

The Library of America Interviews Tess Gallagher, William L. Stull, and Maureen P. Carroll about Raymond Carver

In connection with the publication in August 2009 of [*Raymond Carver: Collected Stories*](#), edited by William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll, Rich Kelley conducted exclusive separate interviews for The Library of America e-Newsletter with the volume editors and the writer Tess Gallagher, Carver's widow.

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In a review of a number of Carver's works in The New York Review of Books in 1999, A. O. Scott wrote, "In the years since his death in 1988, at 50, from lung cancer, Carver's reputation has blossomed. He has gone from being an influential—and controversial—member of a briefly fashionable school of experimental fiction to being an international icon of traditional American literary values. His genius—but more his honesty, his decency, his commitment to the exigencies of craft—is praised by an extraordinarily diverse cross section of his peers." The publication of Raymond Carver: Collected Stories, which collects 90 of his stories and four essays, will no doubt prompt a new round of assessments of his work. How would you characterize his achievement?

Stull & Carroll: Carver's great achievement lies in writing short stories, as well as poems and personal essays, that are at once accessible and unforgettable. The renowned novelist Haruki Murakami, who translated a multivolume edition of Carver's works into Japanese, has said that reading Carver turns readers into writers. His stories are, in effect, our own.

In contrast to the ironic, self-reflexive "post-realist" experimental writers of the 1960s with whom he came of age, Carver followed Tolstoy in prizing something that sounds naïve but is fundamental: sincerity. Carver once said of his characters, "They're my people. I could never write down to them." The deepest secrets in Carver's stories are the secrets we all share. He invites us to face them open-eyed, for good or ill.

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Tess Gallagher: Raymond Carver widened the keyboard of American writing. He expanded the population of those we care about in American life, those who have a claim on our concern.

These people are our neighbors. They have the same desires, failures, and hopes that we have. Ray connects us to them. Thanks to him, we came to understand that when people lose their homes and jobs, their stories could be ours. It really could happen to any of us, and now in this economic downturn, it has. Ray's work is as true today as when he wrote it—maybe even truer.

Ray will also be remembered for his stylistic elegance, which may not seem like elegance at all. His writing is as clear as glass and as sustaining as oxygen.

Carver's first collection of stories, Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? was published in 1976. Reviewing it in The New York Times Geoffrey Wolff wrote this remarkable sentence, "[Carver's] prose, for all its simplicity, carries his mark everywhere: I would like to believe that having read these stories I could identify him on the evidence of a paragraph, or at most two." Do you agree that Carver's signature style was there from day one?

Tess Gallagher: Yes, I think that's true. There's something recognizable in his voice, his way of moving in the language, that is his alone. Also, there are his obsessions—love, loss, dreams, spiritual growth, or personal diminishment. Ray respects his characters even when they can't respect themselves. He treats them with a dignity he would never violate.

The published version of Carver's second collection, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981), differs considerably from the manuscript he submitted, in which he called the title story "Beginners." His editor and mentor Gordon Lish revised every story, in some cases rewriting or deleting more than half the original text. Collected Stories offers readers for the first time the opportunity to compare the two versions. It also includes a Note on the Texts that reproduces the complete text of the anguished pre-publication letter Carver wrote to Lish objecting to the changes and a description of what happened afterward. Can you bring us into Carver's state of mind at that time? Was it published with the edits because he was conflicted about them?

Tess Gallagher: His torn state of mind is clearly evident in that letter to Gordon Lish. Ray understands that he owes a great deal to his editor. He also knows that his vision and accomplishment in the stories have been altered so radically

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that the result will separate him from his work in a painful, compromising way.

At the time he began communicating with his editor about a new book of stories we were living in Arizona. I recall his bafflement at one particular suggestion: that he remove all the references to drinking from the stories. I remember responding that his editor must not realize what Ray had been through, that he had nearly died from alcoholism and that alcohol was practically a character in the stories. This was to be Ray's first book since he had become sober. He was telling the truth about physical and emotional damage and what it was like to come back from the dead.

