



What We Talk About When We Talk About Love

Raymond Carver

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In his second collection, Carver establishes his reputation as one of the most celebrated short-story writers in American literature—a haunting meditation on love, loss, and companionship, and finding one's way through the dark.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love Details

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From Reader Review What We Talk About When We Talk About Love for online ebook

Joe Valdez says

If I had a teacher in high school who assigned Raymond Carver, I would've gone bananas for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, a 1981 collection of seventeen stories published in literary journals in the '70s or early '80s. After being required to read Orwell and the goddam *Canterbury Tales*, reading *So Much Water So Close to Home*--where men on a fishing trip discover a woman's body in the river and wait until the end of their weekend to report it--would've been like ducking a bullet fired from a gun. It would've left an indelible impression on my teenage mind, caught between a *Doors* phase and a *Public Enemy* phase. Today, not so much.

Exploring Carver's fiction for the first time at the age of forty-three, I feel that in many ways I'm over this. Like listening to someone coming out of AA with their raw stories, epiphanies and apologies, I'm happy they're exorcising their demons, but I can only tolerate point blank despair for so long. I was, is and will always be a big fan of *Short Cuts*, the bold 1993 film adaptation in which filmmaker Robert Altman relocated the Carververse to contemporary Los Angeles and whose script drew in part from four of the stories in this collection. While the spiritual root canal on screen was numbed by the humor and humanity of its cast, in printed form, these tales are bleak.

My favorite stories were:

I Could See the Smallest Things (*Missouri Review*, 1980). In which a woman named Nancy wakes on the night of a full moon at the sound of her backyard gate opening. Her husband Cliff passed out, she puts on her robe to investigate and finds their neighbor Sam Lawton, formerly a friend of her husband's, out exterminating the slugs that feed on his rose bushes.

Sacks (*Perspective*, 1974). In which book salesman Les Palmer visits with his recently divorced father during a layover in Sacramento. Unable to unburden himself to anyone else, the father relates to the son in detail how he ended up breaking his marriage vows with his mother. This idea made its way into a scene between Jack Lemmon and Bruce Davison in *Short Cuts*.

The Bath (*Columbia*, 1981). In which an unnamed mother and father stand vigil beside their young son at the hospital after he's hit by a car and slips into a coma. Canceling their son's birthday party and ignoring the cake they'd ordered, they draw the wrath of the alcoholic baker. Andie MacDowell & Bruce Davison played the parents and Lyle Lovett the baker in *Short Cuts*.

So Much Water Close To Home (*Spectrum*, 1975). In which Claire is shaken by the behavior of her husband Stuart, who despite discovering a woman's body on a weekend fishing and drinking trip with his buddies, waited until they were on their way home to contact the police. This act, which seemed reasonable to Stuart, gives Claire no choice but to look at her husband in a new light. Anne Archer and Fred Ward played the couple in *Short Cuts*.

Everything Stuck To Him (*Chariton Review*, 1975). In which an unnamed couple on holiday in Milan revisit their past when she asks him to tell her what it was like when they were young. The man recounts the time their infant daughter came down with an illness and he had to choose between a fishing trip or staying home with his family.

While I was able to race through these micro stories in less time than it would take me to duck from combat gunfire, providing some of the same sheer joy and terror, they didn't cast the same spell they would've had I discovered Raymond Carver in high school. As an adult, I've met enough addicts--recovered or otherwise--to know how miserable they make their lives and those closest to them. I don't need that behavior illustrated to me anymore. That said, the effect of reading Carver was palpable. This material got into my bones. There's a closing time quality to these tales that I can only imagine is like a barfly staring into an empty bottle at 2 a.m. like he was staring into an abyss.

In 2009, two decades after Raymond Carver's death, his widow Tess Gallagher helped editors William Stull and Maureen Carroll restore all seventeen of these stories to their original length in a collection titled *Beginners*. By their accounting, Carver's editor Gordon Lish had excised up to 70% of Carver's text, which indicates that readers and academics have come to appraise Carver's speeding bullet style and bleak vision after only reading 30% of his work. I plan on purchasing a copy of his edition and will review it at some future time. As for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, it gets an incomplete grade.

Ilse says

Hummingbird

Suppose I say *summer*,
write the word "hummingbird,"
put it in an envelope,
take it down the hill
to the box. When you open
my letter you will recall
those days and how much,
just how much, I love you.

Capturing bliss in one word, crystallising tenderness and love at once into a precious gift and a delicate act of remembrance, *Hummingbird*, the affectionate poem closing this collection, charmed me in its endearing simplicity and ended up as my favourite - reading this short poem magically transporting to the moment of receiving and later cherishing of a letter or a postcard dear, the one you keep close to you and take with you until it is ragged, almost perished, the words barely discernible anymore, a four-leaf clover in your heart for the rest of your days.

