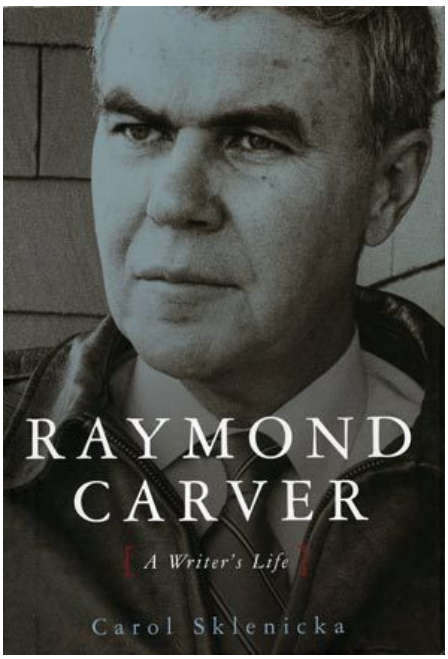

Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life

Carol Sklenicka

Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life

Carol Sklenicka

Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life Carol Sklenicka
The first biography of america's best-known short story writer of the late twentieth century.

The London *Times* called Raymond Carver "the American Chekhov." The beloved, mischievous, but more modest short-story writer and poet thought of himself as "a lucky man" whose renunciation of alcohol allowed him to live "ten years longer than I or anyone expected."

In that last decade, Carver became the leading figure in a resurgence of the short story. Readers embraced his precise, sad, often funny and poignant tales of ordinary people and their troubles: poverty, drunkenness, embittered marriages, difficulties brought on by neglect rather than intent. Since Carver died in 1988 at age fifty, his legacy has been mythologized by admirers and tainted by controversy over a zealous editor's shaping of his first two story collections.

Carol Sklenicka penetrates the myths and controversies. Her decade-long search of archives across the United States and her extensive interviews with Carver's relatives, friends, and colleagues have enabled her to write the definitive story of the iconic literary figure. Laced with the voices of people who knew Carver intimately, her biography offers a fresh appreciation of his work and an unbiased, vivid portrait of the writer.

Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life Details

Date	:	Published November 24th 2009 by Scribner (first published September 8th 2009)
ISBN	:	9780743262453
Author	:	Carol Sklenicka
Format	:	Hardcover 592 pages
Genre	:	Biography, Nonfiction, Biography Memoir, History

From Reader Review Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life for online ebook

Robert Vaughan says

Gross and intense look at the inspiring life of short story writer Ray Carver, one of my many mentors. This is such a painful book to read, only because of the choices Ray Carver made while he attempted to be a writer, husband, father. The family scrimped along on a near poverty level and yet his writing sings still to this day.

Bookmarks Magazine says

Not merely a great biography, but often an astute critical assessment of Carver's writing as well (*San Francisco Chronicle*), *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life* breaks new ground by tying the significant events of Carver's life to his stories and then using those connections as a means of studying both the man and his work. Though the *Christian Science Monitor* took issue with Sklenicka's focus on the unsavory details of the author's private life, critics were generally satisfied with Sklenicka's scrupulous research and analysis, recognizing that these same details informed the better part of Carver's luminous fiction. Without diminishing Sklenicka's astute examination, this incisive and "grimly compelling" (*Seattle Times*) biography's greatest achievement will be sending readers back to the bookshelf to rediscover Carver for themselves. This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Andrew Sydlik says

Don’t have time for an in-depth review, but I enjoyed this biography of Carver. I would recommend, however, tracking down Stephen King’s review of the book in the New York Times Book Review, November 2009, for an interesting supplement. King remarks upon the fact that Sklenicka is nonjudgmental in her portrayal of Carver, perhaps downplaying his nastiness and selfishness. I both agree and disagree with King. If I remember correctly, he doesn’t necessarily bring to light anything that was not actually stated in the book, and I think that, for the most part, the author of a biography should try to be as factual as possible, not “taking sides” so to speak.

I have heard people say that this book is dry, too. Perhaps at some points it is, but not enough for me to lose interest. Actually, Carver’s life is too interesting for that to happen. Even in his sober years, there’s always some turmoil a-brewin’, either that, or he’s just constantly on the move and hobnobbing (to his own small town boy amazement) with literary superstars like Salman Rushdie.

