as edited by Stull and Carroll exposes the full extent of the alterations and offers a unique and lasting glimpse into the process behind what is now considered one of the most controversial editor–author collaborations in American letters. This collaboration has recently been compared to those between Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*) and between F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway (*The Sun Also Rises*), and to restorations of classics such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*.[4] Such comparisons indicate that Carver's esteem in the canon of American literature has grown in the two decades since his death.

Besides the manuscript to *Beginners*, the Library of America *Collected Stories* also includes restored stories that were never published in Carver's lifetime, a handful of essays, and his fragment of a novel, *The Augustine Notebooks*, which is absurdly Hemingwayesque:

> "I'm sorry. Well," he said after a minute, "if we just wouldn't look or act or even talk like broken-down Hemingway characters. That's what I am afraid of," he said. (648)

Carver's early story "The Aficionados" (633–38) is a Hemingway parody in which the female protagonist slays her lover instead of him slaying a bull; the fragment from *The Augustine Notebooks*, however, seems to have been a serious effort at a novel written in the wake of the difficult time when Maryann Carver had a scholarship in Israel. It is set in Greek island of Rhodes, where the Carvers stopped on their trip away from the Middle East (Sklenicka covers this period in her chapter 12). That Carver never completed this or any novel is considered something of a triumph for the short-story genre. He was certainly pressured to publish a novel, as writers had rarely been taken seriously without one under their belt. But Carver bucked the trend. Sklenicka has discussed how a set of circumstances in both the publishing and reading world came together in the 1970s and 1980s to promote short-story collections as commercially and artistically viable forms. In that context, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, regardless of its conflicted publication history, remains a seminal work that opened doors also for other writers publishing short fiction.

One can still wonder, however, if the critical reception of Carver's work might have had a different focus if his preferred title, *So Much Water So Close to Home*, had prevailed. The story features a female narrator with a strong voice, one of several women in Carver's canon who are allowed to tell the story from their own

[4] Enrico Monti mentions these editorial collaborations in his substantial analysis of Carver's manuscripts in "*Il Miglio Fabbro*? On Gordon Lish's Editing of Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*," *Raymond Carver Review*, 1 (2008), 53–74; James Campbell discusses "the good and bad sides of restoration" of several American texts in "What a Carve-up," *Saturday Guardian*, 1 Dec. 2007, 21.

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perspectives. Carver once noted in an interview that writing a story from a woman's point of view "was a real challenge," yet he crosses the gender line astutely to produce one of his most powerful tales in "So Much Water."[5] Readers will recognize it by the striking plot: four fishermen discover the corpse of a woman in a river but fail to report the find until they finish their fishing trip. Robert Altman included it as one of the nine stories he adapted for the screen in *Short Cuts* (1993). Claire Fabre, guest editor of the special issue of the *Raymond Carver Review* on "Carver and Feminism," had Altman's film in mind when stating that "the cinematic transcription of such stories as 'Tell the Women We're Going' or 'So Much Water So Close to Home' may have contributed to eclipsing the vital space women occupy in Carver's world and casting his work as predominantly masculine in its imaginary scope" (5). Australian director Ray Lawrence attempts a more nuanced portrayal in his full-feature thriller *Jindabyne* (2006). The main character Claire in "So Much Water" and in the Lawrence film has a powerful emotional reaction to the rape and murder of the young woman who was thrown in the river. It is worth noting that Carver grew up in a state that has suffered two of the most notorious serial killers in America: Ted Bundy and Gary Leon Ridgway (the Green River Killer). Both men targeted young women and used a method of operation similar to the events of the story "So Much Water." Carver is a subtle recorder of cultural phenomena, and his treatment of gender is no less complex, as the feminism issue documents.

It is worth pausing here to note Stephen King's thorough review of Sklenicka's book in the *New York Times* (22 November 2009), as King is keenly observant of the role of women in a writer's life. His review is especially valuable for its insider response, for the light it sheds from the vantage point of having been at the forefront of the writing business for decades. King is rightly outraged at the extent to which a male writer can physically and financially wreak havoc on his family for the so-called benefit of art, and he rightly calls out Carver or any writer who exploits personal relationships, especially with women, as inexcusable abuse. King is speaking from personal experience here and has perhaps his own reasons for desiring a more prominent position in the biography for its "unsung heroine" Maryann Burk Carver. Burk Carver, however, vividly tells her own side of the story in her memoir from 2006, *What It Used to Be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver* (St. Martin's Press), a complement to Sklenicka's book and a must for anyone sensitive to the struggles of women who sacrifice their own careers in the service of a male writer. At the other extreme of the sensitivity spectrum in the discussion of women's roles in the history of men's literature and Carver's place in it is a remark by writer Chuck Kinder, Carver's friend and rival who figures prominently in parts of Sklenicka's book (Kinder married Carver's lover Diane Cecily in 1975). In an email to the Raymond Carver Society concerning the call for papers for the special issue on "Carver and Feminism," Kinder exclaimed, "You academics are something else! Old Ray is rolling over in his grave laughing."[6]

[5] Interview with Michael Schumacher in 1987, reprinted in *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, ed. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson, MS and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 230.

[6] Quoted from an email sent on 7 Aug. 2007, from Chuck Kinder to ircs@internationalraymondcarversociety.org.

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Studies of Carver's women and their role in Carver country have been few and far between and the "Carver and Feminism" issue is in fact a welcome contribution. Readers can gather from both the biography and the *Collected Stories* that the writer had intense personal relationships with a number of women, and likewise that the he/she topic was one that Carver never abandoned throughout his fiction and poetry careers. However, as editor Robert Miltner of the *Carver Review* notes,

> The presence of strong women characters in Carver's stories may be based on his admiration for formidable and resilient women he knew personally, or what he considered necessary to tell the kind of stories he wanted to tell, but such biographical or aesthetic considerations are hardly feminism in a theoretical sense. (2)

The issue thus fills a critical lacuna in Carver studies in which women – not to mention feminism – have been given scant attention. There are in-depth essays on the individual stories "Fever" and "Cathedral" (by Vasiliki Fachard and Eve Wiederhold respectively), as well as on feminism and the topics of class (Vanessa Hall), domesticity (Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh), and masculinity (Josef Benson) in Carver's works. In one of the feature essays, feminist scholar Libe García Zarranz examines several stories under the lens of various theoretical notions of subjectivity, illustrating how Carver's women characters break out of the mold of expected norms. The issue as a whole shows not only how feminism is a relevant concept for scrutinizing Carver's works, but also how it resounds with his own development as a writer exploring the nooks and crannies of human nature that ultimately cannot be contained by gender or cultural conditioning. In this, Carver's legacy is a permanent contribution to the best of American, as well as world, literature.

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