



## **Ron Carlson Writes a Story**

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Ron Carlson has been praised as “a master of the short story” (*Booklist*). In this book-length essay, he offers a full range of notes and gives rare insight into a veteran writer’s process by inviting the reader to watch over his shoulder as he creates the short story “The Governor’s Ball.”

“This is a story of a story,” he begins, and proceeds to offer practical advice for creating a great story, from the first glimmer of an idea to the final sentence. Carlson urges the writer to refuse the outside distractions—a second cup of coffee, a troll through the dictionary—and attend to the necessity of uncertainty, the pleasures of an unfolding story.

“The Governor’s Ball”—included in its entirety—serves as a fascinating illustration of the detailed anatomy of a short story.

## Ron Carlson Writes a Story Details

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Author : Ron Carlson

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# From Reader Review Ron Carlson Writes a Story for online ebook

## Mary Lynn says

Interesting book that follows Ron Carlson through the process of writing a first draft of a short story. Good ideas for "staying in the room" and for focusing on the details of the "outer story" until the inner story reveals itself.

I would definitely recommend to fiction writers, especially if you're in a bit of a slump.

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## Ben Loory says

probably the best book i've ever read about writing. not just inspiring (which many are), or witty and well-written (which a few are), but helpful-- mainly because it's a book about process (the unfolding) and not craft (niggling with words). by far, for me, the most helpful bit was when he talks about description as a way of creating "inventory," which is to say, description is not a method of saying things about characters, but a way of creating real stuff in the story world that you can then use to keep moving the story forward. it's a completely nuts and bolts approach, very physical world, no abstractions. really loved it.

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## Brian says

There is no shortage of how-to-write-fiction books. I know this because I've bought just about all of them. With few exceptions, these books are tremendously disappointing. They promise big, but deliver little.

The biggest problem with how-to-write-fiction books is that almost all of them focus on story structure. In case you haven't heard, stories must have a beginning, a middle, and...wait for it...an end. This little "no duh" *bon mot* can be found in just about every writing instruction book.

The problem with structure instruction is that, while it is dandy for writing outlines, it is usually not helpful for writing fiction. Everything that I've ever written comes across flat and uninteresting--and, ultimately, unfinished.

I think that these writing instruction books focus on structure because it is easy to write about structure. I could go on for pages about how Act I must conclude with an inciting incident or how Act III must resolve the conflict that came to a critical head at the end of Act II. But I would struggle to tell you how to write a compelling scene.

Ron Carlson's book is different. The book is a play-by-play of how he wrote one of his published stories, "Governor's Ball".

Mr. Carlson eschews the standard outline-structured format. Instead, his process is to start with the germ of an idea, discuss concrete physical details, and let the story grow out of itself. The end result is much more surprising and honest than something cobbled together from an erector set of an outline.

Mr. Carlson's book made me want to pick up my pen and try writing again.

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### **Liz says**

To my mind, this is one of the best little craft books out there. You can read it in an hour and then, ostensibly, stay seated at your desk for another couple hours and write an entire story from start to finish. Just hope you don't have to go to the bathroom during that time. Or, god help you, get up for coffee. Because, my friends, Ron Carlson WILL NOT LET YOU!

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### **Chris Orcutt says**

This is one of a dozen indispensable writing books I own, and when I first read it, it was as if a blindfold had been removed and I was viewing the process of writing clearly for the first time. Solid, pithy pieces of advice like "Elsewhere *\*is\** your destination" truly clarify the writer's role in the process. You have to be willing to let the story go where it wants to go. The way I put it is, "The story knows what it wants to do."

If you're a burgeoning fiction writer, you *\*have to\** read this book. It's so clean, clear, and elegant in its simplicity that it ordinarily would be easy to dismiss as "just another book about writing." Not so. Get this book, read it, and read it, and read it again until Ron Carlson's message sinks in.

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### **Yona Yurwit says**

Ron Carlson explains his process of "staying in the room" and finishing writing his short piece of literary fiction, "The Governor's Ball." He talks about how readers and writers engage with stories differently--and that might sound like common sense, but the way he talks through it is helpful to writing process. The two main points he makes are 1) don't stop and 2) stay specific to keep yourself interested as a writer. He discusses these ideas in interesting ways!

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### **Tyler says**

A short book that basically illuminates the process of Ron Carlson writing a short story called the Governor's Ball.

