

“Anything Else?": Food, Fatness, and Frustration in the Short Stories of Raymond Carver

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She put a plate in front of him with bacon, a fried egg, and a waffle. She put another plate on the table for herself. It's ready, she said.

It looks swell, he said. He spread butter and poured syrup over the waffle, but as he started to cut into the waffle he turned the plate into his lap.

I don't believe it, he said, jumping up from the table.

The girl looked at him, then at the expression on his face, and she began to laugh.

If you could see yourself in the mirror, she said and kept laughing.

He looked down at the syrup that covered the front of his woollen underwear, at the pieces of waffle, bacon, and egg that clung to the syrup. He began to laugh.

I was starved, he said, shaking his head.

You were starved, she said, still laughing.

Carver, "Distance" 175



Country or city?

Warnes: City.

Late work or early rise?

Warnes: Neither (baby in the house).

Newspaper or website?

Warnes: Newspaper.

Writing or reading?

Warnes: Reading.

Toast or cereal?

Warnes: Cereal.

Let me begin this essay by thanking the editors. Getting their invitation to be the professorial voice for this year's issue of *aspeers* was a nice surprise and provided a welcome bright point in a period that has been a bit wearing for UK universities. Plenty of obvious reasons, of course, explain why the request gladdened me so much. It is always gratifying to find scholars and students elsewhere in the world taking an interest in my writing on food, race, and literature. I find it pleasing, too, to see that others are growing interested in this subject—and not (just) because I'm obsessed with food but also because I believe that literary critics in the

past have sometimes taken less notice of the material world than the writers whom they have examined and that reflecting on food—and turning ourselves, more generally, into what Michel de Certeau once called “voyagers in the ordinary” (xxxix)—can, accordingly, help to address what remains something of a silence in our discourse. Literary figurations of food and eating, after all, are rarely just incidental. Even when they appear marginal, secondary to a novel’s ‘true’ work of psychological insight, they often turn out to be central. Perhaps it goes without saying that, in the pages that follow, I aim to demonstrate the truth of this observation.

But the invitation also pleased me because it caught me right on the brink of beginning my next book. Embarking on a long work is, for me, a time to be expansive—to get the words onto the page without worrying unduly about the editing that lies ahead. So *aspeers*’s request for a relatively informal piece—something more like a work in progress than the finished article—again suggested good, if accidental, timing. It will, I hope, allow me to write in the more open and impressionistic way that I find works best at the start of new research. It will, above all, allow me to consider more subjective matters and spend some time here reflecting on the relationship between my own cultural situation and the research issue that now occupies me. And I am keen to get this done. For my next book will be about US figurations of overconsumption, and particularly of overeating, and the days when Europeans could dismiss obesity as a peculiarly American epidemic are, of course, long behind us.¹

Indeed, I set these words down in a coffee shop that has learnt many of its best lines from Starbucks and that, like Starbucks, seems determined to lure me into buying all manner of foods I shouldn’t: bacon croissants and toasted cheese sandwiches, sweet pretzels and sweeter muffins, coffees larded in infinite combinations of syrups, sugar, and cream. With this observation, however, a troubling question presents itself: Does the international spread of the obesity epidemic owe anything to that other global phenomenon that we long ago learnt to call Americanisation? Is the former, somehow, travelling on the coattails of the latter? For sitting here, just round the corner from Leeds Town Hall, the cliché happens to be true: Statues of Victorian industrialists might loom over our window, Yorkshire accents might remain audible among the crowd, but this coffee shop could be anywhere—anywhere rich enough to support that blend of commerce and cool that marks US culture at home and abroad. The particular ways in which that culture reinvents pleasure, assimilating it into a Puritanical paradigm of temptation and guilt, might affect me very differently from someone living in the United States itself; but they affect me nonetheless.

Or maybe I have just been reading too much Raymond Carver.

