

RAYMOND CARVER AND AUTHENTICITY



How does the idea of authenticity apply to Creative Writing? The best writing often does not seem to have been 'written'. It seems that it was always meant to be that way and somehow emerged just as it was supposed to. However, writers will tell you that it is an enormous struggle to achieve such an authentic, 'natural' appearance.

Carl Tighe

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A definition of **AUTHENTIC** (adjective):

- worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to, or based on, fact - e.g. 'it paints an authentic picture of our society'
- conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features
- made or done the same way as an original – e.g. 'authentic Mexican food' - not false or imitation
- real, actual – e.g. 'real ale', an authentic cockney

For example: the great Polish writer Kazimierz Brandys once said: 'The appearance of genius is just talent working hard.' And the Polish Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz said: 'Only that which comes after great effort is easy to read.' In other words, there is nothing natural or easy about writing that reads well (that is easily) or which appears to be 'authentic'.

- What might we mean when we use the word 'authentic'?
- What is an authentic poem or story?
- Does it relate to notions of truth and truthfulness?
- And if so, given that a story is a fiction, what kinds of truthfulness?
- Surely this is more than a matter of facts.
- What is the difference between, say, autobiographical truth, psychological truth, historical truth and imaginative truth?
- What kind of truth concerns us most as creative writers?
- What might we mean if we say a piece of writing is or isn't authentic?
- What makes something written 'ring true'?
- Does something authentic necessarily contain some kind of epiphany?¹
- Is all poetry an epiphany?
- Is an epiphany authentic?
- In what way?
- Are all good poems authentic?
- Does authenticity depend on the reader?
- What have you read that strikes you as particularly authentic i.e. not contrived?

¹ Epiphany - a religious word derived from Greek meaning a revelation or striking realization.

- What role do imagination, realisation, control and literary technique play in making writing appear authentic?
- In what way is authenticity a part of writing towards a professional standard?

*

Raymond Carver (1938-88) was an American short story writer and poet. He was a major writer of the late 20th century and a key figure in revitalising the American short story in the 1980s. He was often described as dealing 'authentically' with small town American life. Here are some quotes from Raymond Carver about his work:

There are significant moments in everyone's day that can make literature. You have to be alert to them and pay attention to them.

Oftentimes a writer doesn't know what he's going to say until he sees what he said.

It's possible... to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow these things - a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring - with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader's spine...

The world is a menacing place for many of the people in my stories... The people I've chosen to write about do feel menace and I think many, if not most people, feel the world is a menacing place.



Raymond Carver at his desk.

Here is an extract from a statement Carver made about his writing life:

In the mid-60s I was in a busy Laundromat in Iowa City trying to do five or six loads of clothes, kid's clothes, for the most part, but some of our own clothing, of course, my wife's and mine. My wife was working as a waitress for the

University Athletic Club that Saturday afternoon. I was doing chores and being responsible for the kids. They were with some other kids that afternoon, a birthday party maybe. Something. But right then I was doing the laundry. I'd already had sharp words with an old harridan over the number of washers I'd had to use. Now I was waiting for the next round with her, or something else like her. I was nervously keeping an eye on the dryers that were in operation in the crowded Laundromat. When and if one of the dryers ever stopped, I planned to rush over to it with my shopping basket of damp clothes. Understand, I'd been hanging around in that Laundromat for thirty minutes or so with this basketful of clothes, waiting my chance. I'd already missed out on a couple of dryers – somebody'd gotten there first. I was getting frantic. As I say, I'm not sure where our kids were that afternoon. Maybe I had to pick them up from someplace, and it was getting late, and that contributed to my state of mind. I did know that even if I could get my clothes into a dryer it would still be another hour or more before the clothes would dry, and I would sack them up and go home with them, back to our apartment in married-student housing. Finally a dryer came to a stop. And I was right there when it did. The clothes inside quit tumbling and lay still. In thirty seconds or so, if no one showed up to claim them, I planned to get rid of the clothes and replace them with my own. That's the law of the Laundromat. But at that minute a woman came over to the dryer and opened the door. I stood there waiting. This woman put her hand into the machine and took hold of some items of clothing. But they weren't dry enough, she decided. She closed the door and put two more dimes into the machine. But I remember thinking at that moment, amid the feelings of hopeless 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 such a 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. 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, what exactly, I don't know, but that things would work out somehow – that everything in my life I'd hoped for or wanted to do, was possible. But at that moment, in the Laundromat, I realised that this simply was not true. I realised – what had I been thinking before – that my life was a small-change thing for the most part, chaotic, and without much light showing through. At that moment I felt – I knew – that the life I was in was vastly different from the lives of the writers I most admired. I understood writers to be people who didn't spend their Saturdays at the Laundromat and every waking hour subject to the needs and caprices of their children. Sure, sure, there've been plenty of writers who have had more serious impediments to their work, including imprisonment, blindness, the threat of torture or of death in one form or another. But knowing this was no consolation.

At that moment – I swear all of this took place there in the Laundromat – I could see nothing ahead but years more of this kind of responsibility and perplexity.

From: *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1989)

- What do you think drove Carver to make this statement?
- Why do you think it is included in a session on authenticity?
- Do you think it feels authentic?
- What details and touches of style give it a feel of authenticity?
- In what way is it 'professional'?

Here is one of Carver's poems:

Luck

I was nine years old.
I had been around liquor
all my life. My friends
drank too, but they could handle it.
We'd take cigarettes, beer,
a couple of girls
and go to the fort.
We'd act silly.
Sometimes you'd pretend
to pass out so the girls
could examine you.
They'd put their hands
down your pants while
you lay there trying
not to laugh, or else
they could lean back,
close their eyes, and
let you feel them all over.
Once at a party my dad
came to the back porch
to take a leak.
We could hear voices
over the record player,
see people standing around
laughing and drinking.
When my dad finished
he zipped up, stared a while
at the starry sky – it was
always starry then
on summer nights –
and went back inside.

The girls had to go home.
I slept all night in the fort
with my best friend.
We kissed on the lips
and touched each other.
I saw the stars fade
towards morning.
I saw a woman sleeping
on our lawn.
I looked up her dress,
then I had a beer
and a cigarette.
Friends, I thought this
was living.
Indoors, someone
had put out a cigarette
in a jar of mustard.
I had a straight shot
from the bottle, then
a drink of warm Collins mix,
then another whisky.
And though I went from room
to room, no one was home.
What luck, I thought.
Years later,
I still wanted to give up
friends, love, starry skies,
for a house where no one
was home, no one coming back,
and all I could drink.

- Does this feel authentic? If so, why?
- Is this honest?
- If so, what kind of honesty is this?
- What kind of person does the speaker sound like?
- How is he addressing the reader?
- What kind of language is he using?
- How would you describe the tone?
- What is authentic about the extract?
- Is there anything that is not authentic about the extract?
- What is or isn't authentic about the poem?
- Is there anything that is not authentic about the poem?
- In what way is the notion of 'authentic' related to the notion of 'professional' in writing?