

Creative Living

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Thursday, September 8, 1988 O&E

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Those who would like him to show them around the grounds, a tour that is always accompanied by some interesting tree-related stories, should call the church to schedule a time. Leaf collectors who know their trees are welcome to stop by any time.

Under a spreading spruce tree Harris Olson shows where the branches form a grove where the church holds services and weddings on pleasant summer days.

Gardener shares his delight of nature

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

HARRIS OLSON OF BIRMINGHAM is retired in name only. He can be found on the grounds of the Congregational Church of Birmingham, Cranbrook at Woodward, Bloomfield Hills almost every day during the growing season. The hun-

dreds of trees and thousands of flowers, many of which he has planted himself, are his extended family. He watches over them, cares for them, clips, feeds, plants and propagates them.

The magnificent show of flowers starts with daffodils in the spring and continues through the growing season with peonies, irises, daylilies and regular lilies. There are always roses and beds of impatiens, ferns and hostas in shady settings.

Many people visit the grounds to enjoy the flowers, but only a few may be aware of the many specimen trees that dot the five acres of lawn.

Olson decided to start his tree tour at the Camperdown elm. "We're trying to make our church into an arboretum type thing."

He interrupted his thought to mention that the Camperdown elm is named for Lord Camperdown, who found a tree in Scotland that grew horizontally. "All Camperdown elms are a grafted variety of the Wych elm," he said out of the tree book he had brought along, adding with a smile, "It likes it here."

AS HE WALKED across the lawn, he pointed to two large black walnut trees, noting that nothing grows under them because the roots are poison.

Standing by the building, he stopped by two weeping beech, admired the fan-shaped leaves of the ginkgo trees, and pointed straight ahead to a fine example of a red leaf beech.

"The weeping beech will grow 150

feet tall," he said. There are six on the DuPont estate and they cover a whole, big area."

He was on his way quickly, heading toward an old fashioned crabapple. "I always bring the kids over here so they can see these long, sharp needles and learn to be careful of them." He had pulled down a branch to show one of the needles, a mini-spike, well over an inch long.

He led the way to a cluster of columnar oaks and walked over to another tree nearby that appeared to have collapsed. "I consider this my number one tree — it's a weeping aborvitae. I don't think there's a better example around. When we first planted it, some of the church people thought it was sick."

Looking up at the columnar oaks, he said, "This is a grafted tree. When one of the branches falls out (from the column) we have to get a big ladder and tie it back."

As he made his way across the open lawn, he pointed out several tall white pines, "the tree of Michigan," shag bark hickories with bark so hard, it's difficult to saw, a small tri-colored beech, "there's a wonderful example at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association," chestnuts, pink and white, sycamores, flowering crab, several varieties of locusts, horizontal spruce, tulip

maple, tulip popular, redbud, butter-nut, oaks, willows and apple trees from an old orchard.

"WE INVITE CHILDREN in school (science classes) to come and get their leaf collections here. I would love to have biology teachers call so we can help them."

Then after saying the teachers probably knew more than he did, he said, "I would love to conduct tours for classes."

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Many of the trees are marked and some have been planted as memorials to a loved one. Church services are sometimes held in a magnificent grove of evergreens and the same setting is often used for summer weddings.

Olson said he and some of his relatives had a Christmas tree farm near Muskegon when he was a young man. His interest in trees may have started then. Now, he wants to share the pleasure he has received from a lifetime interest in trees and flowers.

Staff photos by Jerry Zolynsky



To Harris Olson, who likes every tree on the five-acre plot, this weeping beech is a truly beautiful sight.

Carver's greatness deserves more attention

Raymond Carver is dead. He must be, because I read it in a tiny, one-paragraph blurb in the Time Magazine a few weeks ago.

The passing of the 48-year-old short story writer whose odd, flat style transfixed and spawned dozens of successful young imitators and brought the words "minimalist fiction" into our vocabulary went all but unnoticed.

When Carver is mentioned now, he is "the late Raymond Carver" and that is as close as I can get to a confirmation of his death — and I think I'm in the Twilight Zone. What is going on? Where is the affirmation of his life? Didn't anybody care?

There isn't a one of us who writes or studies short fiction who hasn't been influenced in some way by Raymond Carver. He is the creative writing teacher's pet. Because underneath the seeming simplicity of his words lies a whole novel's worth of complexity. His everyday words relate everyday events happening to everyday people — and yet . . .

In "Cathedral" a second husband frets about his wife's having invited her old friend — a blind man — to their home for the weekend. Nothing much — and everything — happens.

