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AN IDEAL PURSUIT: RON CARLSON ON WRITING,
READING AND TEACHING

*"You get to be the bad guy and the good guy in your stories:
you have to be."*

Hailed by *Booklist* as "a master of the short story," Ron Carlson is the award-winning author of five story collections and five novels, most recently *The Signal* and *Five Skies*. His short fiction has appeared in such magazines as *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, *Playboy* and *GQ* and has been featured on NPR's *This American Life* and *Selected Shorts*. A former Pushcart Prize recipient as well as a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow in Fiction, his work has been widely anthologized, including in *Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*.

Carlson recently received the 2009 Aspen Prize for Literature, adding his name to a list of past recipients that includes Wole Soyinka, N. Scott Momaday and Salman Rushdie. In the same year, his novel *Five Skies* was selected as the 2009 Reading Across Rhode Island selection. In 2007, he published his first non-fiction book, *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, which features one of his short stories and details the process that led to its creation in order to discuss the craft and practice of fiction writing.

Carlson taught fiction at Arizona State University from 1986 until 2006, rising to the rank of Regents' Professor. Later that same year, he became the director of the UC Irvine creative writing program and currently lives in Huntington Beach, California. Though he has

garnered praise from such publications as *Publisher's Weekly*, *The Washington Post* and *Booklist*, as well as from such writers as Rick Bass, Mark Spragg and Antonya Nelson, it is perhaps Stephen King's advice that cuts best to the chase when he suggests: "Do yourself a favor and read Ron Carlson."

The following interview took place over several email exchanges zipping across the continental United States between Florida and California in the Fall of 2009.

Katie Cortese: You've published five collections of short stories and five novels over the past thirty years, as well as the incredibly efficient craft book that I'm using this semester to teach my first year students something about writing their own fiction. With that history, it would seem you are comfortable working with fiction of any length, but in a 2007 interview you said, "The pleasures and challenges of the longer form have my attention now."

Do you know if a work is going to be a story or a novel when you start on it? What, for you and your process, is different about writing short and long works?

Ron Carlson: I always know when I start a story that it is a story. Sometimes I get one with a few more rooms than I expected and then I'm tempted to just let it go and see where it might take me, but even then I end up with a long story. The novels I've written in the past few years have been conceived as novels from the beginning. My process for working in the two forms is similar in that I work every day, never exactly sure of where I'm going, but including everything I can think of. With a story there is a point sometime in the second week when I begin to get glimmers of possible endings. In a novel the world comes together and then you get to live it through all the days of the writing—such a pleasure.

KC: In an interview with Tayari Jones, you mentioned you liked that readers have been handing *Five Skies* and *The Signal* to their parents, that it has proven a point of conversation for families and friends. I'm one of those people who gave *Five Skies* to my mother and she fell in love with it. She's a woman from as far east as the United States goes and she fell in love with a book about three variously damaged men working on a futile construction project in Idaho. Why do you think that book and *The Signal* have appealed so widely to such different demographics? Are you ever surprised by reactions to your work?

RC: I think it's because each of these books is a story. There is a lot of work in *Five Skies* and a lot of camping in *The Signal*, but I tried to make each narrative sound and solid in the way the elements of the processes were displayed. Plus, oddly enough in literature: work is exotic. We don't have much of it in song or story. Our subjects and celebrations are sort of anti-work. A lot of people remarked on the care the men take with their efforts and Arthur's deliberation of each part of the project might be part of the appeal. I think we're a little starved for things that are carefully done. I know we are.

KC: Speaking about Arthur and his companions and the job they try to do together, *Esquire* said *Five Skies* was a book about men. It struck me too that *The Signal* has several male characters and one significant female one. There are writers and critics who say we shouldn't write outside of our experience. Does that piece of advice have anything to do with your subjects or is there another reason men often feature heavily in your work?

RC: Scott Fitzgerald said – and I'll paraphrase – that there would never be good biography of a great writer, because *if the writer was great, he or she was too many people*. I'm not the men in my stories but I'm part of all of them. You get to be the bad guy and the good guy in

your stories: you have to be. Same with the women: you have to be them. If they become in the writing “other people,” then they lose their truly compelling hold on us. Our lack of tolerance for nuance is best shown in the way that we have as bad guys in stories and film now Nazis and Zombies and Aliens because they are *other people*; other people are simply obstacles in the plot plans of genre stories.

KC: Yeah, that’s true. I guess there’s something about those kinds of characters in the movies that can feel comfortable, maybe because the lines are so clear between the “bad guys” and the “good guys.” I mean, we’re never really confused about whether or not we’re supposed to root for John Wayne. Actually, the American West as a whole seems a particularly fertile setting for heroes and villains and that other kind of character that is more human, someone in between. So maybe it’s no coincidence that you have been described as a Western writer and have set your last two novels in the wild regions of the West—Wyoming and Idaho, specifically. What do you find compelling about the West as a subject and setting for fiction?

RC: I grew up in the West and returned to it and keep returning to it. When I’m in Utah or Idaho or Wyoming, the sky fits. I know the West, some of it, and I’ve seen it change. That world fills me with hope and with longing and a sort of sadness that feels real. I need to be in a place where I can get out of town, not simply over the hill into the next town; I love to see the horizon open as it does in the big places. I love to be where I can sense I’m on a planet.

