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On Raymond Carver

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REVIEWS

HAVE YOU LIVED THE RIGHT LIFE?

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?

by Raymond Carver

McGraw Hill, 1976, \$8.95

Raymond Carver's book of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, is nothing less than magical. Out of the mundane lives of a man out of work, a waitress, a postman, a writer, Carver draws mystery and depth. Many of the stories contain an "awakening" from habitual life, but there are no cataclysmic events. Something very ordinary is the key to the change, as if to say "Look, it's been here all along."

Carver's characters are not heroes. At their best they are ordinary people making discoveries about themselves, sometimes disturbing discoveries, always discoveries which reveal their humanity. Often they are people who have drifted into narrow lives or allowed basic questions about themselves to go unasked or to be answered by someone else. Carver's characters find in their daily lives a frightening question—Who are you? But even when the answer is not sufficient for them, asking the question makes them come alive.

If Carver is a stylist he is an anti-stylist. His language is as plain as the lives of his characters. For example, this scene from "Neighbors":

The Stones lived across the hall from the Millers. Jim was a salesman for a machine-parts firm and often managed to combine business with pleasure trips, and on this occasion the Stones would be away for ten days, first to Cheyenne, then on to St. Louis to visit relatives. In their absence, the Millers would look after the Stones' apartment, feed Kitty, and water the plants.

Bill and Jim shook hands beside the car. Harriet and Arlene held each other by the elbows and kissed lightly on the lips.

"Have fun," Bill said to Harriet.

"We will," said Harriet. "You kids have fun too."

Arlene nodded.

Jim winked at her. "Bye, Arlene. Take good care of the old man."

"I will," Arlene said.

"Have fun," Bill said.

"You bet," Jim said, clipping Bill lightly on the arm. "And thanks again, you guys."

The Stones waved as they drove away, and the Millers waved too.

"Well, I wish it was us," Bill said.

"God knows, we could use a vacation," Arlene said. She took his arm and put it around her waist as they climbed the stairs to their apartment.

After dinner Arlene said, "Don't forget. Kitty gets liver flavor the first night." She stood in the kitchen doorway folding the handmade tablecloth that Harriet had bought for her last year in Santa Fe.

Certainly nothing terribly exciting in that. But Carver finds in two neighbors watching an apartment for friends on vacation, the key to a disturbing and psychologically penetrating story of boredom and envy that gives frightening and mysterious undertones to simple curiosity.

"Neighbors" is by no means an exception. Carver is a wizard at adding depth to the ordinary. In "They Aren't Your Husband" an unfinished chocolate sundae becomes the symbol of a marriage drifting apart, and in "Fat" a waitress narrates a story in which she takes an innocent liking to a fat customer who refers to himself as "we" and Carver manages to suggest out of this casual affection that a change is probably taking place in the waitress's life, that she may even be pregnant.

I'm particularly amazed with "Put Yourself in My Shoes" in which Carver maneuvers point of view in a story about a writer who is both the author and the third person protagonist which in effect makes the reader the writer of the story. The danger, of course, is that it might appear too gimmicky, but Carver manages to avoid that all-too-common pitfall by placing the writer/narrator in the easily believable situation of being told by acquaintances what a great story "this" would make. But the fact that the "this" they usually refer to is horribly mundane suits Carver's special talent for finding depth in the everyday world.

What Carver does for his characters and for his readers is to help them ask in the context of daily situations—Have you lived the right life? He brings us to a realization of the meaning and extent of what can be lost, sometimes by mere negligence, and reminds us how little it takes to shake up our lives.

A few of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* are perhaps a little too similar, but with stories this good that is certainly forgivable. And there is a kind of theme and variations substructure to the book that climaxes in the title piece. It does however bring up the question of Where next? for Carver. But that's his problem. Ours is how to get a hold of a copy of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*.

—Rich Ives

CONFESSIONS OF A DOUBLE

BORN

poems by Michael Poage
Black Stone Press 1975
\$7.50 hardbound \$3.50 paper

This first collection by Michael Poage is brief but potent. In the space of twenty-five poems an intense voice emerges, working rapidly to possess words and form images deep in a personal line of perception. Poage's opening poem snaps together on first reading.

COMING APART

Something else hit my mind.
A dream
on the edge of my tongue
sweating words.

I am not alone out here.
There are many of us
and tomorrow
we are moving up the road.

We have a war on our hands.
That's all I know.