



No Heroics, Please

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The title's plea speaks eloquently of Carver's character-istic reticence about his own heroism as a writer and a man. His successful struggle with alcoholism and early death from cancer are hardly mentioned here, but a sense of personal frailty and heroics informs everything he wrote. Influenced by the Hemingway ethic, Carver aims for "Truth" by writing straight from the shoulder and the gut. Some passages come close to Hemingway parody, but overall these introductions, book reviews, and essays sustain the moral weightiness Carver attributes to fiction.

Though credited with popularizing stylistic minimalism with a whole generation of young writers, Carver is decidedly old-fashioned in his emphasis on realism and moral sincerity in fiction. His ideal story concerns people whose actions are followed by consequences that matter to the characters and the reader. "Choices. Conflict. Drama. Consequences. Narrative." Turning this formula into writing equally simple and precise is hard work, the hardest for a writer who disdains the careless as well as the abstract. But the unassuming Carver credits his great, if belated success to luck as much as to his own years of dedicated effort.

That effort is demonstrated everywhere in this volume, even if the creative writing, though valuable in understanding his development, is not Carver's best. Still, when his understated and off-hand poetry connects with its subject, the reader feels it. In "Adultery," for instance, an overheard conversation, a photo in a discarded magazine, and the first drops of rain capture the poignant mystery of one furtive afternoon. The early stories also contain much good writing and demonstrate daring and originality in technique (especially "Furious Seasons"). None may show Carver's later mastery, but they show the promise of the mature writer, whose characters and events unfold in plots with an inevitability as powerful and "as subtle as a river current."

All in all, this volume, supplied with excellent bibliographic notes, affords a stimulating look inside the mind of a writer constantly maintaining his balance at the height of his craft.

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