I do share King’s indignation at Carver, though. This book definitely opened me up to some of the uglier sides of both Carver and Tess Gallagher. Carver as an egocentric drunk for a good part of his life, and when he got sober and wealthy, he was still egocentric. He could be violent and mean: one incident I remember in particular, Carver smashes Mary Ann’s head on the pavement when he thinks she’s flirting with another guy. What makes it even worse is that he was a philanderer himself.

But he could be sweet and giving as well. He did continue to support Mary Ann after their divorce, though not always as he promised. In some ways, he doted over his children, even at other times, he wrote an essay

like “Fires,” where he rails at how much having children hurt his writing life (even as he was just starting to gain success). I would like to say that he was first and foremost dedicated to his art, but I think the hard truth is that he was just selfish. Not that he wasn’t a good writer.

The book does touch on his fiction and his attempts at novels and screenplays that never came to fruition. One criticism I agree with is that the critical analysis of his work is sadly lacking. It seems that literary biographies nowadays are more about looking at how works reflect actual experiences in the writer’s life—which is helpful and interesting to a point, but a more aesthetic analysis would be nice. Sklenicka also spends a lot of time looking at his poetry—again, this is interesting (I never even knew he wrote poetry!), but since his fiction is primarily what he is known for, I think this did go a bit overboard.

Not going to go too much into her discussion of Tess Gallagher. The “redheaded Irish witch,” as I believe one of Carver’s friends called her, kind of spoke against herself by refusing to speak to Sklenicka, give her side of the story. Others, who know the details better, have discussed Gallagher’s involvement. I will just say that while Sklenicka tries to show the positive sides of Gallagher—her intelligence, her efficiency handling practical and financial matters (something Carver had no skill for), and her devotion to Carver (which I don’t doubt)—and yet, there is no way for me to see a justification for what she did to Carver’s family, particularly the children. She may have been a stabilizing influence on Carver’s life, but she did benefit from her relationship to him at the expense of others. There was enough money to go around. But Tess couldn’t be happy having some, she had to have it all. Ah well.

Moira Russell says

This book made it a great deal more difficult for me to love Raymond Carver.

I had much the same reaction reading the other Big Biography of the season, on Cheever -- Cheever did abuse his family terribly while drinking, even to the extent of writing nasty stories about them while they were still living, just as Carver did. But at least Cheever, in his very late sobriety (seven years before he died of cancer) made it up somewhat to his children and wife, and his family now enjoy the royalties and fame stemming from the stories they were part of. Carver didn't just leave his first family when he sobered up and got himself a shiny new life, he consistently refused to help his alcoholic daughter (while taking some pride in his more successful son, and publishing poems about her being drunk and battered), reneged on a verbal agreement to help support his ex-wife, and left them all insultingly small cash bequests ($5,000 when he had over $200,000 in savings, apparently). It is deeply disquieting to read about scenes in which they were apparently pressured over the phone to sign away possible benefits like movie rights to his works after his death.

Recovering addicts are often advised to cut off contact with people they knew when drinking, and Carver's extended family sounds like a chaotic, mentally ill, chronically addicted mess anyone would want to get clear of, let alone a dedicated artist who wanted fame and glory so fiercely he pulled himself out of the gutter to get it. But that same family nourished and supported him during his own worst times -- especially his first wife, who put her own literary ambitions on hold, didn't get her own B.A. until she was thirty and then gave up getting an advanced degree to teach high school and cocktail waitress -- and he went on writing about them up until his own death. Even if he wanted to segregate his own hard-won disciplined peace and sanity from them, would it have been so hard to give back a little of what he had taken, even if 'just' on a monetary level?