1 On the global reach of the obesity epidemic, cf. Belasco 88-94.

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Collapsing Americanisation and globalisation into each other, of course, was never the wisest thing to do and has come to seem even less so since the United States entered what Don DeLillo has one character call the time of “our desperation, our dwindling” (35). You could certainly argue that this new kind of coffee shop—the Starbucks template, if you will—only happened to originate in Seattle and actually has less to do with America per se than with what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri once conceptualised as a new form of “global capital” that extends so far beyond “national space” as to render such modern categories obsolete (279). Anyone wishing to make that kind of argument, indeed, could easily build up a comparison between Starbucks and other global corporations, from IKEA to Sony, to deliver a vision of a postnational consumerist culture with only the loosest American ties.

And yet, as I say, I have been reading a great deal of Raymond Carver lately; and, before I would go along with any such ‘postnational’ argument, it would, I think, have to reckon with all the similarities that we can find between the coffee houses of 2012 and the diners of Carver’s fiction, and it would have to deal, accordingly, with the specific US tradition that these similarities bring back into focus. It would have to deal with the fact that our coffee houses and Carver’s diners both offer menus of enormous length, delivering the “impossibly large bill of fare” that Andrew P. Haley tells us had become a recognised feature of “American restaurants” at least by 1900 (80). It would have to deal with the fact that both establishments accommodate still more possibilities, the diner cooking eggs and the coffee shop brewing coffee in endless, passionately individuated, variation. It would have to deal with the fact that both, diner and coffee house alike, sample freely from different European traditions, placing eclectic hyphenations at the service of what Sidney Mintz calls “our obsessive notions about individual freedom” (124). And it would have to deal, above all, with what I think is the most striking characteristic that these establishments hold in common: the fact that both require customers to resist, to exercise restraint, and to all but overlook vast sections of the menu—unless, of course, they want to get, or stay, fat.

Carver’s first major collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), repays close attention on this matter. Somehow or other, whenever diners appear in this collection, Carver finds a way of suggesting that their menus are traps: culinary sirens, promising satiety, that tempt customers towards the rocky shores of calorific excess. His eyes are trained on the moral power of the frugal order, of the basic sandwich requested in the face of the fattening smorgasbord. As in Starbucks, where they make something of a secret of their regular coffee, Carver suggests that simple orders manage to defy the menu even as they can command moral approval. In Carver, indeed, the diner can appear a rather theatrical space, one in which some customers get to act out virtue,

perform their restraint, even as others fall under the spotlight as they cave in to the menu's delights.

This dynamic—what we might think of as the Puritan theatrics of the diner—frequently grows apparent in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* Nowhere is it more evident, though, than in “Fat” and “They’re Not Your Husband.” These stories, I think, should be required reading for those critics and journalists who from time to



Fig. 1. 2. Interior View Looking East. White Crystal Diner, 20 Center Avenue, Atlantic Highlands, Monmouth County, NJ.

time pop up and try to tell us that Carver was a cold and uninvolved observer of ordinary American life. For they suggest that, if anything, the opposite is true. Literature committed to representing reality, after all, rarely grows as absurd as “Fat,” while in “They’re Not Your Husband” Carver strays into melodrama, providing us with a veritable villain in Earl Ober, a salesman “between jobs,” and a bona fide victim in Doreen, his unfortunate wife, who has to “work nights as a waitress at a twenty-four-hour coffee shop at the edge of town” (27). Further proof of Carver’s moral commitment can be derived from the fact that the plotline of “They’re Not Your Husband”—in which Earl, embarrassed by comments other male diners make about his wife’s backside, forces her on the most joyless of diets—resonates so interestingly

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with Laura Mulvey’s contemporary theories of Hollywood film production. That is to say, the years in which Carver edited and reshaped this story were the same years in which Mulvey, having helped to disrupt the Miss World beauty contest in 1970, went on to theorise that Hollywood, too, manufactured scopophilia: images of erotic female beauty that it furnished for the “visual pleasure” of its tacitly male, straight, audience (15).