At that time Ray was just discovering his ability to stand up for himself. He had been sober only a year and a half when we began to live together in 1979. Many of the stories that went into *Beginners* and *What We Talk About* were written shortly after that.

When I've taught college courses, I've asked students to compare the version of "So Much Water So Close to Home" in *What We Talk About* (1981) and the version in Ray's selected stories, *Where I'm Calling From* (1988). Thanks to the research that's gone into The Library of America *Collected Stories*, we now know that the longer, "later" version is in fact the *earlier* piece of writing. My students and I had lively discussions about the story, with some preferring one version or another for different reasons. What is important is that we learn the history of the story, from its first appearances, through its editing, on down to Ray's restoration of the full text and original ending. With the publication of *Beginners* in the *Collected Stories*, and the inclusion of a Chronological Bibliography of Ray's fiction, we can see his signature all the more clearly in this story and in so many others.

Reading Beginners dramatically changes the meaning and impact of several stories. The title story, for one, not only ends differently but has a much longer and moving passage about the hospital recovery of the old couple. The ending of "So Much Water So Close to Home" is so radically different it seems to be about different characters. I came away with quite different understandings of "The Fling," "A Small, Good Thing," and "Tell the Women We're Going." Irving Howe found the difference between "The Bath" and its original, "A Small, Good Thing," like the difference between "second-rate Hemingway" and "Sherwood Anderson at his best." What do we discover about Carver in comparing Beginners and What We Talk About When We Talk About Love?

Tess Gallagher: *What We Talk About* satisfied a particular literary taste at a spe-

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cific moment in time. The form of postmodernism that came to be known as “minimalism” was associated with a cold-cuts-and-vinegar view of life. Ray never saw things that way—not in his own life nor in the lives of his characters. Ray’s editor had his finger on the culture’s pulse and knew what would appeal. By applying various stylistic devices, mainly through cuts and a sideways reformulation of what Ray had written, he reshaped the stories to evoke this ice-cold, cut-it-to-the-marrow outlook.

While it is true that Ray’s work was already clean and honed, he loved detail and believed a story was invested in the richness of its tones and colors. When these were shorn away, I do think he felt the story had been violated. I recall how he answered my dismay when he handed me the published *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* as the first literary gift of our relationship. It was obviously not the book he had written during those months of our living and working together. He said, “Don’t worry, babe, we’ll get those stories back.”

Ray was a man of great forbearance. Never once in his many interviews did he voice the least animus or regret about the editing of the stories in *Beginners*. Instead he set about restoring as many of the stories as he could and writing new ones, as well as writing three books of poems. He chose to include several of the *What We Talk About* versions in what proved to be the last book published in his lifetime. We must remember that this book, *Where I’m Calling From: New and Selected Stories*, was assembled when he was suffering from the lung cancer that very soon would take his life. There was a certain exigency. I also think he was willing to include some of the versions from *What We Talk About* so long as they were presented in the greater context of his work. Recall, too, that the book he wrote immediately after *What We Talk About* was *Cathedral*, a collection that reveals the ample scope and scale of his vision. Readers and reviewers, including Irving Howe, were struck by the difference.

Now I’m going to turn around and say that I much prefer the version of “Why Don’t You Dance?” in What We Talk About. Here I think the edits improve the reading and impact of the story without changing it. Are there any instances where you prefer the edited version over the original?

Tess Gallagher: My response, coming from so close to Ray, might compromise the range of encounters with the stories that readers can legitimately have. Some may prefer, as you do, one specific version to another. My purpose in agreeing to have *Beginners* published was not to express my preferences. What The Library of America has done is offer readers the rare chance to read two versions of a complete book. One version was created by a writer; the other was

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extracted from the original by an editor. Publication of the *Collected Stories* is, I believe, a watershed event. To read both *What We Talk About* and *Beginners* is to see that in our culture books are not just written but are also manufactured. Because of the way *What We Talk About* was edited, for more than 25 years Raymond Carver has been pegged as a “minimalist.” This assumption has shaped the expectations of students, teachers, and general readers around the world. We need to push a “restart” button to recalibrate our assumptions about what a Raymond Carver story is. We learn that the trajectory of his development is not an hourglass with *What We Talk About* at the narrow middle. It is instead a rising, widening gyre, at once expansive and controlled.