Well, someone is likely to say at this point (even if they are only a rhetorical construct for the sake of a new paragraph), *so what?* Most human beings are jerks, artists are usually even bigger jerks than most human beings because, naturally, they are focused more on art and making it than family ties, and what were you expecting -- just because someone can make beauty out of the human condition means they're *not* going to be a jerk? Faulkner (a prize jerk himself, especially to his own family) said 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' was worth any number of little old grannies, and so on. *Ars vita* and all that. Dickens didn't appreciate his own wife and family, Chekhov visited brothels, let's not even bring up Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

But I remember the first time I read 'Fires' - my best friend from boarding school had lent me her copy, the Vintage trade paperback with the construction worker on the cover, a drink and lunchbox in front of him (as this biography wryly notes, not that much in keeping with the actual contents of the book) - and discovered 'So Much Water So Close to Home,' 'A Small, Good Thing,' and especially the title essay. Carver writes about influences on his writing life, and details the pressures of being young, having a young family and no money, and trying to write so vividly I can remember phrases from it decades later. One neglected aspect of the literary 'minimalist' movement is that some authors (notably Carver and Bobbie Anne Mason) tagged with that label wrote about the working poor, the underclass, people who might not read the New Yorker or some of the literary quarterlies those very stories appeared in. Carver especially is often seen as a voice for the voiceless, the desperate, people having furniture sales on their front yards, working two jobs and still declaring bankruptcy, unable to save, often slipping deep into addiction. To see the other side of 'Fires' -- hear the testimony of the children whom he calls 'baleful' and worse -- is a rude shock. He comes off as, really, just another oppressor, a taker.

Well, again, *so what?* Aren't we all takers and oppressors on some level? Even if we don't personally abuse our families or alcohol or kick puppies, aren't we all by the very nature of modern life involved in great mechanical perpetuations of injustice and suffering we can barely comprehend? I read a Zen saying once that to pick up a grain of dust is to pick up all the suffering in the world -- that there's no choice whether or not you will cause suffering in the world yourself, you will. The only choice we have is to try to be aware of it and make amends when we can. Any biography of any great author is thus doomed to be disappointing, because it just reveals a human being, not a Buddha.

But one of my favourite biographies ever is Anne Sexton: A Biography by Diane Wood Middlebrook, which I've reread at least half a dozen times, and never finished thinking 'wow, one of my favourite authors is now revealed as an awful person.' Because Sexton *was* frequently an awful person, and Middlebrook details that. But she does so with what I can only call love and compassion -- an understanding that transcends the dreadful events of Sexton's life (alcohol and spousal abuse, constant infidelities and betrayals, sexual molestation) just as Sexton's own art does. After reading Middlebrook's book, I wanted to go back to Sexton's poetry and stories, informed with new understanding -- she had helped me comprehend not just Sexton but also myself. While teaching a course on poetics in 1972, Sexton wrote an astonishing passage in a lecture on empathy and its use in lyric poetry:

> The rapist. What moment of his life would you pick to tell about While he's having a cup of coffee at Howard Johnson's? Perhaps he eats a clam roll. I myself like clam rolls but I have more than a clam roll in common with the rapist. What have I ever wanted to take? When have I ever wanted to scare and terrify? If you will look around you with eyes stripped you will hear voices calling from the crowd. Each has his own love song. Each has a moment of violence. Each has a moment of despair.

Middlebrook's biography of Sexton doesn't diminish her, it enhances us, in the act of reading it -- it helps us hear her love song, feel her moments of violence and despair, and understand our own. Reading this biography of Carver had the opposite effect.

On a more prosaic level, Sklenicka's style is either bland or clunky -- if we're told once that Amy Burk is Carver's sister-in-law, it's thirty or forty times, and one couple is referred to as 'the X-Y household' bewilderingly even after they get married -- and, as is true of most modern biographies of writers (including the Cheever book) there is little to no literary analysis -- instead, there's a tiresome and patchy pointing-out of supposed one-to-one correspondences between stories and events in the writer's life. The writer is at her (rather weak) best tying together passages from Carver's letters and reminiscences from friends into a kind of running narrative, and very bad at trying to give a sense of place or time; some extended passages on The Most Overpublicized Decade Ever* are almost embarrassing to read.

*If I had my way there would be a ban on writing about The Sixties for, oh, the next hundred years or so. JFK, Manson, Vietnam, Altamont, Woodstock -- all those cliched references could be replaced by 'YES YES WE KNOW WE HEARD IT ALREADY.'

