

### ***Book Review***

*What It Used to be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver*.  
Maryann Burk Carver. St. Martin's Press, 2006. Hardback \$25.95.

Maryann Burk Carver's *What It Used to be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver* is a reclamation of the role she played in the life of her famous author husband. While Tess Gallagher has been given the credit for being Carver's muse, it was the life he lived with Maryann that gave him much of the fodder for the down and out, working men and desperate women found in his fiction and poetry.

In general, Carver scholars and fans tend to champion the writer's relationship with Tess Gallagher—who does not love the image of the pair writing away in their Syracuse home, phones unplugged, a sign on the door clearly stating “No Visitors”—over the seemingly trite and overdone story of two high school sweethearts with its pregnancy, rushed marriage, and difficult life together. Though this plotline is often a model for Carver's fiction, readers prefer to think the writer's life was just a touch more glamorous. In addition, Carver lore is full of warnings from friends and writers who advised him to get away from Maryann, as if she was a dead weight holding his writing back. Burk Carver recalls Gordon Lish's warning in particular: “If you would just let him go, if you would just free him from the exigencies of his life, there is no telling how far he could go.” Against these claims, she uses this book to assert her love for Carver, her presence in his life, and her necessity in the creation of his poetry and fiction.

Beginning with their youthful flirtation to unexpected pregnancy and marriage—all before she was sixteen—Burk Carver details the minute ups and downs of the Carver romance with compelling, if not wholly believable detail. Her writing at times seems forced, as if moving clumsily between writing for scholars and the everyday reader, trying to please both audiences at once, and the result is at times a difficult play with cliché and convention. One method Burk Carver adopts in the book is listing what she is reading during a certain time, be it for high school summer reading or a college class. These lists work as declarations of her intelligence, and stylistically they mimic the methodical nature of the author herself. Writing about the course “Adolescent Literature” taken at Stanford, Burk Carver writes,

We read Arthur C. Clark’s *Childhood’s End* and John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace*, among other books...December 7 was the final exam. Pearl Harbor day. I went to the exam wearing a brown wool miniskirt and a beige long-sleeved top from Joseph Magnin in Palo Alto. I had on Italian brown leather boots that came up to my knees. My hair was long and blond. Can you dig it?

This passage is representative of the pastiche in her style of writing. Awareness of historically important dates, academic (and fashion) name dropping, references to her alluring appearance, topped off with a phrase meant to signify some moment of larger cultural reference—this is typical of Burk Carver’s attempts to show throughout the text how “with it” she was.

This stylistic mish mash points to Burk Carver’s need to make sure all of her story is heard. Her unabashed admittance to wanting to look good, being up on the latest

fashion trends, and attention to physique may seem shallow in the company of her literati husband and his crew; yet this frankness seems so much a part of who Maryann Burk Carver is, and why her marriage to Carver was successful for so long. Despite her lapses into the seemingly superficial, it is the journey of the Carver family—largely fueled by her patience, malleability and, most importantly, income—that make the book so compelling. Just when things look absolutely miserable, after bankruptcies, extramarital affairs, and severe physical conflict, the Carvers always seemed to get it together and move along, due largely to Maryann.

Burk Carver's book details the earliest days of Raymond Carver's career, which surely will be useful to Carver scholars. This book, however, was not written for those who want to know more about Ray; it was written so that Maryann could let everyone know more about her. Certainly there are points in the book where one is apt to roll one's eyes—"I was sure I was looking lithe and attractive in my new yellow treader pants and a brown striped T-shirt of Ray's"—yet one reads on because the need for Maryann's story to be heard is open and honest.

Recalling their days at Humboldt State University, she writes,

Nothing was more exciting for me as Ray saying, "I've got a draft of a story to show you now, Maryann!" All the magic in the universe gathered in his study when we read and analyzed the first draft of a story or poem, our cups of hot coffee together on the floor beside us.

Readers find Burk Carver showing, through numerous examples and anecdotes, how important she feels she was to Ray, and though not masterful in her stylistics, she drives her point home. Even when she refers to herself as "stoic," claiming to have made every

personal sacrifice to ensure her family's survival, one's thoughts of possible self-obsession melt away into sincere sympathy. At the end of the book Maryann details a last meeting with Ray before his death: she talks about him holding her feet, and her continued correspondence until Ray was no longer there to write. It is clear she never stopped loving him and would relive their relationship in a heartbeat. What is truly heartbreaking is that the story is definitely over. In the end, though Maryann Burk Carver wants her reader to like her and her book, she did not write this story—her first published work, a memoir—for anyone except herself. This is her peace.

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