This book helped me understand what he thinks as he writes, which was very informative in comparing it to my own process. For Ron Carlson writing is basically a non-stop war against the temptation to stop writing. He is a discovery writer (which means he writes without an outline or knowing where the story will go beforehand). With each sentence he basically uses a lot of concrete nouns, descriptions etc. and takes what he just wrote as a building block toward the next sentence and paragraph. Everyone is writing blind to a certain extent on the first draft, but for myself it isn't quite this blind (most the time).

Carlson makes several generalizations about genre fiction (he is a literary writer) that I disagree with, naming calling such works plot-driven with false characters that don't really have depth and a personal agenda. I

could see the stereotypes that he was drawing from, but I have read too much excellent genre fiction to buy into the generalizations he makes.

It was comforting to read this book and realize that even a more experienced writer than myself feels a lot of the confusion, self-doubt, temptation to give up for the day etc. that often distracts me from the story and the work.

Interestingly, as he basically walks you through his thinking-as-he-writes process I disagreed with some of the writing decisions he made, but at the end when reading the complete story as a whole it came out better than the sum of those parts then when I read the snippets throughout the book (he tells you what he is thinking as he writes sentences and paragraphs in the story).

One advantage of discovery writing this way that is reflected in a way that outline/architect writers have more difficulty conveying is the spontaneity of the human experience. The narrator of the story is taking a mattress to the dump and ends up having a kind of cool moment with these homeless people at the end of the story. Carlson was essentially feeling his way around in the dark and stumbled into a cool moment, where as for me as more of an architect/outlining writer I have an idea or imagine a moment that strikes me as interesting or could be emotionally compelling or cool in some way and then start wondering what would bring a person there and what kind of person would experience this in a really powerful or interesting way. At least that's how my current story is going.

The difference is in retrospect your life (or the character's) seems to be leading to these things but as you live them you are just sort of stumbling about doing the best you can. That's how I see it anyway. Well, its time to finish the review, get off the internet, and work on my novel. Carlson certainly had that part right.

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### **Sian Griffiths says**

Great read, great advice. So much insight... though there is a part of me surprised not to see more on revision as a part of process. (It's entirely possible that Carlson, brilliant as he is, needs far less time on that part of the process than I do.) That's a small complaint about a generally wonderful book. I'm going to think of Carlson next time I'm reading and want a coffee.

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### **Linera says**

Direct, personal, pithy, and funny, this is Ron Carlson at his best. He reconstructs exactly how he came to write a short story, with digressions into his process, temptations, and always going back to the physical details.

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### **Cheryl Klein says**

I love the roundness of Ron Carlson's language and the slightly askew vantage point from which he writes, so I trust him to talk about craft (never my favorite topic) engagingly and with warmth. On that front, this slim little book doesn't disappoint. Carlson takes us through a draft of his story "The Governor's Ball" from start to finish, emphasizing instinct (almost, but not quite, to the point of fetishizing it) and realism. More

postmodern writers might be skeptical of such defaults, but for the most part I enjoyed going back to the basics. It wouldn't hurt for me to apply some of his advice--be patient and process-oriented, get lost in the woods, stay in the room when you want to leave--to my life, not just my writing.

Carlson admits he would like to follow every paragraph with a trip to the kitchen for coffee, and I greatly appreciate that glimpse into his humanity--the agonizing squirmy-ness of writing, no matter how much you love it and are a writer. But there's almost no talk of revision here, which feels like a denial of the thing that makes regular humans capable of producing great art. So the book is a little simplistic, but still an inspiring companion.

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## **Denis says**

Ron Carlson has written a 100 page dissection of his own short story, *The Governor's Ball*. I'm an intermediate writer, a fan of Carlson's, and have worshipped that very story with virtual writing peers. So, this book was definitely a must read, for me.

But Carlson does much more than dissect his story. He touches on a few topics, such as setting, dialogue, the outer vs. the inner story, and other goodies along the way, but the gist of this essay is on the process of writing. Or more specifically, the process he used to write the first draft of his story, *The Governor's Ball*.

Here's a little snippet on how he sees the writing process: 'I've become convinced that a writer's confidence in his/her process is as important as any accumulated craft dexterity or writing "skill".' -- Interesting. And I can relate in the "lack" of confidence in my own process. I've known long ago that writing in snippets, rereading and massaging after every paragraph, slowly inching my way through a story, was a terrible way to proceed. (In fact, in writing this measly review I've quit to have 2 smokes, 2 glasses of juice, answered the phone twice, Googled information for a friend, played the guitar, and replied to an email. Help!)