And working independently, still languishing in obscurity, Carver in this story grasps the diner counter as a threshold for scopophilia of a more immediate, interpersonal kind. Figure 1 can help us to visualise this. Here, without commenting on the strangers in the photograph (they are just sitting there, after all!), we can perhaps see, with Carver, how the diner counter theatricalises space, ranging a small audience around what is at once a kitchen and a stage: a place where some bodies watch others, to be sure, but also where the former might catch the latter unawares, in moments of accidental exposure, in awkward poses ordained by the exigencies of cooking and other tasks. This, then, is the context for the peculiar embarrassment that Earl feels when his wife fails to provide his two fellow male diners with the scopophilic experience that all three expect from this performative setting:

Earl drank his coffee and waited for the sandwich. Two men in business suits, their ties undone, their collars open, sat down next to him and asked for coffee. As Doreen walked away with the coffeepot, one of the men said to the other, “Look at the ass on that. I don’t believe it.”

The other man laughed. “I’ve seen better,” he said.

“That’s what I mean,” the first man said. “But some jokers like their quim fat.”

“Not me,” the other man said.

“Not me, neither,” the first man said. “That’s what I was saying.”

Doreen put the sandwich in front of Earl. Around the sandwich there were French fries, coleslaw, dill pickle.

“Anything else?” she said. “A glass of milk?”

He didn’t say anything. He shook his head when she kept standing there.

“I’ll get you some more coffee,” she said.

She came back with the pot and poured coffee for him and for the two men. Then she picked up a dish and turned to get some ice cream. She reached down into the container and with the dipper began to scoop up the ice cream. The white skirt yanked against her hips and crawled up her legs. What showed was girdle, and it was pink, thighs that were rumpled and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a berserk display.

The two men sitting beside Earl exchanged looks. One of them raised his eyebrows. The other man grinned and kept looking at Doreen over his cup as she spooned chocolate syrup over the ice cream. When she began shaking the can of whipped cream, Earl got up, leaving his food,

and headed for the door. He heard her call his name, but he kept going.
(27-28)

This is no ‘cold’ observer at work. Here, on the contrary, Carver is at his most withering, empathising with someone who, to some of his contemporary male writers, all too often appeared invisible. He achieves this, allying the narrative with Doreen, not by harnessing her voice or otherwise imagining himself into her female viewpoint but by watching those who watch her. Significant observational details seem to delegate moral judgement to us as readers; at the same time, though, they surely steer us towards one judgement in particular. For it is hard to hear the quiet panic creep into the voice of “the first man” without feeling he is a bit of an idiot. And it is, if anything, harder still not to notice the sheer injustice in the power he and his friend wield, their casual assumption of the right to talk dirty. A whole world of disgust, perhaps self-disgust, crystallises in the “open” collars and “undone” ties of these loathsome customers. This looseness, like the fattening fixings that encircle Earl’s sandwich, speaks volumes about the operation of scopophilia—about who must ‘look after’ their bodies and who can ‘let themselves go’—and about who, in other words, watches whom.

Nowhere, though, are Carver’s sympathies clearer than in the riot of saturated fat—ice cream, chocolate syrup, aerosol cream—that Doreen ladles into the bowl. One of the striking things about this image is the way in which it rejects its own temporal subversion. By this I mean that the image, at least as it is viewed by the three men, subverts time insofar as it seems to compress into a single present both the anticipation of indulgence and its future impact on the body. In this curious image, weight gain no longer follows a temporal sequence—it no longer appears a delayed reaction but seems to occur instantly as the men read the ice cream and Doreen’s rough, oversized legs as if they were cause and effect of each other. To this extent, however, the image, of course, proves misleading. For the fact that the calorific dessert is destined for one of Doreen’s watching customers leaves us with little choice but to see through Earl’s disapproval and recall the terms on which we first meet his wife. It reminds us, in other words, that she is indeed the household’s main provider, working night shift in some godforsaken eatery, and that she is suffering the harsh judgement of the men she serves simply because from time to time, in the course of these exhausting shifts, she succumbs to the fattening, calorific foods that constantly surround her. What the men see as the legacy of greed appears to us, thanks to the wider picture that the story brings into focus, the consequence of a stressful situation that has left Doreen exhausted and in close proximity to bad, unhealthy food.