Deborah says

Despite the fact that I was unfamiliar with Raymond Carver, I found Ms. Sklenicka's biography to be a fascinating and detailed account of a troubled author. The saga of this well-known author of short stories was disturbing to me due to Carver's alcoholism and eventual decline into the depths of that disease. The only thing which kept me reading once this bottom was near was that I was aware that he eventually stopped drinking.
I lived in Northern California during the time Carver and his family moved from place to place so therefore knew the locale very well. Infact, I kept thinking I would find a reference to someone I knew or had met. Although this never happened, my connection is that I attended high school with the author. It is hard to believe the commitment and dedication that Carol had to have spent ten years researching and writing this impressive biography. I am exceedingly proud to be able to say "I knew her when ..."

Hannah Garden says

I kind of feel like Blake Bailey has ruined me for all other biographers. No one comes close to what that guy does.

On the other hand, oh man, this is totally worth reading. The whole Lish debacle, man. I am glad to know more about that. And Tess, she's good, it turns out. It's so easy for me to be an uppity asshole about things I don't know anything about. Now I feel like, if I want to be an uppity ass, at least I'll know what I'm talking about. And anyway after reading all about it I don't feel like being one, so there's that to say in favor of this.

And even though you know it's coming, it is utterly heartbreaking to read the end.

I just kind of really really wish Blake Bailey had written it.

M. Sarki says

http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/5765822...

I had stayed away up to this point in my life from the works of Raymond Carver and any study made of him. I had even discounted him a little because I had visited the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana and saw for myself the correspondence and marked-up manuscripts of Raymond Carver in his relationship to his editor Gordon Lish. The fact that Lish was also my editor and teacher made it a little bit uncomfortable for me to see this much intimacy between a writer and an editor when I was myself attempting to do great things in my writing with the man as well. I felt, prior to my own study, as though Lish did way too much for Carver to make him the man of letters he became. I did not want that type of relationship with Lish. And I didn't have that, nor do I have it now. Lish has marked up manuscripts of mine, corrected grammar and spelling, and offered suggestions from time to time, but never has he written anything for me nor cut anything so severely as he cut the Carver manuscript for *WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE*.

I avoided *RAYMOND CARVER: A Writer's Life* when it first came out because I figured the author Carol Sklenicka had a bone to pick with my man Lish. Not true at all. She did a very fine job of reporting here. There is abundant information about the importance of so many people involved with the career and life of Raymond Carver. I especially liked the book because of all the notations and anecdotes about Gordon Lish. I borrowed a copy from my local library and loved it so much I went out and found a few copies to purchase of first printings of the hardcover edition because I believe the book will only grow in importance the more Carver is studied, not to mention Gordon Lish.

Chuck O'Connor says

This is an impressive piece of reportage. Cklenicka does her homework and the extensive end notes show it. The sub-title offers what the book is, "A Wrtier's LIFE" (emphasis mine), and the examination of who Carver was as a person is exhaustive (and at times exhausting). The failing of the book comes with its choice to keep Carver's artistic process and philosophy a mystery. The man comes off as an alcoholic idiot savant whose sociopathic pattern of manipulation towards dependent reliance on friends, his wife, and editors makes Gordon Lish's apocryphal assertion that Lish "created" Carver plausible. But the actions Carver takes and the success he has as an author and teacher contradicts the inference that he was channeling a muse towards automatic writing. I'd have liked this book more if the author would have given illustration into the passion Carver had for his craft, both as a writer and reader of fiction, with an eye to the author's process. We get many stories of his self-destruction through alcoholism and his slow decline to cancer, where friends and former students assert Carver's attention to detail in writing and his coherent explanations of why literature is great, but we don't get a sense of the process the man had beyond these generalized descriptions. I'd have liked to know through a critical look with comparison and contrast of Carver to his heroes how Carver advanced the work that inspired him with the unique insight that made his stories great. I think the choice to keep the inner life of Carver distant is intentional, and I have a theory that Sklenicka chose this perspective to mirror the observational irony Carver employed in his fiction. We get clues to the man's ideas through chapter epigraphs born from snatches of writing he adored enough to transcribe in his notebooks, but we never get a clear critical commentary on the meta-cognition these snatches made towards Carver's philology. The unfortunate consequence of Sklenicka's choice to mirror her author's commitment to unsentimental observation leads to a dry exposition of the man's art. I wanted more insight into Carver's view of reality and didn't get it, but the biography did motivate me to pick up "Cathedral" and read, so maybe Sklenicka's intention was fulfilled with my willingness to return to Carver as a source.