Before fortuitously coming across this bilingual chrestomathy of 17 poems in the local library – a selection from Carver's All of Us: The Collected Poems, which is a compilation of his 5 poetry collections - I only knew and read Raymond Carver as a short-story writer. A few of these poems strike as miniature stories, vernacular in tone, narrative and direct in style, the nightly atmosphere and a certain rawness at times reminding me of some of the songs by Tom Waits, hanging out in a bar like in the long opening poem *You Don't Know What Love Is (an evening with Charles Bukowski)*, or at the ramshackle party of booze and despair in *Union Street: San Francisco, Summer 1975*.

All poems are love poems, Carver's narrator observes in his poem *For Semra, With Martial Vigor* and obviously not all but most poems in this collection consider love. The simple pleasures of love. The sweet

comfort of holding hands giving strength to endure time consuming us (*Through the Boughs*). The delight of watching the beloved dancing a minuet (*The Minuet*), or the reminiscence of that enchantment emanating from the eye of the painter who has lost his muse and wife (*Bonnard's Nudes*). Hips, thighs and loosened hair celebrating in the dark sensuality of liberty (*This Word Love*). The traces on a lip left after a wild night (*Yesterday*). The bittersweetness of longing and hope, the pain of losing love (*Still Looking Out of Number One*), of loss and grief, of missing, of transience, evoking tenderness and melancholy without threading onto mawkish ground, conjuring up a quiet night where a couple unobtrusively breaths together closing the day in the intimacy of their home (*The Best Time of the Day*), or seizing the simple joy and warm thoughts when coming home where the one you love welcomes you (*Waiting*):

*It's not that house. It's
the next house, just over
a rise. The house
where trees are laden with
fruit. Where phlox, forsythia,
and marigold grow. It's
the house where the woman
stands in the doorway
wearing the sun in her hair. The one
who's been waiting
all this time.
The woman who loves you.
The one who can say,
"What's kept you?"*

Honest and powerful, minimalistic and suggestive, reading this tiny collection struck up a delightful acquaintance with Carver's poetry.

Nancy says

Posted at Shelf Inflicted

When I started reading, I found these stories a little too spare, a little unfinished. They were snippets of lonely people and troubled relationships, but nothing I could really sink my teeth into. I set the book aside and when I picked it up a second time, I discovered that these stories are better digested when read with fewer interruptions. Although these stories are about a variety of characters, I found their commonalities, differences, views and struggles very compelling, if not always enjoyable. Reading the stories consecutively helped to draw me in and connect me with the characters. The words, though brief and simple, were astonishingly effective at portraying the human condition with grittiness, humor, and poignancy and showing a glimpse of American society.

Here are a few memorable lines from some of my favorite stories:

"There was a little rectangle of lawn, the driveway, the carport, front steps, bay window, and the window I'd been watching from in the kitchen. So why would I want a photograph of this tragedy?" – from *Viewfinder*

"Things are better now. But back in those days, when my mother was putting out, I was out of work. My kids were crazy, and my wife was crazy. She was putting out too. The guy that was getting it was an unemployed aerospace engineer she'd met at AA. He was also crazy." – from *Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit*

"The thing was, they had to have a serious talk soon. There were things that needed talking about, important things that had to be discussed. They'd talk again. Maybe after the holidays were over and things got back to normal. He'd tell her the goddamn ashtray was a goddamn dish, for example." – from *A Serious Talk*

"But what I liked about knights, besides their ladies, was that they had that suit of armor, you know, and they couldn't get hurt very easy. No cars in those days, you know? No drunk teenagers to tear into your ass." – from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

Fix a drink, have a smoke, and discover Raymond Carver.

KFed says

I'll announce the cliche of my loving this book before you beat me to it.

I'm an overeducated, mock-contemplative early-twenty-something with a penchant for strong male voices (despite my feminist leanings) and a distaste for anything too sentimental. I was raised in the tradition of "Show, Don't Tell" and hold this closer than even my favorite teddy (whose name is Atticus.) My middle name is "Minimalism." My other middle name is "Ooh, that sounds pretty."

With that out of the way, yes, *of course* I loved this volume, and probably for the reasons you'd expect.

Raymond Carver's name should be in lights. Everyone who likes this book is going to tell you that one of Carver's strengths is his knack for understatement. I'm guessing what they're getting at is Carver's ability to keep all the mechanics of his stories imperceptible beneath the surface, with maybe a few out-of-character exceptions (the alcohol device in the title story being one). There's also the fact that Carver seems to accomplish things in the span of one page that so many authors would kill many more trees (and possibly small children, and maybe even a puppy or two) to achieve; see the opening page of "Tell The Women We're Going" to see what I mean. How many authors can convincingly sum up the entire personal history of two characters in only one paragraph?

