Written for an English II class, Juanita Weaver’s paper explores the short fiction of Ray Carver from his collection *Where I’m Calling From*. Playfully asking “where was Carver calling from,” Weaver proceeds to suggest that perhaps Carver does not want his readers to fully understand where he is coming from. Each reader walks away from a Carver story with his/her own interpretation, which is Carver’s objective. According to Weaver, it is “actually kind of fun to try to find this calling place” of Carver’s, “wherever it may be.”

I Hear You Ray, But Where Are You?

After reading more than a dozen of Ray Carver’s short stories from his collection *Where I’m Calling From*, I have to ask the question, “Where was Carver calling from?” On the surface, his stories seem very simple. They are about people with average jobs such as hotel managers, waitresses, salesmen, and secretaries, who live unsophisticated, mediocre lives. Below the surface, however, there is always more to be discovered if the reader is willing to put forth a little bit of effort. Carver obviously put a lot of thought into his stories. The least that we, as readers, can do is scratch the surface a little, or better yet, dig deep into his words to see what he is really trying to say to us. This is a task that is easier said than done.

One story that does not seem quite as difficult as some others to interpret is “They’re Not Your Husband.” Carver actually tells us quite a bit about Earl and Doreen if, once again, we are willing to look for the hidden clues. Earl is a salesman who is currently unemployed. He is looking for work, and he does find a sales job, but not a paying one. When he overhears two of his wife’s customers commenting on her “fat ass” (Magee), and saying, “Some jokers like their quim fat” (Carver 45), Earl realizes who his next sales pitch will be aimed at. Not wanting to be considered a joker, he decides to “sell” Doreen on the idea of losing weight (Magee).

Using his sales tactics, Earl cautiously presents his “product” to Doreen. At first she is surprised because he has never brought up her weight before, but Earl is able to convince her that she should go on a diet without upsetting her. “All right,” she said. I’ll try. For a few days I’ll give it a try. You’ve convinced me” (Carver 47). After hearing this, Earl replies, “I’m a closer” (Carver 47). Earl feels that he has successfully closed the deal but if we keep digging, we see something more. John Magee, in his article on “They’re Not Your Husband” for *The Explicator*, says, “Drop the c from ‘closer’ and ‘loser’ emerges, which is what Earl is” (2). Earl is a loser because he thinks that the way his wife looks says something about him. He hopes that if he can successfully help Doreen begin to look better, he may start to feel better about
himself. Another intriguing thought that Magee brings up is that the name “Earl Ober” scrambled is “real bore” (2). I have to agree with this description, and also add that “Ober” sounds an awful lot like “ogre.”

The concept of Earl being a loser shows up again when Doreen tells him that her friends at work think that she is losing too much weight. Now, I think Doreen had a hidden agenda in telling Earl this. Did her friends really think she was getting too thin? I sincerely doubt it. If she had a behind big enough to be made fun of, I do not think losing nine and a half pounds would do a whole lot to change her overall appearance. What was Doreen’s motive for making this up? Well, let’s take a look at Earl’s response: “What is wrong with losing? Don’t you pay any attention to them. Tell them to mind their own business. They’re not your husband. You don’t have to live with them” (Carver 49). It’s as if by saying that there is nothing wrong with losing, Earl is admitting to being a loser. If that was Doreen’s goal I do believe she succeeded.

One common thread in Ray Carver’s stories that sometimes makes them difficult to understand is the way he constructs his endings. Anatole Broyard criticizes Carver’s endings in a New York Times review for what he calls “the most flagrant and common imposition in current fiction, to end a story with a sententious ambiguity that leaves the reader holding the bag” (3). I have to admit that I felt this way when I read my first few Carver stories. They have, however, grown on me. I like being able to come up with my own versions of the endings. I tend to agree with Adam Mars-Jones in his response to the previous quote from Broyard. He says, “Perhaps there is a reason for this. Endings and titles are bound to be a problem for a writer like Carver, since readers and reviewers so habitually use them as keys to interpret everything else in a story. So he must make his endings enigmatic and even mildly surrealist, and his titles for the most part oblique” (3-4).

The end of “They’re Not Your Husband” is ironic because Doreen’s friend asks Doreen who the joker at the counter is, meaning Earl. This whole story has been about how Earl wants to make sure that he is not thought of as a joker, yet in the end, that is exactly how he is seen. Even though Doreen has slimmed down, Earl is still the same old loser that he always was. Doreen’s reply, “He’s a salesman. He’s my husband” (Carver 52) shows that she knows that she has been swindled. “Doreen’s name scrambled is “redone”’’ (Magee 2). Her body may have changed slightly, but her attitude about Earl is what makes Doreen a new woman. What will she do now? Will she tell Earl to get lost, or will she stay with him and try to make the best of the situation? Tom Luce has an interesting theory about the ending. He believes that the unfinished sundaes that Doreen gives Earl symbolizes a relationship that is not complete. Also, he interprets the act of Doreen’s totaling up Earl’s check to mean that she is sending him out of her life (6). I am not sure that I would
have come to those conclusions on my own, but that is the beauty of Ray Carver’s writing; every reader is free to interpret it exactly the way that they want to.

“Ray writes so well, so efficiently and clearly, so easily, that it makes others think to themselves, I can do this. But when we try, we simply can’t” (Luce 3). Ray Carver is definitely a one-of-a-kind writer. I still do not know exactly where he was calling from and I do not think that I, or anyone else, for that matter, am supposed to know. One thing I do know is that more of Carver’s stories will find their way into my hands, and I will attempt to interpret the subtle meanings buried in them to unearth what Carver tried so hard to bury. After all, it is actually kind of fun to try to find this calling place of his, wherever it may be.

Works Cited


