

A Voice from the Wasteland

Patricia Morrisroe/1984

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The temperature is 10 below zero. But inside the local restaurant in Syracuse, New York, the air conditioner is running and the silverware is ice cold. Raymond Carver shivers and asks the waitress to warm his coffee. "Sure thing, honey," she says, dumping the contents of the old cup on to his half-eaten lunch. He looks down at his pastrami sandwich. It is submerged in black coffee. "Gee," he says, "I've never seen anyone do that before."

And Raymond Carver has seen a lot of things. Like the aimless drifters in his books, Carver, who is 45, has lived in dozens of places and worked at countless menial jobs. He can't remember the dates or many of the details. When he talks about the past, it tends to sound disjointed. "When I was in a laundromat in Iowa City. . . . When I was in a hospital in Calistoga. . . . When I was visiting some friends in Missoula."

If the hallmark of Carver's writing style is close attention to detail, he is extremely vague about the circumstances of his own life. Much of the problem can be attributed to his 10-year battle with alcohol. He started drinking heavily in his early thirties and suffered from periodic blackouts. "My life was a wasteland," he says. "I destroyed everything I touched. . . . There are certain things I don't want to remember."

Happily, those days are over. Since his first collection of stories was published in 1976, he has gained a reputation as one of the finest writers of short fiction in the United States. Last year was a particularly good one: the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters awarded him a \$35,000 annual stipend for the next five years. For the first time in his life, Carver has the time and the money to do nothing but write. He quit his teaching job and completed two film scripts. He built a house and bought a brand new Mercedes.

Then last autumn, *Cathedral*, his latest collection of stories (published in Britain tomorrow) appeared in the U.S. to almost unanimous praise.

"I'm very pleased," Carver says, in his low, tentative voice. He smiles briefly and his eyes sparkle. A large man with bushy eyebrows and a jowly face, he projects a gentle, almost haunting sadness. "But it hasn't really affected me one way or another. Life had pretty much come to an end in 1977. My drinking had backed me into a corner. I was out of control, almost as good as dead. I stopped drinking in June that year and I consider that my greatest achievement."

Much has been written about the bleakness of Carver's vision of America. His stories are populated by ordinary people—waitresses, hairdressers, factory workers—who can't cope with daily life. Instead of seeking solace in friends or family, they turn to alcohol or television. They have dreams, but they don't have the words or the imagination to express them. When asked why he writes about such characters, Carver says it is because he knows them so well: "They are where I come from."

Carver was born in a small logging town in Washington State. His father, who was also an alcoholic, worked in a sawmill. As a child, Carver loved to read Zane Grey westerns and listen to his father tell stories. "I remember my dad talking about my grandfather who fought in the Civil War," he says. "When the South began losing, he joined forces with the North. He was a turncoat and I found that pretty exciting."

Carver says he doesn't know why he decided to become a writer. "Perhaps it was my father's stories," he says. "But ever since I can remember I wanted to write." After high school, he joined his father in the sawmill. By the time Carver was 20, he had two children and no marketable skills. Moving his family to Chico, California, he enrolled in a state university and paid his tuition doing odd jobs. From Chico, he travelled to Iowa to attend a writers' workshop but dropped out for lack of money. Back in California, he found work as a night janitor at a hospital. It was like this for the next 10 years.

Still, Carver kept writing. In the beginning, he worked on poems, simply because they were short and could often be finished in one sitting. With a full-time job and two children, he didn't have much spare time. Weighed down by financial pressures, and increasingly frustrated by his inability to gain control over his life, Carver turned to

alcohol. It was a painful period, and Carver still winces when he talks about it.

Everything went bust, he says, on what he describes as a "whacky trip to Israel." It was 1968 and his wife, who was studying for her college degree, won some scholarship money. "They promised us a villa on the Mediterranean," Carver says. "I could just see myself, sitting at the typewriter with a magnificent view of the water. Instead the house was awful, the kids were miserable and we ran out of money. After a few months we packed up and headed to Hollywood. I got a job selling theatre programmes. But something inside me said, 'It's over.' I had wanted that villa in the Mediterranean all my life, and at that point I knew I was never going to get it. My writing had done nothing but bring me grief. My wife and I split up. . . ." His voice disintegrates into a mumble, and he reaches for another cigarette.

Today, Carver has found his villa on the Mediterranean. It is a large, two-storey house in Syracuse with a sign outside that reads "No Visitors." He lives there with Tess Gallagher, a poet and short story writer. When he speaks her name, it's in a soft and tender voice that conjures up images of a warm kitchen and freshly baked bread. Not surprisingly, Carver conveys the same feeling in several of the stories in *Cathedral*. While many are still bleak and a touch despairing, there is also something hopeful and more compassionate. The title story about a blind man who comes to visit a married couple is perfect evidence of what Carver calls his "new opening up." Initially callous to the sightless man, the husband turns on the television and watches a show about cathedrals. When asked what they look like, the husband can't find the right words. Instead he pulls out a pencil and a grocery bag and, taking the blind man's hand, he closes his eyes and they draw one together.

"There is something different about the book," Carver says. "The stories are more generous, more interesting. 'Cathedral' was the first one I did and halfway through it I got this tremendous rush. It felt wonderful and I had the strong sense I was doing something right."

Recently, Carver completed a second screenplay with writer/director Michael Cimino. It is an odd collaboration. Cimino, of *Heaven's Gate* fame, was virtually ostracised by American critics for being excessive in everything from the movie's length to its astro-

nomical budget. Carver, on the other hand, has gained a reputation for his simple, minimalist prose. How did the two get along? "I never saw *Heaven's Gate*," he says, "and I think Cimino is a nice man. Last spring he commissioned me to write a screenplay on Dostoevsky. I think Carlo Ponti was involved but I haven't heard anything else about it." He shrugs.

The waitress interrupts the conversation. "Excuse me," she says, "but I'm going on my break. So maybe you could pay the bill?" The coffee stain is gone, and her blue-black hair has been sprayed into a 1950s bouffant. "Gee thanks," she says, picking up the tip with her long tangerine-coloured nails. "Now you have a Happy New Year, OK?"

Carver pauses for a second and then smiles. "Yeah," he says. "Happy New Year."