Beneath the tightness of each story there seems to be a distinctive pulse. Not the rhythm of the language. Rather, the kind of pure life energy that all artistic works strive for (or at least they should.) When stories took turns ("for the worst" is implicit), what startled me more than each outcome was often the fact that I was so moved by them each. It's because of this pulse that characters who existed for only 3 or 4 pages still seemed to walk off the page and become real. And that's probably what will make these stories linger in my memory.

People often seem to speak of "Raymond Carver's America" when they're trying to grasp these stories. I don't know what that means, or if Raymond Carver's America is anything like mine. Whatever it is, it's tortured and beautiful. And I like it.

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

This is like what would happen if Walker Evans had built a time machine, gunned it to the 1970's, landed in the field of some pop. 1000 Oregon hunting town, plopped down at a bar stool, and started writing field notes for photos of the place and the folks contained therein. He isn't actually going to shoot the images this time, though. Fill in the lines with your own muck.

Sparse, s(p)earing, simple stuff. Even if you don't generally go for a minimalist approach, Carver has this unthumb-downable wisdom which catches you off guard, like some crackling, muffled, faded live recording of a blues track from a 1930's porch stoop which still just bleeds its ache all over your shirt despite all technical/technological infancy and inferiority. Back to Walker Evans, these pieces reminded me strongly of his photographs of Depression-era domestic interiors in particular, just the meagerest display of utilitarian possessions fastened to shabby walls like sculptural objects in a museum. Sometimes it just takes a simple scene to summon an elaborate history of struggle, a fully fleshed-out internal pride structure, a loss which haunts. Screams in a pillow, I guess. But I'm being morose.

This passage pissed me off in that good way:

As for Rae she hadn't been to school for weeks. She said no one could make her go. Maxine said it was another tragedy in a long line of low-rent tragedies.

Shutup, mom!

Teresa Proença says

A primeira coisa que me ocorre dizer sobre este tesouro:
Vocês que me lêem, se puderem leiam-no...
Entreguem-se-lhe e terão uma fabulosa experiência literária!

São pequeninos contos - episódios do quotidiano - que falam de amor, de todas as formas de amor – e muito da falta dele -, amor fraterno, amor amante, amor conjugal, amor perdido, amor reencontrado, amor amizade,...; e de desamor, muito desamor...

São pequenos relatos de amor, de desejo, de morte, de egoísmo, de crueldade e que nos deixam lassos, inquietos e a pensar, muito para além de leremos a ultima linha.

Cada mini conto, aparece do nada, como que por magia, expondo-nos a alma de seres como nós - mesmo que não o queiramos reconhecer - e da mesma forma que começam, terminam, deixando-nos desconcertados; sem um final, ou um final fácil de entender, ou que queiramos entender...

Temos de lhe criar nós um fim, para isso queremos ler de novo, voltar a unir personagens e textos, por forma a tornar consistente aquilo que rodeia as palavras que soletramos e nos fica, a pairar solto, na mente. E, então sim, julgamos compreender...

Aqui, nada é corriqueiro e banal, normal ou esperado. Tudo é surpreendente e tão imprevisível como a nossa própria vida...onde, a todo momento, nos surpreendem e nos surpreendemos e nada acontece como planeamos e prevemos;

Como reage um marido quando apanha a mulher adúltera em flagrante? Bate-lhe, mata-os? Não!
Simplesmente chora...;

O que acontece quando o amor acaba...como se divide o que se construiu em conjunto - se é divisível - ...os

filhos...;

O amor físico como forma de exorcizar o desgosto e a morte...

...

Eu não sou apreciadora de contos...

Andrew Smith says

I first became interested in this book when I read Haruki Murakami's memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. Any book that can inspire Murakami to steal (most of) the line must be worth reading. Mustn't it? Well I thought so, though it took me some time to get around to this collection of 17 short stories. The cover of the Vintage Classics version I read is sparse and the blurb gave nothing away. Ah well, in for a penny...

Originally published in 1981, the prose is lean and the general mood somewhat disturbing as Carver explores the nature of life and love. As I worked my way through the collection the stories seemed to increase in length and complexity. Many of the characters were not easy to like - many were alcoholics and adulterers – but there was a compelling darkness and variation that seemed to draw me, urgently, from one story to the next.

Mid-way through I came across a scene I recognised, I'd seen it before in a film I'd much enjoyed: *Short Cuts* directed by Alan Altman, in 1993. In looking back at the film I discovered that Altman had based it on a group of Carver's short stories. About Carver, he says:

His stories are all occurrences, all about things that just happen to people and cause their lives to take a turn. Maybe the bottom falls out. Maybe they have a near-miss with disaster. Maybe they just have to go on, knowing things they don't really want to know about one another.