David Haws says

The book has been extremely well researched, but is perhaps a little partisan.

Ray was my writing instructor at Berkeley. I took four classes from him over the 1972-73 school year, but because we both commuted to campus, we would sometimes wait together for the rush-hour traffic to die down—splitting a pitcher, nursing a vodka and grapefruit juice (he claimed to need the vitamin C) playing liar's dice, or talking about life and/or writing. I had not spent my formative years around drinkers (for me, you drank with friends when there was nothing better to do, and the whole point seemed to be getting drunk at roughly the same time as everyone else, and then nodding off together). Because Ray never seemed drunk, I was unaware of his problem with alcohol until I helped him move out of his office in Wheeler Hall, and had to dispose of all the empty vodka bottles behind the books in his bookcase. Here is my Bad Raymond story:

It was after we'd wrapped up our spring classes, but the University was publishing its literary magazine, which was to include one of Ray's stories and the piece of a fellow student. They were having a launch party in the early evening. Bill Kittredge was coming down from Montana to assume the Stegner chair at Stanford, and Ray wanted to introduce us. When I got to the sparsely attended soiree, they had a stack of the magazines (all white, as I recall) in the middle of a white tablecloth and flanked by two half-gallons of Beefeater's. Ray walked in with Maryann, whom I'd met the previous term, Bill, of whom I'd heard countless stories, and one of Bill's students from Montana (dressed like a 1973 version of "hippie girl").

This was the first time I'd ever seen Ray falling-down drunk—Maryann actually did fall down—and only the hippie girls seemed sober enough to walk without leaning on something/someone. There weren't many people and the girl need to get to her sister's in Santa Cruz, so I volunteered to leave my car in a parking garage off Channing and drive them all home in Maryann's Datsun. Before we left, Ray took one of the full half-gallons—concealed it as ineptly as you might expect—and we managed to make it to Maryann's car.

I was unfamiliar with the South Bay, but Maryann gave copious, smiling directions from the front passenger seat (many of them wrong) we made several loop through San Jose, and we finally reached Santa Cruz, but only after the hippie girl smashed Bill on the head with an empty vodka bottle from the back seat. We must have been in the car for hours, Ray sitting in the back seat with Bill and the hippie girl, cradling the half-gallon of gin like a foundling child—especially when Bill was being assaulted by his student (the basic assumption was that she must have had a good reason, but we could only speculate as to what it might be). Finally we pulled up to the house on Cupertino Road. It had been dark for a while. Ray got out, clutching the bottle to his breast, and opened the front, screen door. As he was fumbling for his keys, he lost control of the half-gallon, which shattered on the concrete step to the side of his foot. We (observers) assumed a deathly silence. As gin sought its own level and the tinkle of glass ebbed, the only audible sound was a low moan coming from Ray, something one might expect from a man witnessing the loss of his darling child.

I've spent all but eight years of my adult, productive (pre-retirement) life teaching or taking classes at universities. I have seven degrees, but Ray was one of only three teachers that took enough interest in me to qualify as a mentor. I love reading his stories because I find his authorial voice so comforting, and so I naturally found parts of this book distressing. From our discussions in the early 70s, I don't think Ray ever expected to support himself with his writing. We talked about grants, and in many ways he was like Galileo, in search of a *sinecure*, which might allow him to pursue his interest without having to worry about his family. I note with fondness that he received all the grants he'd talked about, as well as the Strauss Living, which he hadn't. Ray was a sensitive, good man, which doesn't always come through in the biography.