If Beginners had been published in a version closer to what Carver submitted, do you think he might have avoided being labeled a “minimalist”?

Tess Gallagher: I believe so. Ray resisted that label adamantly. I can’t count the number of times I was in his presence in public and heard him attempt to correct the record, saying he was not now and never had been a minimalist. The term was invented to describe *What We Talk About*, and it was not a compliment. It did no justice to the stories in Ray’s earlier books, nor to the books that followed. It was as though the clock stopped in April 1981. The Chronological Bibliography in the *Collected Stories* shows that Ray published his first story in 1960, his last one in 1987. What interested him for 30 years was the next story, the one he was just beginning.

In his Author’s Note to Where I’m Calling From Carver writes that after publishing What We Talk About he took two years off from writing fiction and began his return by writing “Cathedral,” the title story of his next collection. He calls the stories in that collection “different in kind and degree from the earlier stories” and in a 1987 interview with Claude Grimal, Carver described these stories as having “more range. They’re fuller, stronger, more developed, and more hopeful.” Critics agreed. Josh Rubins in The New York Review of Books found them “riskier, deeper stories than Carver has produced before, the first ones likely to outlast their place and time.” Do you find a difference in these stories? Is it their more hopeful, positive endings that set them apart?

Tess Gallagher: With *Cathedral* Ray continued the opening up of the stories he had begun writing in his sobriety with the unpublished *Beginners*. Today we know that “A Small, Good Thing” was not an expansion of “The Bath,” as read-

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ers and reviewers understandably assumed in 1983. The longer, fuller story was the original. He was actually resuming that process of spiritual largesse in *Cathedral*.

In *Cathedral* more of Ray's beautiful sense of humor got to come forward. His respect for and deep engagement with his characters became visible again. It had never been missing, if we have *Beginners*. But without *Beginners* Ray seems to have made a huge leap, whereas *Cathedral* was a further development from *Beginners*. Ray's sense of humor was such a joy in our days, and it comes through in moments such as when the man in "Cathedral" covers up his wife's bare leg with her robe when she has fallen asleep, then realizes his guest is blind so he uncovers the leg again. I remember laughing so hard when I first read this story at this point! There was this feeling of light in *Cathedral*, of yes, the endings having more lift to them, but not artificially so.

Carver published his last collection of stories, Where I'm Calling From, in 1988, the year he died from cancer. Among its 37 stories, seven were new and they are all included in Collected Stories. Carver said that he felt that in these new stories he was "beginning to make some discoveries about what I can do with a short story." Reviewing the book in The New York Times Marilynne Robinson found them "written in more elegant prose and more elegiac" than the earlier stories. Do these last stories represent a consummation of Carver's work?

Tess Gallagher: The seven "New Stories" in *Where I'm Calling From* are so imaginatively rich that we find ourselves living them as we read them. Ray was writing in the fullness of the confidence and strength he had struggled all his life to reach. Both in subjects and techniques, he was reaching beyond his grasp. In the last story, "Errand," he paid homage to his literary hero, Anton Chekhov. The fusion of fact and fiction in that story has such subtlety and resonance, it is impossible to read it without being deeply moved. And that is what Ray wanted to do, to move his readers. Writing these last stories brought him to a threshold. As he said, he was eager to explore what lay beyond it.

Collected Stories includes four early stories uncollected in Carver's lifetime and five stories discovered after his death in 1988—two of them you, the editors, found among his papers. What insights do these reveal about Carver's work?