And this seems to be the essence of it. Life's miseries are not sugar coated here. The stories *are* uniformly melancholy. But overriding this is the feeling that as long as life includes the precious opportunity for us all to experience love then maybe it's all worthwhile.

I did enjoy some stories more than others, with the title piece probably being the most memorable, but overall I'd say it's well worth setting aside a short amount of time to experience this powerful collection.

Jason Koivu says

A collection of slice-of-life short stories that mostly go nowhere and end ambiguously, and for some damn reason I loved them.

Carver gets mileage out of yard sales, photographers offering their services, accidental death, a night of bingo, doing things and doing nothing, talking yet saying nothing.

As a reader, I was frustrated when some of the stories went nowhere. I expected and hoped for big

conclusions, finality, and instead I got dudes driving away from confrontations holding ashtrays. But then there would be subtle moments of human nature revealed, true revelations of our unnecessarily complicated lives, that would make me catch my breath.

I read this over 20 years ago and I'm afraid some of the particulars of the collection escape me. However, what I'll not soon forget is the quiet desperation Carver made me feel for everyday people whose lives had derailed. I was in college and full of life. Middle-aged regret is not something kids of that age tend to fully understand, yet Carver made me feel that horrid indecision, that deep-seated pain. These are emotions worth enduring for the price of reading this beautiful prose.

T for Tongue-tied says

I rarely get on with short stories. I need time to engage, I need time to move from affection to love. But this was different. This was instant.

Mesmerising in their simplicity, made up of fragmentary scenes that so often feel strangely quiet and motionless. Incredibly raw and earthy, both close-up and distant, Carver's stories make you feel as if you were there, on that bed, in that shaded light. They crystallise into a myriad of hardly visible gestures, half-uttered sentences that dissipate into thin air the moment they are said out loud. It is a collection of domestic freeze-frames that are casually played to us in a staccato rhythm of the repeatedly broken hearts, broken bottles, broken lives.

Indecisive.
Waiting.
Hoping.

There is this omnipresent feeling of reaching the end without the prospects of any new beginning. The love we are talking about here has lived and done it hard. It does not parade in the guise of sentiments but it holds firmly to its memories. This love is crippled, ingrained in one's heart like the night sweat in the fibres of our bedsheets. And yet there's something dignified about it. Authenticity, silence. True care for another human being, no matter how estranged from the one who has been hurt. Sometimes a delicate, fleeting touch of fingers means more than the loudest, forever lingering words - it does not take the fear away but it diffuses it into something more bearable. Carver often gives us no background for what is happening and we almost feel like intruders watching someone else's sadness, grief, unwitting tenderness. Here the prose of life reaches to us from a long way off and it makes us feel very lonely. My eyes were full of tears when I read what Mel McGinnis was saying about love in the story that gave title to Carver's collection. Not only because I could relate personally but also because it was so devastatingly true. And because this is the way love often has to be. Not easy, not as eternal as we desperately want it to be. Transient but with consequences. Memorable in so many different ways.

Real every time we live it.

Greg says

My fucking head hurts. I should be writing my thesis, but the math part of crunching the data is hurting my head. It shouldn't though. It should be easy math. I'm dumber than I used to be. Instead I'll procrastinate, and share a review I wrote 6 years ago for another website that I haven't written a single thing on in just about 6 years. All date references should have six years added to them.

After reading MFSO's review I wanted to make some comment about a line that I really like in the first story of this book. Instead of going to find the book, and type out the line, I just found this old review that mentions this line.

The old review

About five years ago I read a couple of Raymond Carver on the recommendation of a friend. I hated the books. At the time I thought what was so great about very short stories where all the characters seemed to chain smoke constantly, drink hard liquor and watch their lives fall into dissolution around them. I ended up selling one of the books to a used shop for a dollar and kept the other one only because I loved the title, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

A couple of months ago I had an allergic reaction to the excessive verbosity of writers like Rick Moody. This reaction coupled with an interest as a struggling writer to see how one can write effectively and minimally I pulled out Raymond Carver again and sat him on my to be read pile of books. This time when I read Raymond Carver I didn't get hung up on the repetitive drinking and smoking but focused on the writing itself and saw the simple genius in these pages.

Take this example from beginning of the title story of the collection:

My friend Mel McGinnis was talking. Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and sometimes that gives him the right.

The four of us were sitting around his kitchen table drinking gin. Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink. There were Mel and me and his second wife, Teresa—Terri, we called her—and my wife, Laura. We lived in Albuquerque then. But we were all from somewhere else.