In "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" the title doesn't lie. Two couples sit around a table drinking gin, talking about love,

Things come out as the drinkers drink, and love takes on new meaning.

In "A Small, Good Thing" anguished parents, on the death of their son, try to cancel an order for his birthday cake. Their pleas fall on deaf ears as the baker moves relentlessly toward completion.

People say Carver is of this generation of writers what Hemingway was to generations past. Carver himself didn't believe he was as influenced by Hemingway as he was by his teacher and mentor, John Gardner. Carver took his first writing class with Gardner in 1953 at Chico State College in California.

In Carver's masterful book, "Fires" a selection of essays, poems and stories, he wrote, "(Gardner) helped me to see how important it was to say exactly what I wanted to say and nothing else; not to use 'literary' words or 'pseudo-poetic' language. He'd try to explain to me the difference between saying something like, for example, 'wing of a meadow lark' and 'meadow lark's wing'. There's a different sound and feel, isn't it? The word 'ground' and word 'earth' for instance. Ground is ground, he'd say. It means ground, dirt, that kind of stuff. But if you say 'earth', that's something else. That word has other ramifications . . . He made me see that absolutely ev-



book break
Mona Grigg

everything was important in a short story. It was a consequence where the commas and periods went."

There were other influences in Carver's literary life, including (give me a moment to force myself to type this) Gordon Lish.

Lish was fiction editor at Esquire in the early '70s when Carver sent him a story. Lish rejected the first one, asked for more, rejected those and asked for more. Esquire finally published a story called "Neighbors" and after that, many more. And in the process, Lish and Carver became friends.

BUT THE GREATEST influences in his life, Carver writes in the title essay, were his children. In response to Flannery O'Connor's suggestion that "a moment much needs to happen in a writer's life after the writer is 20 years old," Carver wrote: "I really don't feel that anything happened in my life until I was 20 and married and had the kids. Then things started

to happen." Carver writes poignantly and powerfully about his own epiphany. His own moment of truth came for him in the mid-'60s in a crowded Iowa City laundromat when he couldn't get a dryer and he knew he was going to be late picking up his kids, for whom he was responsible while his wife waitressed at a local cafe.

IN THIS essay, he could be a character in his own story. Nothing much happens but everything happens: "I remember thinking at that moment, amid the feelings of helpless frustration that had me close to tears, that nothing — and brother, I mean nothing — that ever happened to me on this earth could come anywhere close, could possibly be as important to me, could make as much difference, as the fact that I had two children. And that I would always have them and always find myself in this position of unrelieved responsibility

and permanent distraction.

"I'm talking about real influence now," Carver wrote, "I'm talking about the moon and the tide. But like that it came to me. Like a sharp breeze when the window is thrown open. Up to that point in my life I'd gone along thinking . . . that things would work out — that everything I'd hoped for and wanted to do, was possible. But at that moment, in the laundromat, I realized that this simply was not true . . . I knew that moment, in the laundromat, I realized that this simply was not true . . . I knew that the life I was in was vastly different from the lives of the writers I most admired."

DURING WHAT Carver called "the ferocious years of parenting," the circumstances with his children dictated something else. "They said if I wanted to write anything and finish it, and if ever I wanted to take satisfaction out of finished work, I was going to have to stick to stories and poems."

I had known a little something about Raymond Carver before I read "Fires." I'd read a few of his stories. I knew he'd been divorced and was living with the poet, Tess Gallagher. I knew the reason so many of his stories centered on drinking was because he had been an alcoholic. I expected a book full of machismo with

a smattering of insight into what made the writer tick. I didn't expect to identify — nor did I expect to cry.

AFTER READING "Fires" I knew this man and loved him, and I can't say that often about (sorry) male writers. There is too often a barrier there — a sign that says, "Here is the writer, open to observation; the person is not for you to see." But Raymond Carver changed all that. He let us in. And in his stories, where not much happens, we feel the pain, we recognize the ennui, we grasp at the small triumphs — and we challenge the word "minimalist."

Raymond Carver's fourth short story collection, "Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories," Atlantic Monthly Press, \$19.95, is available at Borders and other bookstores. But read "Fires" first, if you haven't already.

LATHERUP VILLAGE novelist Tom Sullivan is scheduled for book signings at three different locations in September. Sullivan's first novel, "The Phases of Harry Moon," was recently released by E.P. Dutton (hardbound, \$18.95). Watch for him living with the poet, Tess Gallagher. I know the reason so many of his stories centered on drinking was because he had been an alcoholic. I expected a book full of machismo with