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Prolegomena to Any Future Carver Studies

William L. Stull et Maureen P. Carroll

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Studied authors :

[Raymond Carver](#)



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Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly

bodies on the supposition that they all revolved round the spectator, he tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest.

Immanuel Kant. Preface to the Second Edition, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1787)

1Ever since the tenth anniversary of the death of Raymond Carver (1938-1988) scholars and general readers have been uneasily aware of what has come to be known as the Carver controversy. This controversy was precipitated on 9 August 1998 when the journalist D. T. Max published in the *New York Times Magazine* an exposé entitled “The Carver Chronicles” that called into question Raymond Carver’s authorship of many of his most celebrated stories.

2The principal actor claiming to have played Francis Bacon, Lord Strange, or some other masked nobleman to Carver’s low-rent Shakespeare was none other than the dead man’s estranged friend and former editor, Gordon Lish. First in his capacity as “Captain Fiction” at *Esquire* magazine during the wonder years of the 1970s and later as a trendsetting senior editor at the New York publishing house of Alfred A. Knopf, Lish was for twenty years the kingmaker of American fiction. During the 1980s he published and promoted the young royalty of what the East Coast media regarded as the reigning literary dynasty of a decade of diminished expectations, the so-called minimalists, among them Mary Robison, Amy Hempel, and (the early) David Leavitt.

3The arch-minimalist, according to reviewers and journalists who coined the term and retailed it ceaselessly, was Raymond Carver. Throughout the 1970s Gordon Lish published Carver’s work in *Esquire*, promoted it to agents and editors in New York, and against all odds persuaded McGraw-Hill, a textbook firm, to publish Carver’s first book of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* in 1976. The following year proved to be a turning point for each man. In 1977 Carver succeeded in his arduous struggle to give up alcohol, and Lish parted ways with *Esquire* and landed a position at Knopf. That same year saw the publication of Carver’s second collection of short fiction, *Furious Seasons and Other Stories*, by Capra, a small press in California with no ties to Lish.

4 It was not until several years later that Carver and Lish reconnected as writer and editor. The product of their reunion was the book that cut the pattern for minimalist fiction. This was Carver’s third short-story collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). Edited by Lish and published by Knopf, it was celebrated by Michael Wood on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* on 26 April 1981. Reviews, overwhelmingly positive, followed in newspapers and magazines across the United States, with no one capturing the book’s astringent bite better than Donald Newlove in the *Saturday Review* of the same month: “Seventeen tales of Hopelessville, its marriages and alcoholic wreckage, told in a prose as sparingly clear as a fifth of iced Smirnoff.”

5Just about everyone liked the quarter-inch-thick book and counted it the

measure of the author's scope and scale; just about everyone, that is, except Raymond Carver and the handful of writers who had read his original manuscript. The first story Carver published after *What We Talk About* was "Cathedral" in the September 1981 issue of the *Atlantic*. As readers immediately grasped and Carver subsequently corroborated, in style and substance this spiritually inflected story was the polar opposite of the bleak and bare-boned fictions in the book he had published less than six months earlier. Carver's change of direction veered into a stunning reversal of field when, in the spring/summer 1982 issue of *Ploughshares*, he published "A Small, Good Thing," a vastly longer and more hopeful version of "The Bath" in *What We Talk About*. Further evidence of Carver's dissatisfaction with his minimalist book emerged in *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*, a small-press miscellany published by Capra in the spring of 1983. *Fires* contained fuller versions of three more stories in *What We Talk About*: "So Much Water So Close to Home," "Everything Stuck to Him" (titled "Distance"), and "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit" (titled "Where Is Everyone?"). For anyone who had missed the evidence in magazines and small-press publications, Carver's transformation from postmodern minimalist to humanistic realist in the manner of Chekhov and Cheever was confirmed by his next major-press book, *Cathedral*. Published by Knopf in September 1983, it featured "Cathedral" as its title story and "A Small, Good Thing" as its center of gravity. A book more different from *What We Talk About* than *When We Talk About Love* is difficult to imagine.

6What accounts for the striking turnabout in Raymond Carver's fiction between 1981 and 1983? The answer to this question resolves the Carver controversy and establishes an authoritative textual foundation for future Carver studies.

7In the opening sentence of "The Carver Chronicles" D. T. Max asserts that rumors about Lish's influence on Carver's fiction had circulated well before 1998. "For much of the past 20 years," Max writes, "Gordon Lish, an editor at *Esquire* and then at Alfred A. Knopf who has now retired, has been quietly telling friends that he played a crucial role in the creation of the early short stories of Raymond Carver." On the basis of this hearsay evidence, and abetted by Lish's caustic ad hominem remarks about Carver's ingratitude and "mediocrity," Max builds a conspiracy theory worthy of a Kennedy-assassination buff. He suggests that nearly every significant person in Carver's life had a hand in the making of his work and deserves or claims partial credit for it. His first wife, Maryann Burk, inspired it; his second wife, the writer Tess Gallagher, contributed key lines to it; above all, his editorial Rumpelstiltskin, Gordon Lish, spun Carver's mediocre straw into marketable gold.

