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## Tributes and Testimonies: Carver and the short story

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## **Tributes and Testimonies: the stories of Raymond Carver**

The array of topics at Washington's AWP conference enthralled and intrigued. There was an emphasis on 'how to' as you might expect, but there was discussion of 'where to' as well, as seen in sessions such as 'Small presses and pedagogy' and 'Trends in Contemporary Flash Fiction: What are Editors Looking for?' Some sessions were either inspired or haunted by absent writers, some dead, some not; a number of them were billed as tribute sessions (to Barthelme, to Coover, amongst others). I steered clear of these, as I steer clear of tribute bands. Instead my route meandered to meditative corners of the American writing psyche. 'What has happened to the essay in the 21st century?' Dare we even utter that word, given that this form of writing is so widely used for assessment and punishment? Robert Atwan, series editor of *The Best American Essays* and Kyoko Mori, author of *The Dream of Water*, were reassuring in their definitions and love of the form. Essays are an exercise in solitude; the audience was reminded of Montaigne. They begin with a tangle of private thoughts, but these private chats evolve and combine with public conversations. At which point, on cue, an English voice in the audience spoke up in support – an editor from the Times Literary Supplement, where they are fond of a good essay.

I checked out a couple of nature writing sessions, where the essays were bound by habitat, flora and fauna, and was reminded that 'the Gulf' means something different to Americans - not war-torn states but oil-sullied sea. In another session a Literature academic dared to sit on a panel with writers and writing tutors. Professor Mark McGurl from UCLA has written a book about the effect of creative writing MFA programs on the American canon (*The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*). This struck me as remarkably apposite. I speculated about a similar project in the UK, starting the discussion with award-winning graduates perhaps - McEwan, Ishiguro, Enright - plus one or two who have taught but not studied on creative writing MAs - Tremain, Bradbury, Carter .... My mind whirled while Eileen Pollack (from the University of Michigan) detailed a negative effect from what is seen by many as the most positive workshop

fashion - the Carveresque style of story. Raymond Carver was a minimalist, his stories seen as working class from their content or by association. This was Pollack's point. Verbosity became associated with middle class, more affluent subject matter and writers. It felt gratifying to hear honest talk of class in a country where by repute it doesn't exist. Pollack, a self-declared maximilist, a fabulist no less, protested that the Carver fashion had caused her problems.

No doubt. Non-realists can struggle amid this ongoing orthodoxy. Carver's legacy is strong and enduring. Writing tutors on both sides of the Atlantic see him as an excellent influence because his style encourages and endorses good editorial practice. The recent revelations about his working relationship with his editor, Gordon Lish, perhaps seem ironic in this context (I'll come back to that), but don't really alter his standing.

And here is where I have to admit the one exception to my rule of 'no tribute sessions'. You guessed it: Raymond Carver. I had to. The panel included Carver's biographer, Carol Sklenicka, and several presenters who knew him. It could have borne out my prejudice; the first speaker didn't bode well – claiming to be a Carver fan, to have met him twice and to have been overwhelmed because Mr Carver liked one of his workshop pieces. Yet the other testimonies were captivating.

We learned from Sklenicka that Carver did numerous MFA writing workshops as he moved from job to job (many of them in saw mills), but he never gained an MFA. We learned from Douglas Unger, his brother-in-law and fellow drinker, that Carver stole freely and sometimes painfully from real life – salmon falling from the beak of a passing eagle, that happened to a friend of them both; and Ed in 'What we talk about when we talk about love', trying to kill himself with rat poison only to survive and find that the poison had turned his teeth into loosened fangs – this was something experienced by Unger's own schizophrenic mother. But there was no rancour. Unger painted an affectionate portrait of an impassioned writer and teacher – one who loved his students and good work, but hated teaching because of what it took out of him and because of the 'time wasters'.

This may sound familiar, as will some of Carver's editorial preferences and guidance – presented by the novelist C.j.Hribal who was taught by Carver and Tobias Woolf at Syracuse University. Always put the story away for a couple of days at least; when returning to it, write the two pages before the story begins and the two pages after the story finishes, to make sure you have started and ended in the right place. Always be prepared to bin the story if it isn't working. Be wary of using consecutive verbs such as 'I turned and walked'. Cut all the perception verbs - turn the object of those sentences into the subject, i.e. change 'I smelled the pungent aroma of pig shit' to 'the pig shit stank'.

On the question of the editorial effect on the stories: Hibril suggested Lish might have improved some stories, made some worse, and in some cases created entirely different stories. Unger added, 'Ray was always on the horn, that's what he called it. Long distance, calling Lish. That's how they thrashed things out. Without those transcripts, those phone calls, no one's going to say what went on.' This was a refreshing conclusion to mesmerising testimonies – there was probably no straightforward contest between the Carver and Lish versions of the stories after all. As we may have guessed, editing and finalising the stories was far more complex.

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