“They’re Not Your Husband” and “Fat” have much in common; they can, I think, be approached as companion pieces. Several stylistic echoes exist between the two,

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helping them to deliver a mutual vision of the power of temptation and judgement in the American diner. One such echo arises as, whereas Carver gives many of his characters seemingly random and quite insignificant names, those of the male partners in these stories really resonate: Earl is anything but noble, while Rudy in “Fat” is, well, rude. (His partner, our unnamed narrator, reports him recollecting that: “I knew a [...] couple of fat guys, really fat guys, when I was a kid. They were tubbies, my God. I don’t remember their names. Fat, that’s the only name this one kid had” [16].) But Rudy’s rudeness, like that of other coworkers, does not outrage our narrator so much and strikes her as normal; what vexes her is her own unease, her own disquiet, at their callous insults. She seems to feel she is wrong to notice the unpleasantness of the label ‘fat’ and alone in recognising the humanity of the customer who must wear this epithet. At the same time, though, these emotional negotiations run alongside, and hold a curious relationship to, an absurd streak in the story whereby the “fat” man keeps referring to himself in the first person plural:

When I serve his soup, I see the bread has disappeared again. He is just putting the last piece of bread into his mouth.
Believe me, he says, we don’t eat like this all the time, he says. And puffs.
You’ll have to excuse us, he says.
Don’t think a thing about it, please, I say. I like to see a man eat and enjoy himself, I say.
I don’t know, he says. I guess that’s what you’d call it. And puffs. He arranges the napkin. Then he picks up his spoon.
God, he’s fat! says Leander. (14)

“Fat” and “They’re Not Your Husband,” then, follow a similar trajectory. In both, Carver begins by drawing attention to the investment in guilt and temptation in the diner and presents it as a place of bodily judgement. Having established this, he then shows why some of these judgements, and the assumptions behind them, are flawed. Thus, just as the first story skewers the men’s humiliation of Doreen, so the second dwells on the incessant disparagement of the fat man and begins to suggest that there is something compulsive, obsessive, about it. At odds with his own genteel manner, the other characters’ rudeness about him grows so relentless as to seem, eventually, a pleasure all its own. Carver seems to suggest that they find self-validation, self-reinforcement, through their luxuriant horror at his gargantuan, grotesque body. But their disgust, operating in this way, can not only reveal that the personal freedoms of the American diner have a limit and indicate that the choices on the menu are meant to perform a symbolic rather than a practical function. For if, as Maud Ellmann suggests, the “fear of *greed* has always haunted” American “prosperity” (8), then the fat man in the diner—like figure 2’s 1910 cartoon of William Taft—provides a welcome object of

common disgust, someone onto whose corpulent frame others might displace their own propensity for avarice and excess.

But the image, again, misleads. The fat man, after all, disclaims enjoyment. And, by subtle insinuations, the story invites us, in the first instance, to relate this repudiation of pleasure to the curious possibility that he might be hiding someone beneath his



Fig. 2. Keppler, "Oh, Hell! Nobody Loves a Fat Man!"

clothes before then, in the second instance, we realise the implausibility of this explanation, recalling that no one has seen anything amiss. Looping back to our original impression that his use of the first person plural is just idiosyncratic, we are left with a sharper impression of the isolation, the solitude, of this insulted man. All the more powerfully we feel the force of his repudiation of pleasure. Rereading his comment "I guess that's what you'd call it" (14), a paradox crystallises: Here, in this resonant American setting, dedicated to the pursuit of happiness, the customer who looks like he is making the greatest use of such freedoms in fact tells us he is eating out of obligation rather than desire. Overindulgence, his robotic eating of the bread, comes to seem more of a duty than an indulgence. He seems, almost, to be carrying out an inverted hunger strike, martyring himself, surrendering his body to fat, in order to display it to his fellow diners as a fulfilled and cautionary symbol of the dangers of consumerist excess.