8Where, in the lurid light of the Carver controversy, do Carver studies stand? For the scholar as for the general reader, questions about the substance, form, and intentionality of Carver's work are so fundamental as to be ontological in nature. Who was Raymond Carver and what did he write? To what degree do the stories attributed to him represent his original writing, his editor's alterations for publication purposes, or Carver's unconstrained intentions with respect to stories

published in multiple versions?

9Lish's postmortem claim that he effectively created Raymond Carver can be tested only by rigorous textual analysis. The requisite materials for such an undertaking are available in libraries and archival collections as well as in the little magazines, chapbooks, and small-press books in which Carver published his writing throughout his lifetime. Carver's manuscripts of his stories that were heavily line-edited by Lish and published in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) are preserved among the voluminous Gordon Lish papers in the Lilly Library of Indiana University. So too are the Carver manuscripts for *Cathedral* (1983), where Lish's far lighter line-editing is seldom reflected in the published book. Also preserved are Carver's many letters to Lish, beginning in 1969 and breaking off abruptly in the spring of 1983, a few months before the publication of *Cathedral*. To examine this evidence systematically and reach empirically and rationally supported conclusions requires long-term research.

10More important, it requires a fundamental reformulation of the research question. For Max and the popular press, the Carver controversy is about Lish. How did the sophisticated New York editor put genius into the writings of a mediocrity from the boondocks of the Pacific Northwest? For scholars, the Carver controversy must be about *Carver*. What did Raymond Carver write, and what is the relationship of that writing to the various publications that bear his name? For future Carver studies, this restatement of the question is analogous to the epistemological Copernican revolution that Immanuel Kant effected in the realm of philosophy, and it is from Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* that we adapt our title. In the *Prolegomena* (1783) as in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Kant redirected the attention of philosophers from the objects of knowledge to the preconditions of knowing. Future Carver studies, insofar as they address the issues raised by the Carver controversy, must redirect their attention from the editor to the writer. *What did Raymond Carver write?*

11Locating, verifying, and making available what Carver wrote has been the focus of our research for some twenty years. The results of this inquiry have been published in half a dozen books, including *No Heroics, Please: Uncollected Writings* (1991), *All of Us: The Collected Poems* (1996), *Call If You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Other Prose* (2000), and most recently *Tell It All* (poems, plays, and recollections, 2005). In response to "The Carver Chronicles" we made extended research trips to the Lilly Library in 1999 and 2000 to examine the Carver manuscripts preserved among Lish's papers. Our goal was to recover the words that Raymond Carver had written from beneath the editorial alterations made by Gordon Lish. We initially focused on the stories that Carver gave to Lish for the book that became *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. It was

challenging work, involving decipherment, transcription, and collation. It was also exciting work in that it quickly overturned erroneous assumptions that underlie nearly all past and present studies of Carver's writings, including one of the earliest, William L. Stull's "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver" in the winter 1985 issue of *Philological Quarterly*.

12 Versions of signature stories such as "So Much Water So Close to Home" and "A Small, Good Thing" that were assumed to be Carver's later expansions of his earlier minimal stories were discovered to be restorations of texts that Carver had written long before submitting them to Lish for publication by Knopf. In effect, stories written by the "more generous" Carver of *Cathedral* (1983) antedated the "minimalistic" Carver of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). Although Carver, a twice-bankrupt recovering alcoholic, had acquiesced to Lish's radical editing of the stories in *What We Talk About*, he had done so under protest and with shame. Moreover, Carver had signed a book contract with Knopf before reading Lish's edits, and this obligation compounded his legal and financial predicament. In the end he was persuaded to let the truncated book go forward, but the bond of trust between writer and editor was severed. Immediately after the publication of *What We Talk About* Carver began restoring his stories to their original forms. When Lish sought to exert editorial control over *Cathedral*, Carver forbade him to do so and thereby brought their friendship to a bitter but artistically liberating end.

13 A first step toward settling the Carver controversy – and toward putting future Carver studies on a solid footing – will be the publication of *Beginners: The Original Version of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. That book is now complete, and it will make its first appearance, likely in 2007, in Japanese translation by the internationally acclaimed novelist Haruki Murakami, a longtime literary comrade of Raymond Carver. Editions in English and other languages will follow.

14 The Copernican revolution in Carver studies has begun. Preliminary examination of manuscripts and magazine publications suggests, in addition, that there is an original Raymond Carver book to be extricated from the Lish-edited *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* There are also unpublished letters, notebooks, and related archival materials to be brought to light.

15 Writing is an act of discovery, Raymond Carver often said. When his original writings reach their audience, reading too will be an act of discovery. The Copernican revolution in Carver studies will replace the vagaries of the Carver controversy with verifiable evidence. With a new world of material to be explored, the future of Carver studies promises to be a renaissance.



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William L Stull and Maureen P. Carroll are research partners on the faculty of the University of Hartford in West Hartford, Connecticut. Their publications on Raymond Carver include *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography* (1993), *All of Us: The Collected Poems* (1996), *Il mestiere di scrivere* (with Riccardo Duranti, 1997), *Call If You Need Me: The Uncollected Fiction and Prose* (2000), and *Tell It All* (2005). Their current project on Carver, based on five years of archival research, is *Beginners: The Original Version of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (forthcoming in Japanese translation by Haruki Murakami). They have also written on the poetry and fiction of Tess Gallagher, and their essay “Two Darings” served as the introduction to her book *Soul Barnacles: Ten More Years with Ray* (2000).

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