Stull & Carroll: Four stories uncollected and five unpublished at the writer's

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death . . . That's not a bursting cupboard, compared to the dozens of uncollected stories by John Cheever, say, or the shelf of posthumous books by Charles Bukowski. In life and literature, Raymond Carver didn't hold much back. "I've always squandered," he liked to say.

As one would expect, three of the four early stories point to roads not taken: light but learned classical riddling in "Poseidon and Company," self-consuming social satire in "Bright Red Apples," and a Hemingway parody in "The Aficionados," published under the pseudonym John Vale.

One early work, however, struck Carver's creative-writing teacher Richard Cortez Day as the story that marked him as a writer. That story is "The Hair," and it is "funny strange" in ways that readers of the later work will recognize as Carveresque. Reacquainting himself with "The Hair" and several poems in his Preface to *Those Days: Early Writings by Raymond Carver*, the mature writer offered his own assessment: "after having just finished rereading the work—some of it written a quarter century ago—I think I can say *not bad*. Not bad, considering."

Both as readers and as researchers we were thrilled to find two unpublished stories in corrected typescript among Carver's papers in the Charvat Collection of American Fiction at the Ohio State University in July 1999. They were a gift, as were the three unpublished stories retrieved from his writing desk in Port Angeles, Washington, earlier that year. Two of these five posthumous stories subsequently appeared in the *Best American Short Stories* and the O. Henry Award *Prize Stories* annual volumes. That's a high batting average for any writer, and it testifies to the enduring quality of Carver's work.

The volume includes four of Carver's essays. "On Writing" contains the inspiring credo: "It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power." But I found "Fires" even more memorable with its disturbing account of his writing life, especially as he details the problems of juggling being a writer, a breadwinner, and a parent: "I'd take poison before I'd go through that period again." Is it safe to say that Carver's early life resembled that of many of the people he wrote about?

Tess Gallagher: Of course it did. Great writing comes out of heart's meat and the vicissitudes one has endured. A poem or story may be sparked by something we have done or by someone else's experience that resonates for us. Many, many people live in straitened circumstances, suffer from alcoholism,

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endure painful childhoods, go bankrupt, etc. Only a few turn their sufferings into art. Raymond Carver did that. The life is not the work. Art is experience transformed by imagination.

Stull & Carroll: For reader and writer alike, the relationship between life and literature is at once self-evident and obscure. What some view as a straightforward life-into-art representation of experience, others see as a constructed art-for-art's-sake performance of highly stylized language. In editing the *Collected Stories*, we've included ample material to surprise and engage critics and readers at both ends of the spectrum, as well as others who, like ourselves, fall somewhere in between. For those who favor a biographical approach, the Chronology and Chronological Bibliography offer rich biographical, geographical, and publication details about Carver's career. For formalists who prefer a linguistic house of mirrors, there are multiple versions of stories to study and compare, including three versions of "The Bath"/"A Small, Good Thing." In one of his book reviews, Carver invoked Lionel Trilling's dictum that a great book reads us. That statement turns the life-art question back on the reader and perfectly describes our own ongoing encounters with the *Collected Stories*.

Raymond Carver was no literary theorist, and his essay "On Writing" is more credo than manifesto. At public readings he, like other writers, was often asked, "Did that story really happen?" In an interview with Nicholas O'Connell in 1986, Carver answered this question with nuanced simplicity. "The stories and poems I've written are not autobiographical, but there is a starting point in the real world for everything I've written. Stories just don't come out of thin air; they come from someplace, a wedding of imagination and reality, a little autobiography and a lot of imagination."

Carver struggled with alcoholism for most of his life. Your Chronology in the volume marks 1977 as the year he stopped drinking. How did his writing change after 1977?

Stull & Carroll: Getting sober was the change that made possible Carver's resumption of his writing, which had all but ceased during the mid-1970s. As the Chronology reveals, the year that Carver's first trade-press book, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), appeared was also the year he began experiencing alcoholic seizures. Hospitalizations and voluntary confinements followed during the coming months. As he told *The Paris Review* in 1983, "I was completely out of control and in a very grave place."