On a quick reading this might not seem like much. In the story this is about as much space that Carver gives to the general background of the characters and setting. Looking at the passage though every single word is packed with meaning hidden behind the simplicity of the words. Carver never uses big words, he writes with everyday language. The language of people who go to work everyday, have pitiful lives, find solace in a stiff drink after work and are more likely to watch a sitcom than ever pick up a book. Going back to the passage I picked (sorry if this is starting to sound like a school paper), look at the line (my favorite in this passage), "We lived in Albuquerque then. But we were all from somewhere else." In saying nothing really this line illuminates to me a transient loneliness that places a fleeting solidarity in the afternoon drinking. (2009 *interjection: holy shit was that pretentious*) In the verb tenses Carver chooses he places this one moment in time as one that may never be again. I shouldn't belabor the point though.

The stories are filled with Carver being able to choose a short phrase or sentence that can capture the entire mood of a scene.

The themes that Carver chooses are slightly limited. In this collection there are mostly stories about loneliness. The loneliness of married people, the ways that the disappointments in life eventually catch up and leave an emptiness, and the hopelessness of a life that needs to just be lived even after the thrill of living

is gone (yeah, just like John Cougar Mellencamp). In these stories of hopelessness are the small moments of tenderness that make life worth going on for, and it's these moments that the collection a bittersweet feeling without any syrupy sentimentality.

Raymond Carver was a master. He singularly created a body of work removed from anything else in American Literature. It's possible to compare him the Hemingway, except that the comparison falls away once you move away from the simple language both authors use with razor sharp precision. The closest writer Carver reminds me of is a stripped down version of the Russian Short Story master Anton Chekhov.

Glenn Russell says

This collection part of the 1980s Vintage Contemporaries series includes seventeen vintage Raymond Carver, including *Viewfinder* - An abandoned husband chuck's stone as he is photographed up on his roof by a door-to-door salesman/photographer who had hooks instead of hands; *A Serious Talk* - An ex-husband expresses his rage when his ex-wife takes a telephone call in the bedroom by cutting the telephone line in the kitchen; *One More Thing* – A husband, wife and daughter accuse one another of being nuts. To share a larger helping of what a reader will find in the pages of this book of early Raymond Carver short-shorts, here's a bit of detail on the title story alone with my sidebar comments:

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love

Symposium: Two couples, Mel and Terri, Laura and the narrator, Nick by name, sit around Mel's kitchen table one evening drinking gin when the topic of conversation turns to love. Sidebar: Echoes of Plato's *Symposium* and, of course, the meaning of symposium is a drinking party. However this is 20th century Carver county America, so the object of love remains always women for men and men for women – not even close to seeing the opposite sex as the first step on the ladder leading to a more generalized universal love of philosophic wisdom.

Dionysius, One: Terri lived with Ed before she lived with Mel. Terri tells how Ed loved her so much he tried to kill her, dragging her around the living room by her ankles, while repeating, "I love you, I love you, you bitch". Thus, the four launch into a debate about Ed's madness and passion being true love. Sidebar: Ed embodies the ancient Greeks myth of Dionysius, the frenzied, drunk intensity of unbridled passion gone wild.

Dionysius, Two: Mel relates how Ed would call him up on the phone to threaten his life and once actually tried to kill him. Mel had to buy a gun for protection (completely out of character, he admits – he's a cardiologist, for God sake!) and he and Terri lived like fugitives. Terri, in turn, says how when she left him, Ed drank rat poison causing serious facial deformities. Sidebar: Raymond Carver noted how a little menace is good for the temperature, good for a short story. Very true, Ray! Since Mel and Terri were personally so threatened by Ed, the whole tone of the discussion on love takes a much more serious turn.

Dionysius, Three: Ed shot himself in the mouth but he didn't die – he was taken to the hospital where at one point Mel actually saw him. "His head swelled up to twice the size of a normal head. I'd never seen anything like it, and I hope I never do again." When Ed was in his hospital room dying with his much swollen head,

Terri sat in the chair next to him, counter to Mel's wishes, right up to Ed's last breath. Sidebar: As these two women and two men drink their gin, Terri's compassion for Ed is the sole example given in the story where love transcends physical attraction for any of them.

True Love: Laura comments how she and Nick know what true love is, as they touch knees and Nick makes a big production of kissing Laura's hand. Terri tells them they are still on their honeymoon, even after being together for nearly two years, but just wait. As an afterthought, Terri tells them how she is just kidding about that "just wait." Sidebar: Like hell Terri is kidding; she knows from experience that at some point the honeymoon ends, but Laura and Nick are in honeymoon mode now, which is the pinnacle of love for each one of these four, thus her jealousy.

Probing Question: Mel waxes philosophical when he acknowledges how he loved his first wife very much but now he hates her guts. Same thing with Terri in her love for Ed, same thing for both Laura and Nick since they both were married previously. What happened to that love? And if anything tragic happened to any of them, their partner would find someone else to love. Sidebar: Good question. Why is such a powerful, all consuming emotion for one person alive within us for a time then it either dies or turns to an equally negative emotion? Even when it comes to something that doesn't change, like music, the type of music we love changes over time. Why is this?

