

Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Julia Bell No 6: Showing Not Telling

Raymond Carver was an extraordinary writer. Born in 1938 in Oregon, his father was a sawmill worker and his mother a waitress and a secretary. He married young and for a great deal of his life, writing took second place to earning a living to support his family. He worked as a hospital porter, a textbook editor, a dictionary salesman, a deliveryman and petrol pump attendant. His first collection of stories was published in 1976 – *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* – a book which took him nearly thirteen years to write.

After that, Raymond Carver wrote prolifically, publishing many collections of stories and poems. He died on 2 August 1988 and since his death, several anthologies of his work have been published, among them *Short Cuts* – the stories Robert Altman adapted for his 1992 film of the same name, and most recently *Call If You Need Me* a collection of his unpublished work, gathered from library archives, and the papers he left behind.

Perhaps the best book, if you've not encountered Raymond Carver before, is *Where I'm Calling From*, a collection of his stories across four different volumes of his work, with a few extras thrown in for good measure. In his introduction Carver says that writing should be about 'Life. Always life.' This was his mantra. He believed, like all the authors in this series, that the best subject for writing was to be found in the life around us. He writes about ordinary lives and shows us their extraordinary bits.

Take the story 'They're Not Your Husband' – Earl Ober, a salesman, is out of work. One morning he goes to the coffee shop where his wife, Doreen, works, in the hope of getting a free meal. While he's waiting for his food, he overhears some men who are eating at the counter commenting on Doreen's body. They discuss her

weight; make her bend over to get ice cream from the freezer, then snigger at her thighs. Finally, they make an obscene comment about ‘some jokers’ liking fat women. Earl is horrified and leaves the coffee shop without eating his food.

The whole story depends on how Earl responds to this incident. He starts to become obsessed with Doreen’s weight, forcing her to go on a diet. He goes for job interviews and never gets offered work:

He read the classified. He went to the state employment office. Every three or four days he drove someplace for an interview, and at night he counted her tips. He smoothed out the dollar bills on the table and stacked the nickels, dimes and quarters in piles of one dollar each. Each morning he put her on the scale.

Then Doreen loses lots of weight, her uniform is loose on her, and people at work are saying things. When she suggests to Earl that she might be losing too much weight he tells her not to ‘pay any attention to them. Tell them to mind their own business. They’re not your husband. You don’t have to live with them.’

After this Earl goes to the coffee shop again to see Doreen. He sits at the counter, making his food last, watching all the customers at the counter, waiting to see if they’ll say something about Doreen. But no one says anything. Eventually, Earl breaks the silence: “‘What do you think of that?’ Earl said to the man, nodding at Doreen as she moved down the counter. ‘Don’t you think that’s something special?’”

But no one in the coffee shop says anything, and one of the waitresses asks who ‘is this joker, anyway?’ and everyone stares at him, and Earl and Doreen are both humiliated by his question.

What we can learn from Raymond Carver in this story is how to show and not tell. Even from this short précis you can get a sense of how deftly Carver constructed his characters. He doesn’t go off on long paragraphs of description. He only shows the reader the things they need to see, the relevant bits. He cuts to the quick.

For example, when Earl is counting out Doreen’s tips and then in the next moment putting her on the scale to check her weight, there is a very deliberate author guiding our connections here. Drawing our attention to a relevant detail, and saying ‘look at this – isn’t it ironic? What does this mean about these characters?’

There are several ways of interpreting this deceptively simple story and whenever students look at it in class they are always divided about whose side they’re

on – Earl or Doreen’s. Raymond Carver leaves enough room in the story for the readers to decide for themselves – he doesn’t tell us what to think.

Good writers always try to show in this way – illustrating their characters through their actions and details. If you find yourself writing reams of back-story and notes and profiles, then, good, you’re discovering your character. But how much of this do you need to share with your reader? If you find that you’re writing no dialogue or action for your characters you might find it’s because you’re telling too much of your story, and not letting the characters be dramatic on the page. You’re describing them in action, not showing them in action.

Think about how Raymond Carver could have written this story. He could have told us that Earl was obsessed, that he was poor, sad, lonely, and regretful. But the story wouldn’t have been a story any more. It would have been a psychological profile.

Regret, loneliness, sadness: these are all big abstract words. Grand themes. But what do they really mean? It’s the author’s job to try and realise these abstract emotions in a concrete way. To show the reader how someone who is full of regret, for example, might behave, how their inner conflict affects how they act and talk. ‘Show not tell’ is really an exhortation to the writer to dramatise their stories. Make them active, and full of ‘Life. Always life.’

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JULIA BELL is the co-editor of the Creative Writing Coursebook (Macmillan, 2001), and the short fiction anthologies *Hard Shoulder* (Tindal Street Press, 1999) and *England Calling* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001). She set up and managed the imprint Pen&Inc at the University of East Anglia and is the founding editor of the biannual literary magazine *Pretext*. Her first novel *Massive* published by Young Picador in 2002, with a second to follow in 2006. Julia now lives and works in London, where she teaches creative writing and publishing at Birkbeck College.

RAYMOND CARVER was born in Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1938 and lived in Port Angeles, Washington, until his death in 1988. It was not until *Will You Please Be Quiet Please?* (1976) that his work began to reach a wider audience. In 1977 he met the writer Tess Gallagher, with whom he shared the last 11 years of his life. During this period he wrote three collections of stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk*

About Love, Cathedral and Elephant. Fires, a collection of essays, poems and stories, appeared in 1985, followed by further poetry collections, including A New Path to the Waterfall.