Trust is the only currency that means much, and yet trust is an affective response. Behavior accords with experience, which includes cognitive experience (reason) but when trust is gone, it’s gone, and seldom returns. Ray and Maryann’s generation was in between that of we baby boomers, and our parents, who had personal experience with the depredations of the Great Depression, and the trauma of the Second World War. Those from the in-between generation had only childhood memories of the War, and with the exception of a few military Advisors, were too old to be significantly threatened by our war in Vietnam. Most of them trusted their parents, churches, and governments as basic dispensers of truth and so tried to emulate their parents’ lives. We (baby-boomers) felt sufficiently threatened to question the hubris of our parents; trust was gone, and nothing was going to bring it back. A few from that in-between generation had also experienced enough to question their inculcated trust, became counter-culture predecessors, and hence leading voices in the counter-culture. The spirit of petty larceny in Ray’s biography has to be understood within the context of his having lost trust—that in conjunction with the way he seemed to ramble through life in a nearly unconscious state. Ray was a guiding light for many.

John M. says

This biography is well-written, comprehensive (to say the least) and a great tribute to the life of Raymond Carver. Carver is one of the authors that I read and re-read again and again over the years, and it won't be long before I read this biography again. I'm glad that Sklenicka wrote this book, and I believe this is a fitting tribute to Carver's life. It's well researched and reveals a lot about a man we really only know through his short stories. Along with Maryann Burk Carver's book about her life and relationship with Raymond Carver, I think that I've discovered so much more about his drive and passion for creating stories and poetry. This is a must-read for any Raymond Carver fan.

Joshua says

I really liked this bio. Well, let me rephrase: I liked Sklenicka's involvement, appreciated her thorough research and detailed rendering of Carver's entire life. The whole book read like a well paced novel, exciting at turns, characters well developed. All in all, a very satisfying read.

But the word "liked" doesn't feel appropriate, as the reader learns in such painstaking detail that Carver was such a bastard when he drank--physically abusive and unfaithful to his wife, emotionally unavailable to his family, unable to hold a job.

Don't get me wrong, I'm glad he got sober and repaired some of those relationships; I'm glad that he wrote beautiful, thoughtful stories that changed the scope of the American short story. But at the end of the day, it's a very sad biography, a cautionary tale. Is it worth becoming a brilliant writer at the expense of your own humanity? Should your artistic goals supersede your familial relationships?

I love Carver's writing and teach many of his stories, and I'll continue to admire him as a wordsmith, but it's always a tough reminder when those you emulate on the page fail so gloriously in their personal lives. It's important to remember that two things can be equally true: Carver was a brilliant writer, yes, but he also crossed boundaries, especially in terms of violence against women, that are unforgivable.

Eric says

When I started this book, I hadn't read any of Carver's work, but had only seen Short Cuts, the film Robert Altman had made of a clutch of his stories and one poem. While reading it, I read a couple of books worth of his short stories and one book of poems.

This is the story of the redemption of a man. The son of an alcoholic, he marries Maryann Burk, the love of his life, and they have two kids. He doggedly pursues his dream of being a writer, and until the age of thirty or so, makes steady progress. By the late sixties he has carved out (no pun intended) a name for himself. It is at this point that he is captured by the myth of the hard-drinking writer, and allows alcohol to become his "muse". A long, slow slide downward begins. Maryann follows him into alcoholism. There is domestic violence, parental neglect, and the work slows down to a crawl as Carver's body and mind deteriorate. Through it all, he retains his gift for friendship, surrounding himself with other drinker/writers who respond to the big, boyish lug. He moves frequently, shows a distressing ineptitude with money, and fails at several prestigious writing workshops and teaching posts.

Through all this, his editor, Gordon Lish, is instrumental in what success he manages to cobble together. Lish attacks his prose with a heavy hand, abbreviating the stories, increasing their ambiguity and their unsettling effect. As a result, Carver becomes known as the father of a new minimalism, also called "dirty realism". This stylistic label may have more to do with the reshaping Lish did on the work than with the stories as originally written.

In the late seventies, Carver bottoms out, hits AA, and finally quits drinking, although he still smokes prodigiously (both tobacco and marijuana). Although Maryann quits too, they separate and never manage to totally repair their relationship, although they remain important to one another. Ray takes up with writer Tess Gallagher, who becomes the companion of his last ten years.