Carver spoke of the day he quit drinking, June 2, 1977, as "the line of demar-

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cation” and the beginning of his “second life.” It’s significant that although his first published interview appeared less than two months after he stopped drinking, he chose not to speak of his alcoholism on the record until 1983. After that, he repeatedly expressed a recovering alcoholic’s joy in living day by day as a writer, an outdoorsman, and a trustworthy partner of the woman to whom he dedicated all the books of his post-drinking years, the writer Tess Gallagher.

There’s really no better expression of Carver’s sense of fulfillment in his sobriety than his poem “Gravy.” He wrote it during his final illness, and it appeared in *The New Yorker* three weeks after his death. “Don’t weep for me,” he tells his friends and readers. “I’ve had ten years longer than I or anyone / expected. Pure Gravy. And don’t forget it.”

You met Raymond Carver in 1977, the landmark year in which he stopped drinking. In time you became his intimate companion and the two of you later married. He also encouraged you, who had mainly published poetry, to write short stories, of which you’ve published three collections. How did you influence each other’s writing?

Tess Gallagher: Actually, Ray and I lived most of our eleven years together as lovers, collaborators, and soul mates. We really did not need marriage to keep us bound. But in the final days, as I wrote about us in the introduction to *A New Path to the Waterfall*, we felt the need for the pledge, the shelter of marriage. That need arose only in the last months of Ray’s life. Our marriage was an act of loving affirmation. It was beautiful and sustaining.

After we began to live together I think Ray started feeling surer of himself. It took a while, but gradually the second-guessing, the inner panic, the infirm tenor of the will—these demons retreated. He found hope in his own life and that hope affected the way he saw his characters. Had he not stayed sober and solvent, I doubt he could have created the work he did in *Cathedral*, *Where I’m Calling From*, and his books of poetry. I am proud to have contributed to his stability and his confidence in himself.

It is generally acknowledged that Ray’s work reached new levels during his “second life.” The qualities that make people love him as a writer and a man are unmistakable in the books he wrote after he stopped drinking.

Ray did encourage me to write stories, and he looked at my poems too. He affected both to a profound degree. I doubt that I ever would have returned to the short story without his encouragement. He truly loved my stories as much as his own. My first collection, *The Lover of Horses* (1986), benefited from his good advice and influence. My newest book is a selection of stories from two pre-

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vious collections. Its title is *The Man from Kinvara*, which reflects the fact that I now spend a significant amount of time in Ireland. The first thing I thought when a copy of the book arrived last week was: Oh! I wish Ray could see this! Sometimes it's hard to be without his presence, except as I constantly imagine it. But one's life moves inevitably on, and the cover of this new story collection is a painting by Josie Gray, my companion of the past seventeen years.

*It has reportedly taken some ten years for **Beginners**, the original version of **What We Talk About When We Talk About Love** to be published. What delayed its publication until now?*

Tess Gallagher: The biggest job was the painstaking archival and textual work done by Bill Stull and Maureen Carroll, the editors of *Beginners* and the *Collected Stories*. In the late 1990s they spent much time sifting through the Carver papers at the Ohio State University and the Lish papers at the Lilly Library of Indiana University. After that came years of transcription, comparison, and verification of what they had found.

The most significant result of their research is the restoration of *Beginners*. But during that process they also uncovered two unpublished stories by Ray and learned a great deal about the development of his work. Then, of course, they reunited me with the manuscript of *Beginners*. The writing had been done more than 20 years before, and I had to be absolutely certain Ray's original stories were as good as I remembered them to be. Rereading the manuscript the two researchers showed me brought back to me what I had admired during the time in which the stories were drafted. It was a revelation to find them again as moving as I'd felt them to be then. I felt we had to have this book. I had to have it, Ray had to have it, and readers had to have it.