Stay away from excuses to leave the room, is what he says. Don't get up for that second cup of coffee, or for a peek outside for a glimpse of what the real world is up to. Don't reach for a dictionary or the internet or any other excuse to stop writing your first draft. Leaving the room, literally or metaphorically speaking, is really an excuse to stop writing, because writing is oh so tough. With *The Governor's Ball* as example, he shows us how he plunges into the dark and lets the story unfold, seemingly by itself. 'All the valuable writing I've done in the last ten years has been done in the first twenty minutes after the first time I've wanted to leave the room.'

'This little book is intended to be a companion for beginning writers', but his words of advice on writing the first draft have resonated with me, and for that reason alone he deserves 5 stars.

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## **Christine says**

This slim volume, recommended by my thesis advisor, has been instrumental in getting me writing again. Not only that, it has helped me simplify my story-telling mode and given me new perspectives on "how" to tell a story. In it, Carlson examines one story he wrote in one day ("*The Governor's Ball*"), and talks about his method, which boils down to: stay in the room and let the physical details of the story solve your problems. Highly recommended to writers needing a recharge.

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## Julia says

I am reading a short book by my colleague, fiction writer Ron Carlson. The book is called *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, and it's directed at aspiring fiction writers. Since I don't write fiction, maybe I should be reading one of Ron's novels instead. But I press on anyway. I am compelled by the sample story that Ron delivers in crisp, salty little chunks, like so many goldfish crackers on the path through the dark woods of procrastination. But I am also drawn in by the lessons Ron draws out of the writing process: tips and truisms, warnings and reminders, all of it frank and funny and right, because each one is tied to the wagging tale of the story he's telling.

Ron's emphasis is on process, not craft, and hence on intuition and accident more than control. Writing is discovery; you need to listen to your characters, not tell them what to do. Writing dialogue, Ron tells us, is "like playing tennis against a real partner. It's not like playing tennis against a wall." Craft alone would be mastering the wall; but process means creating characters who feint and parry, keeping the writer on her toes.

A lot of the book isn't about fiction writing at all. It's about time management. In a sharp little chapter called "Coffee," Carlson writes, "No one among us suffers the radical appreciation for coffee that I do. It calls to me, but I have learned not to listen." Coffee takes you out of your seat; it breaks concentration; it persuades you that "you might be smarter in the next room." And every coffee machine has a vacuum cleaner as its neighbor. Or an email account. Or a Face Book page.

The writer, says Carlson, "is the person who stays in the room."

And who is not in the room writing? you ask.

"Everybody."

Is it difficult to stay in the room?

"Yes. It's impossible."

Who can do it?

"The writer."

Carlson calls the things that build a world and make a character inventory ("Everything is inventory; everything is evidence"). Things keep the fiction writer firmly in the physical world. Put otherwise, things help the writer avoid adjectives. Say it with marigolds, or ear wax, or a big red plastic hair clip. And there's help here for the design writer, whose job is to tell stories with the stuff we inherit, disown, use up, wear out, throw away, or store high up on the shelf. Coffee pots and toaster ovens may keep us from staying in the room — but they can also become magnets that will keep us put, at least until the water boils or the baby cries.

This is a quick, fun, and enlightening read, for anyone who likes to write, or to read about writing. Great with a cup of Joe.

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## Clarence says

What I learned about writing stories:

--do the first draft all in one day (impossible!)

--don't stop to research anything, ever  
--don't have a second cup of coffee  
--listen to your story  
--don't, under any circumstances, leave the room  
--email is death to stories (already obvious)  
Thanks Ron Carlson!

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## **Caroline Bock says**

RON CARLSON WRITES A STORY: From The First Glimmer of An Idea to the Final Sentence - dives into the creative process of writing with a special focus on character development, which he believes, as I do, is at the heart of good writing. This contemplative book on writing is for the literary versus the more plot driven, often, (but not always), genre writer. The very short and wonderful book should be added to any writer or would be writer's bookshelf. Several succinct writing workouts are included as well as one of his stories, which forms the building blocks of this extended essay on writing.

And of course, look for my new novel: BEFORE MY EYES - coming out in February, 2014 from St. Martin's Press. There's a goodreads giveaway for an advanced reader's copy going on now. Best, Caroline

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