DOA: Mel relates a story of love that really impressed him, a story where a drunk teenage driver at high speed slammed into the car of a seventy-year-old husband and wife. The kid was DOA but the husband and wife were at his hospital in traction, bandaged head to foot, in the same hospital room and the husband tells him through a mouth-hole in his bandaged head that what really depresses him isn't the accident or being injured or the pain but the fact that he can't turn his head and see his wife through his eye-holes.

The White Knight and His Kids: Mel says how he wants to be like those medieval knights in their armor where nothing can hurt them. Then, tipsy with gin, Mel wants to speak with his kids. Terri cautions him that his Marjorie (Mel's ex) might answer the phone. Mel becomes extremely angry and upset, tells everyone how Marjorie is bankrupting him, how she doesn't marry her goddam boyfriend since she wants to still continue to collect money from him. Knowing Marjorie is allergic to bees, Mel swears he will show up at Marjorie's front door wearing the white suit of a beekeeper and let loose a hive of bees to kill her. Sidebar: Echoes of Ed and the spirit of Dionysius as Mel is possessed with the mad desire for destruction and killing.

Silence: All four fall silent, sensing how Dionysius isn't all that far away – it is only a matter of what can set us off. The story ends with Nick's reflection: "I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark."

Raymond Carver, master of the short story

K.D. Absolutely says

Dirty Realism is the genre where this book is classified. Coined in the 80's, the dirty-realism school of writing became popular during that decade due to the writings of Raymond Carver, Angela Carter, Bobbie Ann Mason, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff among others. Their language is sparse and their characters are the blue-collar, middle-class Americans who faced disappointments, heartbreaks and harsh truths in their ordinary lives.

I have been reading a biography of Haruki Murakami and read last week that part saying that one of his influences is Raymond Carver. When I saw a copy of this book last Friday, I bought it right away. The reason: I like Murakami's style: the sparse, easy-to-understand narrative and, I must admit, the fantasy elements that he seems to be very fond of using.

My edition of this book is composed of 17 short eccentric yet thought-provoking stories. Very Murakami except that the fantasy elements (the talking animals, the roving television camera, etc) are totally absent. Carver's characters are all human beings but the mood is always bleak as if the his characters do not know how to laugh and see the good side of things. Don't get me wrong though; these stories will not dampen your mood. Rather, it will make you think of your own life as you see yourself (even if you are not an American), in those stories. They are short (the shortest is 3 pages) but told in minimalist manner totally devoid of excess words. Every word has a purpose and if you speed read, you will not get what the message is and you will have to go back and read again. In most of the stories, Carver did not care to put names to the characters so he just uses "woman", "man", "boy" or their pronoun equivalents. So, that could be confusing if you don't pay attention. I think the purpose of that is to make his readers see themselves in those characters.

The title story, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) is the 16th story in this compilation (I know that in other editions it is the first). I think it is properly placed there because it is the **most** beautiful among the 17. Also the last story *One More Thing* seems to be like an afterthought of the title story so the book has that cohesive message: *that Love is too hard to understand. Its meaning is elusive to most of us. Even if we keep talking about Love, we don't really know what it is really.*

And yes, it is obvious that Murakami even got his inspiration from Carver's title when he came up with his non-fiction book: *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. Talk about originality.

Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

Answer: In other words, everything else: "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" by Raymond Carver, Gordon Lish "

I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark."

in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" by Raymond Carver, Gordon Lish

Imagine the following sentence: "By 8 AM I wake up to go to the bathroom."

Now imagine the following edited sentence: "By 8 AM I wake up and go to the bathroom to sit on what has to be the unlikeliest throne in Lisbon."

Which one is better? Uhm...Food for thought...

If you're into this kind of stuff, read the rest of he review elsewhere.

Garima says

Milan Kundera in his short story collection *Laughable Loves*, talks about the inevitable absurdity that revolves around the highly misunderstood feeling of Love that begins with innocent stargazing but later tempt numerous meteors to destroy the vulnerable abode of lovers. Promises are ditched, mushy definitions are torn apart and even when other things remain equal or unequal; he/she still loves me just doesn't matter anymore. What remains is this filthy carcass of emotions that some people tag along wherever they go while some bury it in the most unwholesome style in the graveyard of their hearts. A laughable business and some compelling stories, which underwhelmed me initially but after reading Carver's *What we Talk about when we talk about Love*, I reconsidered my reaction towards Kundera's book and now I can appreciate it a lot more by reason of few hazy intersection points I perceived between these two works.

I thought we'd be like that too when we got old enough. Dignified. And in a place. And people would come to our door.