In commercial publishing there is an assumption that when a writer dies, the canon of his or her work is closed. But literary history, like all forms of history, is not a turnstile but a river. It is forever in motion, overflowing its banks, uprooting solid structures, uncovering old-new treasures. The Library of America *Collected Stories*, of which *Beginners* is a part, celebrates Ray's life and writing from its sources to its fullness. Readers can watch the son of a small-town saw-filer become Raymond Carver. This great big book is bursting with the plenitude of Ray's achievement and his gift.

Do you have any personal favorites among the stories collected here?

Tess Gallagher: My absolute favorites include all of *Cathedral* and Ray's last

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seven stories. But I have favorites in all his books. For example, I'm very fond of dark little stories like "Why, Honey?" in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* I remember how spooky that story seemed to me, how I rang up Ray because my sister had to know what happened next. Naturally, he said, "Well . . . that's the end of the story. I don't know." He left us laughing and conjecturing, making up scenarios. We really worried about that mother who suspects her son could be a killer. She just may be the next one on his list! Stories like that keep you guessing—and glancing over your shoulder.

The two of you have devoted years to the study of Raymond Carver's life and work, and have edited several collections of his work, in addition to this volume. Did pulling together this collection spark any new insights or discoveries?

Stull & Carroll: Editing the *Collected Stories*, particularly the manuscript version of *Beginners*, reminded us that textual scholarship is a lot like archaeology. The only things missing are the desert heat, siroccos, scorpions, and (for the most part) tomb curses. In reviewing the Italian edition of *Beginners* (*Principianti*) in March 2009, the novelist and critic Alessandro Baricco compared reading multiple versions of Carver's stories to discovering, on a small scale, newly exposed layers of an ancient city such as Troy: "Carver I" and "Carver II." We've felt that kind of excitement, albeit in the secure and relatively comfortable rare-book rooms of research libraries in Ohio and Indiana, where the bulk of Carver's papers are preserved.

What especially pleases us—and we believe it would please Ray Carver too, whom we had the honor to know in the last five years of his life—is that the *Collected Stories* empowers every reader to become a literary archaeologist. All the materials are here: 90 authoritative story texts, Notes on the Texts of six collections (one presented in two complete versions), and a Chronological Bibliography of every story's first appearance, alternate titles, and inclusions in Carver's books.

There is also a Chronology of Carver's life. In doing research for this volume we made discoveries about his roots in the American South and his family's migration to the Pacific Northwest before and during the Great Depression. Two of his Arkansas ancestors really did fight for both sides in the American Civil War, as his father often told him. Jenkins' Ferry, site of a noted Arkansas battle in that war, was owned and operated for 30 years by a larger-than-life Carver ancestor, Jane McWhorter Jenkins. The Arkansas connection to the timber industry, to extended family, and to oral tradition remained strong even after

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Carver's parents moved west to Washington State and then to Oregon, where he was born. By heritage and working-class upbringing, it would be hard to find a more American writer than Raymond Carver. We suspect this accounts, in some part, for his extraordinary international appeal.

We've spent 25 years reading, researching, and writing about Carver's work. Our first conversations about the multiple versions of his stories were based on "Visions and Revisions," William L. Stull's 1984 review of *Fires*, followed in 1985 by his seminal article "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver." Since then, working together, we've edited Carver's interviews, uncollected works, and collected poems. In 1993 we edited *Remembering Ray*, a composite biography that includes recollections of him by some 40 readers, writers, and friends, including his beloved typist, Dorothy Catlett. The book's publisher was Noel Young, founder of the pioneering Capra Press and an early advocate of Carver's work. Our own memoir of Carver, entitled "Big," has appeared in Japanese, Farsi, and Italian.

If we had to summarize in one word the signal achievement of the *Collected Stories*, that word would be "more." The Library of America has succeeded in bringing to readers more Carver than they've likely seen before. For scholars, of course, more is never enough. And for that reason we look forward to the new interpretations and fresh assessments of Carver's fiction that the *Collected Stories* makes possible.