KC: Landscape is something that comes through really clearly in your work. Take this line from *The Signal*, for example, when Mack and Vonnie hike up to Spearpoint: “They came out of the trees onto a hill of rock lined with lichen above the treeline, the rocks looking smashed and fitted, and they ascended this shoulder for

half a mile until they came to a barren plain before a rocky cirque that like the entire series along the mountain crest could have been called the Throne.”

Sometimes your descriptive tone reminds me of the outdoor cooking scene from Hemingway’s “Big, Two-Hearted River” that you read aloud in class once. You also read out loud the penultimate moment of James Joyce’s “Araby” and one class included a dialogue recital from Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*. Are these writers who have inspired you over the years, or are they just good teaching tools? Whose work inspires you now?

RC: These are three masters, and they will always be masters. I read all the time, more than I did in college, and I’m not sure I ever read a book to take away the lesson, but I don’t think there is a book that isn’t a lesson. I read the new and the old. I read all the vexatious stories in current magazines and I read *Tobacco Road* last spring, a nasty little book, and I read the magical *High Wind in Jamaica* and the masterpiece by Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*. It is incandescent. I read the changing a tire scene in *Cities of the Plain* by Cormac McCarthy every year; I love that book.

KC: There are people out there who say things like, “Ron Carlson is a funny writer.” They know your stories like “Bigfoot Stole My Wife” or “Some of Our Work with Monsters” and they’ve read *Betrayed* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. And then they read *Five Skies* and say things like, “The writing in this book is really sincere.” Of course, comedy and tragedy are not mutually exclusive, but are there notable differences for you when you write one or the other? Does one tone come more easily?

RC: I’ve tried to treat each of my works—stories and novels—with the levity or gravity it called for. I’m writing some odd things right now, but the best work is always reaching beyond its own clever-

ness. You want your story to cast a shadow. Both of my recent novels were written as straight narratives in part because of a reaction I had to the great thickets of irony in which so much of American discourse is now struggling. I wanted each of these two books to say what it meant in the simplest terms, no tricks.

KC: Trick is an interesting word in this context. Many of my students seem to want to write “trick” endings, to go for punch lines. It’s hard to explain the difference between a trick ending and earned humor. I often give them some of your humorous stories, probably because they were my introduction to your work. I love “The Chromium Hook” in particular, and “Keith,” even though that’s also sad. Both *Five Skies* and *The Signal* take on serious subjects in serious settings and feature men and women made serious by their mistakes and their misfortunes. Do you ever purposely take up humor as a subject and do you think you’ll return to it?

RC: I never really left it. What I love about the phrase “sense of humor” is the word “sense.” As I said above, I have a curious story going now about a band which has a chance to record a cursed song and that story is treating me quite humorously. I hope we both survive. And I have a handful of other short work which I’ll read to you when we meet again.

KC: Great, because I think I still owe you a coffee. After *Five Skies*, *The New Yorker* called you “a notable exponent of that difficult literary technique, the happy ending,” meaning to contrast, I think, the tragic conclusion of *Five Skies* with some of your more comic short stories. Would you agree that you’re a fan of the “happy ending?” Is there even such a thing?

RC: Any story extended far enough ends happily.

KC: I love that idea. It seems like a lot of writing teachers usually disparage happy endings, as if they've fallen out of fashion or can't ever ring true. Which reminds me, you've been a teacher for almost as many years as you've been a writer. In what ways does teaching inform your writing? Does it ever stall your work?

RC: Teaching gives you the opportunity to stand with your back to young people and bump your head on the blackboard uttering lucky messages quietly to yourself. I love to teach. Every term for all of these years I've tried to invent my way across the river. It has led me to a lot of models, examples, exercises, metaphors, and outlandish (and patented) drawings on the blackboard. At least once a year I write with my students to try to illuminate some point. It half works and leaves me a start of a story when the term ends and the buildings empty and I'm a year older standing at the window in my chalk dust sportcoat.

KC: Those drawings were actually really helpful. My favorite was the stick people bobbing in their pot of boiling water. I think I remember you saying once that you were in a commercial for meat in Utah. Please tell me I'm not making this up. If you weren't a writer and a teacher, what would you be?

RC: I wouldn't be a model, although they paid me \$800 to carry that steaming briefcase around an office. (It was smoked ham—get it?) I think I would have Ron's Fix It Pickup, a truck full of tools with a small vice on the back bumper and a clipboard on the front seat. Why won't your screen door close? Let me take a look.

KC: At Arizona State, you were at work on a book of poems. When can we get our copy on Amazon?

RC: Ooosh. The poems are working their way toward the surface. I would think 2011 latest. You will be the first to know.

KC: I'm looking forward to them. And that ongoing project makes me wonder, do you tend to work on novels and stories at the same time? What else are you working on now?

RC: I work on one project at a time, with interruptions for notes, etc. on other pieces.

I'm working on a novel about four men. I'm making a lot of work out of this second draft.

KC: What advice do you have for those of us still trying to get our first book out in the world? What do you wish someone had told you when you were just starting to write and publish your fiction?

RC: My advice would simply be what I tell myself: work steadily and choose projects that matter deeply to you, even if you don't understand them. It's a long game. We're writers and we understand we've selected an ideal pursuit, which means mostly we shall labor well out of the world's notice. ■