In an instant, the surefooted destiny stumbles and a suffocating despair assumes a confident stance because when we talk, we often fail to communicate effectively and rely a little too much on the unsaid. Carver succeeds with this book because of the negligible distance he has maintained with the reality that defies the lofty motifs of life and explores the silent frustration of clueless mortals. The characters appear to be the uninspired architects of some amorphous structure that demonstrates their clumsy choices and in their attempts to justify the same, they toss around rhetorical questions and alternate opinions without any didactic purpose.

Every story implies a different concern rather than a direct reference to love that renders uniqueness to this collection, which elevates manifold by Carver's minimalist prose. He often indulges a little too much with the privileges of ambiguity but it's hardly a flaw in the light of wit and ingenuity that makes one come back to meet people who prolong their last goodbyes while taking every last thing they think belongs to their individual self or to feel compassion towards the young couple who had some other plans rather than becoming young parents.

...it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about love.

Continuing from just another day to a deserted afternoon and crawling slowly towards an imminent night, these stories happen everywhere as the result of some unnatural disorder that human beings were able to conceive so it's better to think and feel a little before we talk and listen.

Sawsan says

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Cecily says

A collection of short stories first published in 1981, but feeling a couple of decades older. They are **heavily** edited versions of "Beginners", which I reviewed [HERE](#)). Comparing the two versions of these stories demonstrates that Stephen King's assertion that "The editor is always right" is not necessarily true. See my review of *On Writing*, [HERE](#)).

Each is a vivid glimpse of people at a troubling time in their lives. One of the early ones contains the line "Booze takes a lot of effort if you're going to do a good job with it" and one expects that to sum up the collection, but they're more varied than that. Most concern recent or imminent loss, whether a partner, child, friend or home. Often matters are exacerbated by problems with drink and fidelity. There are few really likeable characters; more references to fishing than might be expected; misogynistic aspects and not much humour, yet they were fascinating to read.

A few stories are positively disturbing (e.g. a brutal and pointless murder), but there are insights and questions too. Where does love go when it dies? How do you come to terms with the violation of the sanctity of your home? Can there be love if there is also violence? How does a functional family fall apart? Some of the characters are keen to explore these matters overtly ("There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out" and "We'd reached the end of something, and the thing was to find out where new to start"), but others are victims of circumstance or just go, unthinkingly, with the flow.

They are very short, but I'm sure I've seen adaptations of *The Bath* (starting with a boy's birthday cake) and *Tell the Women* (the grisly one), though I can't track them down; perhaps it's just Carver's storytelling skill that makes me think that.

Overall, I'd rate them 3.5*, but I'm feeling generous, and Carver is revered, so I rounded up.

Diane says

I picked up this collection of Raymond Carver stories after watching the movie "Birdman," which features a play based on the title story.

When I finished reading it, I was both impressed at Carver's brisk dialogue and wishing there had been more. He sketches scenes well, dances around a topic, reaches for an emotional peak, and then closes.

Like most short stories, it's a marvel of efficiency. But I still wish there had been more heft.

Steven Godin says

Raymond Carver is simply one of the best post-war American writers, simply because he keeps everything within, simple, crisp and clear. He honed his writing craft to such a degree here that this collection may well be his best work. Focusing on lonely men and women who talk, drink, go fishing and play cards to pass the time of day. Told in a minimalist style with a razor-sharp sense of how people get along in a contemporary America using dialogue that reads like an absolute dream. There's still something cerebral rather than emotional about the stories, but this alienation is part of Carver's package. If you want to see beautiful craftsmanship and feel in the mood to take a wry and sometimes sad trip through the lives of average Americans with stories of failed promise or everyday accident then this is for you. Short-story telling at its grandest.

Joshua Nomen-Mutatio says

"Booze takes a lot of time and effort if you're going to do a good job with it."

Indeed. If one wanted to distill the stories within this collection down to a pithy, *inverted*, Hallmark-style aphorism, this would be a top contender.

(Click For Review Soundtrack: "Little Person")

Drinking and smoking and talking: these are the true main characters of Carver's world (and make no mistake: he's summoned and crafted a distinctive world). Okay, we can quibble and refer to this trifecta more aptly as the true plot devices perhaps. In any case, these *things*, whatever we want to call them here, are not merely a *thread* uniting the stories, but a thick multi-braided rope, the sort one of Carver's blue collar archetypes might use to drag a freshly felled (by hand) oak through the snow, or, more likely, to break their fall while snapping their neck in a final, irredeemable act, right after polishing off a fifth of cheap bourbon.

Basically, the character's names and jobs seem to matter less than the brand of booze they're downing, or the sort of receptacle they extinguish their cigarettes in.

At the same time, though these things seem to stand out, the characters do not feel like mere vessels for Carver's words. They somehow mysteriously manage to be sympathetic, despicable, objects of pity, curiosity, and so on. But basically everyone is miserable in one way or another. Carver's characters cause the ol' chestnut that "Misery loves company" to take on a new and energized tone and hue. That shit really comes alive and drunkenly tap dances upon the page.