This unsettles the terms by which the fat man is judged. Temptation grows unreliable, contingent, here. That is to say, Carver here seems to see that those who

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judge in these stories remain committed to a belief that greed and indulgence are stable categories. The scales of biblical justice, for them, continue to function. Just as Eve’s moment of temptation sentenced her to a long future of submission and pain, so, it seems, they imagine that the fleeting pleasure of greed leads to a long and obese aftermath. For the fat figures themselves, though, life is not so simple. Greed is, for them, beside the point. There is, instead, a kind of restlessness here, a desire for something else. They overeat, not in greed or hunger, but as if under command.

I would like to draw this essay to a close by suggesting that such moments of frustration come to seem all the more important in the light of Carver’s second collection, *Beginners* (1980).² Although, in this collection, Carver pays less attention to diners, his interest remains fixed on moments when his characters reach out for something pure, for something outside themselves, yet find they sully or contaminate it as a result. Nostalgia often animates such desire: Characters envy younger lovers who they happen to encounter, envy their own lost youth, and they stare at their hands, again and again, as if accusing them for their failure to satiate themselves on the objects of their desire. An overall impression of tantalisation duly takes hold. Characters in *Beginners*, for one reason or another, try to touch something out of reach—something purer than themselves.

Tantalisation, in the long story “Dummy,” takes food as its focus. Carver, here, tells the story that lies beneath another insulting nickname, his first-person narrator offering an account of the mute Dummy and his plans to fill a lake on his property with black bass. It quickly becomes apparent that the story is also about the narrator’s father, and the narrator provides two pieces of unflattering information, telling us that his father “didn’t approve of the kidding” yet still calls Dummy Dummy (135) and that the father assumes he will have free access to the fish in the pond (“[o]ur own private pond!” is how he describes it to his son [138]). Far from another unattractive feature, however, the father’s overweight body, when first described in the story, seems almost positive, and the prospect of fishing for the bass acquires for him a bounteous, almost Edenic, aspect. The “fish had multiplied like crazy,” he reports to his son; “it would be like dropping your line into a hatchery pond” (140). Indeed, in a story that emphasises the father’s heft and that is littered with references to eating, and snacking in particular, the obsessive focus on the future meal of caught bass comes to seem striking. The

2 *Beginners*, as William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll tell us, was “the original version of seventeen short stories [...] published, in editorially altered form, as *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*” in 1981. In response to those editorial cuts and abridgement, Stull and Carroll add, Carver “promised his partner Tess Gallagher that one day he would republish his stories at full length” (vii). Under these circumstances it seems likely that referring to the text of *Beginners*, rather than that of *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, as Carver’s ‘second’ collection should now become standard practice.

possibility of reaching into the lake and catching such a pure and untouched food seems the greatest of inspirations to them. Carver, in turn, emphasises the ways in which the natural world around the lake flinches and recedes as the men enter it and the contrast with the tame, inquisitive fish:

We walked slowly across the spongy pasture. There was a fresh, clean smell in the air. Every twenty feet or so snipe flew up from the clumps of grass at the edge of the old furrows, and once a hen mallard jumped off a tiny, almost invisible puddle of water, and flew off quacking loudly.

[...]

We came up to the pond at an open place, a gravel beach fifty feet long [...]. The three of us stood there side by side a minute, watching the fish come up out toward the center.

“Get down!” Father said as he dropped into an awkward crouch. I dropped down too and peered into the water in front of us, where he was staring.

“Honest to God,” he whispered.

A school of bass cruised slowly by, twenty or thirty of them, not one under two pounds.

