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Plath Edits Book of Essays on Raymond Carver

Aug. 22, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Raymond Carver — the writer whose minimalist style of short sentences and surface description spawned a spate of imitators at creative writing programs across the country — is the subject of a new volume of essays edited by Illinois Wesleyan University Professor of English James Plath.

“If Carver took the fuzzy dice and hood ornaments off the car, the people trying to imitate him took the wheels off,” said Plath. “There just wasn’t the same depth in any of his imitators.”

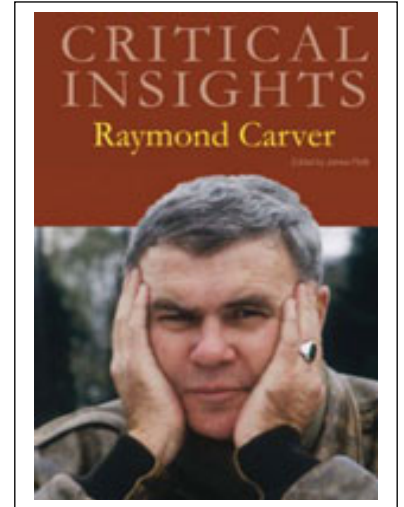
Plath’s new book *Critical Insights: Raymond Carver* (Salem Press, 2013) is a collection of 13 essays summarizing the short story master’s unique place in American literature and examining the major issues surrounding Carver criticism. Although he was also a poet, essayist and playwright, Carver is best known for his short fiction that consistently reflected his own hardscrabble, blue-collar life. His work often focused on ordinary people living everyday lives on the margins of society. Six of Carver’s stories won the O. Henry Prize given annually for the best North American short fiction.

Critics in Carver’s time insisted on calling his literary style “minimalism,” a style short on adverbs and long on oblique hints and even innuendo. Carver resented the term, feeling it diminished his work, said Plath, who also wrote the book’s introduction and contributed two essays, including one on the relationship of Carver’s writings to the paintings of Edward Hopper.

“Carver managed to write a lot by implication,” said Plath. “No matter how many times you study his fiction, there are still backstories of his characters for the reader to discern.”

Carver’s spare style was partly born from practical consideration, as he juggled writing with a series of jobs as a janitor, pharmacy delivery person, sawmill worker and service-station attendant. At times, he was the primary caretaker for his two young children while his first wife, Maryann, supported the young family.

Another of Carver’s innovations was his subject matter, introducing lower-class elements into the realm of so-called ‘high-art,’ Plath writes in the book’s introduction. Quoting a contemporary critic of Carver’s, Plath wrote that the author gives us “access to a neglected part of the social landscape in which people were indeed living minimal lives.”



James Plath



Although Plath only met Carver once, he developed a relationship with him via correspondence. That began when Plath invited Carver to contribute to *Clockwatch Review*, a literary journal edited by Plath.

“He would send back these lovely handwritten notes almost embarrassed to say he had nothing in his cupboard,” Plath recalled. “The notes gradually became more and more personal until we actually had a correspondence going.”

Plath first attempted to publish a book about Carver, who died in 1988, in the early 1990s. Two of the planned essays drew on the papers of Gordon Lish, the editor who heavily edited Carver’s second short story collection. Carver’s widow, the poet Tess Gallagher, felt that it was premature to publish critical evaluations of the original stories when they were not yet available to the reading public.

“I did not include those two essays out of respect for Tess,” Plath recalled. “No one was doing original Carver work at the time, and so I lost the contract for the book and two years’ worth of work.”

Since then, original versions of Carver’s collection of short stories in the Lish edited *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Knopf, 1981) have been published in a book entitled *Beginners* (Chatto Bodley Head & Cape, 2009) and in a Library of America edition of *Collected Stories* (2009). Plath said the publication of *Critical Insights: Raymond Carver* represents a resurgence of interest in the short story master.

For Plath, the book’s publication wraps up the loose ends of that cancelled book contract long ago. More importantly, it adds to the discussion of the humanity and work of a significant writer.

A widely recognized scholar on the works of John Updike, Plath is co-founder and president of The John Updike Society and the author of *Conversations with John Updike* (University Press of Mississippi, 1994). A member of the Illinois Wesleyan faculty since 1988, Plath is also a recognized Ernest Hemingway scholar and has published two books and numerous journal articles on Hemingway.

Plath said his research both stems from and feeds into his teaching. “I find when I use examples of my own criticism [in the classroom] it enables me to talk about the process of information gathering, of idea organization, of analysis, and all the steps that underlie every piece of published criticism,” said Plath. “It affords me the opportunity of walking students through the process that led to the product, so they hopefully develop both a greater interest in literary criticism and, seeing it demystified, aren’t so daunted by their own assigned critical papers.”

Plath has also published his own fiction and poetry in *ACM (Another Chicago Magazine)*, *Amelia*, *Apalachee Quarterly*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Cream City Review*, *The North American Review* and many others. Plath is also responsible for Illinois Wesleyan’s journalism sequence of courses and has served as faculty advisor to The Argus, Wesleyan’s student newspaper, since 1988. The Argus is one of the oldest continuously published college newspapers in the country.

Critical Insights: Raymond Carver is part of a series from Salem Press. Each volume focuses on an individual author’s entire body of work, a single work of literature or a literary theme.

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