And herein lies the magic of Carver for me--how does he do it? I say "magic" in both in the colloquial, metaphorical sense of "pleasant," "enchanting," and so on—and also, more so, in the sense of *literal magic tricks*. How does he do it? You see this famously spare narrative before you, you see the extremely narrow range of subject matter (drunk, sad, average people, being drunk and sad and average) repeating to the point that stories easily begin to merge into one another, you see the distinct lack of purple prose, the bluntness of it all, and yet you're being affected in a tremendous way by it all, to the point that it becomes oddly difficult to explain. Affected in a way that you feel you shouldn't be, given the way your descriptions of the work look on paper.

Perhaps the problem is that every way in which I'd like to describe the depth of these stories simply comes off as an unspeakably repetitive cliché that almost makes me shudder.

Another thought that crossed my mind is that it almost feels wrong, like morally incorrect, to try and put some new, clever, summarizing spin on these stories (and the superior collection *Cathedral*, which left me more or less wordless in my "review"). To try and wax analytic with such raw slices of life does indeed seem to miss some Point that may or may not be hovering about.

But I ultimately feel that it's also not a grave sin to do so, or to want to do so, rather it's a reflection of the desire found in each and every story of Carver's--to find some company, for our misery and otherwise. To exchange pieces of ourselves while we can. I'll just have to save it for a night with You, seated at a table, with a large ashtray and a long line of adult beverages trailing behind us.

David Schaafsma says

"What do any of us really know about love? It seems to me we're just beginners at love. We say we love each other and we do, I don't doubt it. I love Terri and Terri loves me, and you guys love each other too. You know the kind of love I'm talking about now. Physical love, that impulse that drives you to someone special, as well as love of the other person's being, his or her essence, as it were. Carnal love and, well, call it sentimental love, the day-to-day caring about the other person. But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too. But I did, I know I did."

I have read this volume several times, and this time listened to it. So it's very important to me. In a former Life I got an MFA in short fiction, in the eighties, and at that time the premier living short story writer, or certainly the most stylistically influential, was Carver. He himself, a minimalist, would seem to have been himself influenced by Ernest Hemingway. And maybe noir fiction: Very simple, straightforward prose. Carver was particularly a working class fiction writer, an alcoholic writing about booze and the effect of booze:

"Drinking's funny. When I look back on it, all of our important decisions have been figured out when we were drinking. Even when we talked about having to cut back on drinking, we'd be sitting at the kitchen table or out at the picnic table with a six-pack or whiskey."

and people on the edge of serious collapse:

"We opened our eyes and turned in bed to take a good look at each other. We both knew it then. We'd reached the end of something, and the thing was to find out where new to start."

Grace Paley wrote a story collection entitled *Enormous Changes Happening at the Last Minute*, but this is Carver, and the changes are cataclysmic. Booze, divorce, but also stripped down language:

"All this, all of this love we're talking about, it would just be a memory. Maybe not even a memory. Am I wrong? Am I way off base? Because I want you to set me straight if you think I'm wrong. I want to know. I mean, I don't know anything, and I'm the first one to admit it."

"There was a time when I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you explain that? What happened to that love? What happened to it, is what I'd like to know. I wish

someone could tell me."

Devastating. Clueless. Lost. Drunk.

And elegant: "The light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from."

Besides the title story, I love many stories, including

"Why Don't We Dance?" about a guy going through a divorce who takes all of the furniture from his house and leaves it on the front lawn as it looked inside the house. A young loving couple sees it, assumes it is a yard sale, sits on the bed, the man comes home with booze...

"Why don't you kids dance? he decided to say, and then said it. "Why don't you dance?"

Surreal, devastatingly sad.

"Viewfinder": "A man without hands came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house."

"The Bath": On his birthday, young Scotty is walking to school when he is hit by a car and knocked unconscious. "The Bath" is a predecessor of "A Small, Good Thing," one of Carver's most famous stories, which was published in *Cathedral*. It is much shorter than "A Small, Good Thing" and ends on an ambiguous note as Scotty's mother goes home from the hospital to take a bath, which is where this version of the story gets its name.

"So Much Water Close to Home": At breakfast, Claire learns her husband Stuart and his three buddies found the body of a girl washed up on the river shore upon arriving in the afternoon for their yearly camping trip. Instead of reporting the body to the police right away, the four enjoy their vacation fishing, eating, and drinking whisky as they sit by the fire.

This collection is stunning, but it is also so threadbare minimalist, completely controlled by Carver's editor Gordon Lish. These are great stories, as is, though later collections have fuller, uncut versions. But yes, read this wonderful collection!