These ten final years are charmed. Ray gets out from under the editorship of Lish, sheds the stylistic labels that he resented, repairs his relationship with his kids (although certain fictionalized aspects of these relationships cause hurt feelings, as do some confessional essays and poems), attains the recognition he always wanted, does a lot of fishing and spends time with his many friends. When he is eventually hit by terminal cancer in the late eighties, he never falls into self-pity, but enjoys the "Gravy" of his final days. "Gravy" is a poem he wrote about this attitude of his. If you can, pick up any collection of his poetry from the eighties to see a portrait of a man who has come to an ability to enjoy the now; to savor every moment. The collection Where Water Comes Together with Other Water: Poemsis almost an instruction manual on enjoying life.

Unfortunately, Tess Gallagher comes off in the book as greedy and grasping near the end. Gobbling up all the rights to Carver's work from Maryann and Carver's children. She saw him through his final days, though, and that's something. But Maryann was Ray's true protectress, the lioness who sacrificed everything and worked hard through Ray's dark days to enable his writing career.

Cody says

All art mirrors life to a certain extent, but to what degree is examining an author’s life and experiences crucial to gaining insight into their work? In the case of Raymond Carver, who drew directly from his life for writing material, having the details of this life/literature correlative thoroughly hashed out—thanks to Carol Sklenicka’s exhaustive research—makes for engaging reading. However, far more insightful is being able to bear witness to the sacrifices Carver and his family (particularly his first wife, Maryann) made in pursuing his writing career. Alcoholism, violence, neglect, poverty—all were a part of Carver negotiating his life as a writer. Carver made many destructive choices out of desperation, choices that not only undermined much of what he'd worked for but, at times, nearly destroyed his life and those closest to him. He privileged his writing over the needs of his family, and, yet, when it was a question of first getting published, Carver willingly compromised his voice and vision. (The detailed, complex saga of his relationship with the editor Gordon Lish is one of the more fascinating aspects of this book.) Living such a life of contradiction ultimately propelled him straight to the bottom of a bottle.

But this is also a story of redemption, at least somewhat. Carver manages to finally quit drinking, and it’s hard not see the immense success that follows—both in terms of fame and the quality of his writing—as a reward for this struggle. In the last decade of his life, Carver often counted his blessings, acknowledging that he'd been incredibly lucky. It’s tempting, then, to view his life’s story as a triumph, and, in many ways, it is. But Sklenicka reminds us that many of those that sacrificed tremendously for Carver were, in significant ways, left behind. In the end, it’s Maryann’s life that mirrors those of Carver’s characters far more closely than his own.

Returning to the initial question: how does all of this affect the reading of Carver’s work? Often, when discussing art, the reasons for/against a work depend far too much on the character of the artist. In Carver’s case, where art and life are particularly intertwined, it is easy to let his personal successes and failures color our views of his writing. I’d argue for a more nuanced reading, appreciating, first and foremost, the quality of his craft. One can do this without condoning Carver’s actions, and his work really is deserving of our continued attention. But it’s also important to admit that art does not exist in a vacuum and that some of the greatest works arise from personal conflict and hard won experience. Realizing this can add meaningful context to the work and offer a much deserved understanding and respect for the labor and sacrifice of *everyone* who played a role in Carver’s journey as a writer. Sklenicka’s biography offers just such an opportunity to more fully examine Carver’s life and work.

Janet says

Reading this bio of one of my favorite writers was an incredible ride. It transported me back to my own hopes and dreams of being a writer and living the "literary life." I read this alongside his recently published collected stories and essays as well as 1996's collected poems, "All of Us" and connected all the dots from his personal life to his writing. He's a true case in point of "write what you know." Ray was certainly the calm center of a nutty life. He was also a decent, generous man whose writing reduced his experiences down to their essence, and revealed the strangeness concealed behind the banal. As writer Richard Ford said at his funeral, "He wrote everything he knew or could sense of human frailty, and everything he could figure out or offer that frailty consolation." His biographer beautifully captures all of that. One interesting tidbit that I did not know was that Ray intended to get a Library Science degree in 1967 in Iowa, but never pursued it when his father died shortly after his enrollment. He re-enrolled in 1969 but again didn't finish.