The fish veered off slowly. Dummy was still standing, watching them. But a few minutes later the same school returned, swimming thickly under the dark water, almost touching one another. I could see their big, heavy-lidded eyes watching us as they finned slowly by, their shiny sides rippling under the water. They turned again, for the third time, and then went on, followed by two or three stragglers. It didn't make any difference if we sat down or stood up; the fish just weren't frightened of us. (142-44)

This, I would suggest, is an Edenic, rather than a paradisiacal, image. For these unthreatened fish, it transpires, are harbingers of imminent collapse. Their behaviour suggests a devilish agent at work or at the very least a perversion of a natural order of things in which animals ought to flinch and fish ought to struggle to elude the angler's rod. Their friendliness might at first seem charming, but it quickly grows unsettling, creating a sense of gathering disaster that grows still further as the narrator and his father speculate that the fish are so tame because “Dummy came down there afternoons and fed them, because, instead of shying away from us as fish should do, these turned in even closer to the bank” (144). With this speculation, the denouement of the story seems guaranteed. Dummy's power over the fish causes psychosis; it amounts to a demonic identification with them and suggests that he shares that lack of understanding of the human that prevents them from anticipating human aggression. In turn, it comes as no surprise that he should end the story in violence, beating his errant wife “to death in the truck with a hammer” before jumping into the bass-stocked lake (149). The father and son return, at the end of the story, to what has

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become a crime scene: “In a minute or two I saw an arm emerge out of the water; the hooks had evidently struck him on the side, or the back [...]. It’s not him, I thought for an instant” (150). But Carver makes sure, here, to render the dredging of Dummy’s corpse a common disaster, a second Fall. “I’m not sure what [Father] believes,” the narrator tells us, “I only know he was frightened at the sight, as I was. But it seemed to me life became more difficult for him after that” (150). “Dummy” ends, then, with a kind of disillusionment that is also a restoration of reality. The miraculous prospect that the father and son have witnessed, of a perfect culinary purity that lay within their reach, has been abolished by violence. And while it destroys Dummy himself and spells ruin for the narrator’s father, the experience also heralds the demise of a kind of bad magic and the reinstatement of the kind of ordinary American experience of food and nutritional desire that Carver registers elsewhere. Trauma returns us to a social world in which hunger remains, somehow, necessarily omnipresent, a constant reaching for a horizon of perfection that eludes it.

The ‘dropped’ meal that formed the opening quotation of this essay resists easy interpretation. Whereas some Carver stories considered in this essay are rather moral, even conventional, this scene occurs in the altogether more cryptic “Distance,” a tale that operates by placing disconnected elements together. (The accident occurs in a story about a young man and his pregnant wife that our older protagonist tells to his new lover, and we are left unsure whether it is his personal recollection.) The couple’s laughing, echoing response to the falling plate as well as their unstated feelings about the baby make the incident appear all the more baffling. As an incident, indeed, it might well appear insignificant, lacking in repercussions. But the fact is that Carver put it, and kept it, there. Both the image and the couple’s odd and stilted response to it must, then, have pleased or intrigued him in some way. And the foregoing discussion has perhaps raised some possibilities as to why. The orgy of chocolate and synthetic cream that Doreen prepares for some unspecific customer might make us appreciate that we have here a comparatively wholesome, comparatively appetising, meal. The uncanny feeling, prompted by their laughter, that the meal is meant more for the eyes than the mouth might make us think about the difficulty that the idea of enjoyment seems to cause the titular character in “Fat.” And this, in turn, might make us think about how, in “Dummy,” food that we can touch heralds violent disaster. Here, in the incident of the dropped plate, an image of food as a tantalising substance is not just restored. It is literalised, and the laughter that it prompts surely contains a measure of relief. For now, after the frighteningly unafraid fish of “Dummy,” the eternal pursuit of the new and untouchable appears reinstated. A reaching for purity akin to the historic reaching for the frontier appears restored. Albeit at a banal level, this elusive, flipping meal might indeed seem like the emerald city beyond the rainbow or like that “fresh,

green breast of the new world” which F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Dutch sailors seem sentenced to defile (171). It, too, forever out of reach, might seem the object of an exquisite American dissatisfaction, feeding as it does a hunger beyond food.

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