---

mitch h says

Raymond Carver: A Writers Life, by Carol Sklenicka does a beautiful job illuminating Carver's complicated, heartbreaking and ultimately triumphant literary journey. Sklenicka conducts hundreds of hours of research and interviews with many of Carver's friends and family members to piece together stories about his life. This book was a truly immersive experience for me. I ploughed through all of it in less than a week and it was one of the best literary biographies I've ever read.

Carver was a complicated guy. He grew up in a working class family with an alcoholic father in Washington State, moved around a lot in his youth, married his teenage sweetheart, Maryann, when he was a teenager, and shortly after graduating from high school, moved to California together and soon had two children.

Ray and Maryann had a wild life (to say the least) growing up through their teens with two young kids. Until his first teaching position in Texas in his mid thirties, Carver did not hold on to a job for longer than 2 years. They family moved around the country, back and forth between California and Iowa for years, and they were often followed by Carver's mother and sister. But the one constant in his was his unflinching literary ambitions. And his wife, Maryann, went to incredible lengths to support these ambitions. As Ray descended into alcoholism, he paid for his stories with his emotional and physical well-bring, his marriage, and his strained relationship with his children. Some of the stories between 1976 - 78, the years when he was publishing his first book, are especially harrowing as Ray's late-stage alcoholism nearly killed him. (There's a couple awful examples of abuse during this time as well.) With that said, Carver found a way to channel his incredible eye for the bits and pieces of our lives that incapsulate our humanity—in all it's fragility and indecision and ambivalence—into some of the most carefully crafted, beautifully written short stories ever.

Carver spent most of his early writing career telling "he, she stories"—meaning stories of young couples, or a group of friends, doing the best that they can to get by and survive. And in many instances, the harder they worked to stay afloat, the quicker they sank. Carver brings his characters to life in his short stories with perfect minimal descriptions. His writing gives readers this deep sense that the characters they are reading about have a history that extends far belong the confines of the story. This is a world that often exists in the silences, gaps between his dialogue. Often times it's the things left unsaid that are more powerful than what is—like an iceberg, only 10% of it exists above the surface. In an essay called "On Writing," Carver sums up this literary vision in this quote: "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."

Another fascinating thing about this book is Carver's relationship to his editor Gordon Lish. The two of them met while they were both working across the street from each other at scientific textbook companies. When Lish was hired as the new fiction editor for Esquire magazine, Carver carried the hope that his relationship with Lish would help him gain recognition, new readers, and a chance to make a career as a writer. Later in his life, Lish would move on to become an editor with Knopft publishing house, and helped Carver land his first book deal, publishing Will you please be quiet, please?

Carver's work, especially the Lish edited pieces in What we talk about when we talk about love, an element of menace, power and force. They end abruptly, without fully realized conclusions and can have a haunting effect on the reader. As they are getting the manuscript for WWTAWWTAL ready for publication, Lish and Carver exchange a series of letters that are reprinted in this book describing Carver's hesitation about the heavy editing that his manuscript received, even went so far is a imply that Lish bullied Carver into accepting his edits.

The material in this particular book was extremely close to him because of his recent battle with alcoholism. In fact it was the first time in his life he was sober since he was a teenager. (Although he would smoke cigarets and pot for the rest of his life). But his hard parting days were over and with a new relationship to a fellow poet Tess Gallagher, who he previously studied with in Iowa, Carver found the strength to stay sober. This book brought him a new critical acclaim and for it he received a nomination for a national book award. Later on, Lish would brag that he did so much editing work to the stories, they were no longer Carver's—he was doing so much work that they became his, and he would tell others about it too, even showing one other New York editor Carver's manuscript pages.

Another interesting fact near the end of the work for Haruki Murakami readers, who served as Carver's translator in Japan (and also a huge literary admirer) actually built an extra large kingsize bed in his Tokyo home so that Carver could come and stay with he and his wife. But he was too sick with lung cancer to make the trip.

If you're a fan of writing in general, and have any misconceptions about the devotion and drive that it takes to life a writer's life, I highly urge you to read this book. But read his short stories first of course. 5/5.
