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Carlson was a featured writer at the 2007 Ohio University Spring Literary Festival.

The Wrong Answer

RON CARLSON

A FEW YEARS AGO I BEGAN receiving e-mail queries about my story "The Ordinary Son," which had appeared in *The Best American Short Stories.* They were obviously from students, and they all posed the same question: "I was wondering what theme you had in mind when you wrote the story." I answered the first student truly that I do not write for theme. I had begun the story because of a strange job I had when I was seventeen, working maintenance for a motel on the outskirts of Houston, Texas, the summer I made my first fresh blunders at developing a personal life. In the writing, I tried to be true to the events of the summer by describing them closely, because I had learned that if I did that, and assembled a believable inventory, something else would happen in the writing, something I couldn't foresee. The other thing always only happened in the act of writing. In "The Ordinary Son" as soon as I featured the motel and gave it an inventory—somewhat based on memory—the place began to evolve. It began to devolve actually and it became seedier than it was in life, and then I found (in writing) a very old resident of the motel and a scene emerged. I've written dozens of stories this way: paying hard attention and listening as one thing leads to another.

The student wrote back to me and said *this was the wrong answer.*

Her teacher wasn't accepting this answer. Her teacher wanted a composition on theme, and could I please help. I sat up and wondered what to write to this ardent young scholar. I reread her message and, so instructed, I began to help. I wrote to every student as each e-mailed me—a dozen kids (high school students, I judged, though my story seemed a bit graphic for such a group), and in each message I noted that I had this theme in mind or that theme, yes, some rites-of-passage, and some money-can't-bring-you-love or -happiness, and neither can being smart. These things are in the story. I tried hard for these kids, seriously, because the first girl had caught me out. As I read the story again, I saw the possibilities of many themes. These young readers needed suggestions for the meaning of the story, when in fact *as a writer* I was operating on the principle that the story itself is the meaning.

The meaning didn't help me write it; not a bit. But after I'd scrambled with my memory and the inventory of the life I remembered, I had without question crafted many themes. The premise for the way I've been working these many years is still viewed sometimes as the wrong answer.

I know what theme is, and that is: it is a reader's term. It is a term useful to those decoding text. When the work is all done and put in pages somehow, along comes theme. A reader examines the arrangement of the evidence and draws a conclusion or proposes an interpretation of the sometimes tangled persons, places, and happenings in the story. When I taught high school years ago, I had a skeptical sophomore (redundancy acknowledged) who called it DIM, the Deep Inner Meaning. He said it always as if the phrase were framed in golden quotation marks; it was a phrase he used to mock the proceedings. Analyzing literature (essays, poetry, and fiction) is a minor major industry and great sport, and we've all seen the lights go on in students' eyes when the discussion reaches a certain level. We've also seen the lights go out when they turn to the page once again instructed to read foremost for meaning. Do we read foremost for meaning? Don't answer.

I love what Annie Dillard said about theme to writers in her wonderful book on writing, *that if you scratch an event a theme will arise.* I'm an event scratcher. I've always worked from evidence up, not verdict down.

This means that I don't know everything that is going to happen, that I do not know the ending of my stories. I don't parse my evidence before or even as I write a draft. I include absolutely as much as my memory and imagination suggests.

As I noted in my discussion of "The Governor's Ball," I start with a moment. This means that I don't know everything that is going to happen, that I do not know the ending of my stories. I start with a moment. These moments are all sorts of things; I sometimes call them collisions. I have just finished a story which started because as I stood on a friend's porch in Los Angeles one morning after ringing the bell, I looked up the tunnel of jacaranda trees blooming all down her block and with her tall front garden agapanthus swaying around me like seaweed I felt like I was suddenly in a purple town and I heard a sort of Philip Marlowe character saying, "Sometimes this can be a purple town." That's all. What does it mean? I don't know. What will the theme be? Purple? I'll have to write the story. Joining my intuition with those purple trees and a sense of the voice that said ". . . purple town . . ." I would have to write the story. More recently I went into a thrift store I love in Los Angeles hoping to acquire more of the beautiful shirts some guy my size had been donating there for months, and I ran into a young guy who had just bought a gigantic round oak table and he was scratching his head and looking at the little red dolly they'd loaned him to get it home. He lived three blocks away. I stood in that carpeted alcove and I felt the feeling I've had over a hundred times, of being beside myself, of being there and observing myself being there, and as I reached out to steady the beautiful edge of his beautiful table, I knew I was enacting a story idea. Not the story: the event that if I opened it carefully and included everything I knew while I allowed all of the things that would happen to evolve into things that could happen, I would find something out and have a story. What would the theme be? Kindness? The helping hand at the thrift store? No. The story I wrote has a theme, but I couldn't have predicted it until I'd typed the last page.

WE CAN SEE planned themes enacted frequently in films, where many times a writer is not working alone or without

the heavy guidance of a focus group or a producer's wallet. Everybody knows that the unearned happy ending is an insult, even to a child. Movie endings are generally fraudulent because of the demands of marketing, so the good folks are going to win. If the good guys don't win, then the film is going to be a small art house film and will be the bittersweet last chapter in the careers of all involved. If there is going to be some question about the good guys winning, then the filmmakers can brighten that with the sound track or the helicopter shot or with an audience within the film clapping madly or throwing their hats and laughing, hugging, smiling. Every audience shot within a film (where we see an ardent group of spectators witnessing the main event) is the heavy hand of a bad author come to instruct us in the use of our emotions, because he or she doesn't trust us to understand the scene. Filmmakers don't trust us very much at all, and are unduly concerned about "how the audience leaves the theater." We know how to leave the theater—up the aisle and out the door. It's enough; it will serve.

If a story depends on its ending, it hasn't done its work. This means, of course, that an unearned mordant ending—a more common feature of literary writing—is an insult as well. Fiction writers don't have sound tracks to trick up their endings, but they have other methods, including all of the various instruments of image and metaphor. An example would be a rainbow; rainbows are sound track and always a bright unmistakable signal that the writer has failed. Rainbows, light bending through prismatic water vapor are 100 percent symbolic in stories. Moonlight or rain on the last two pages means the writer has failed. Starlight: failure. Anything glowing: failure. Distant music (a radio down the block, etc.): failure. Evening falling (evening doing anything): failure. Darkness modified by any adjective: failure. A smile in the last paragraph: failure. Appearance of a bird on the last page: failure. A group of people throwing their hats and hugging: failure. There are so many ways to attempt to cheat the reader and thereby fail. *Cheryl looked at me, her eyes glistening, and I could see the starlight reflected there, and she walked away in the rain.* Cheryl may walk away. I sort of hope she doesn't. But if she walks away, she's going to have to do it without glistening and without the aid of the

starlight or the rain. It's a good writer who can have Cheryl walk away without the night or the rain. It's a great writer—or one with real ambition—who can have her hesitate and extend the ambiguity.

Of course, what I am saying with such pretty axioms is that every story must earn its ending, dark or light. (Rain is rain and you can have it if it is precipitation and not meteorological sound track.) Stories earn their endings via evidence. The evidence, in my case, isn't arranged and selected beforehand and delivered to the site. It can only be found in the pure act of writing. One thing leads to another in a world a writer discovers. To plan the evidence is exactly the same as tampering with the scene of a crime. This is oversimplified, and I don't exactly mean crime. Wherever a story goes it must earn its belief, and the person who must believe it is the writer. If I do that there is a chance the readers will come along later, and they have shown themselves to be relentless about finding my theme.

But wait, Dear Professor. When I looked again at my story "The Ordinary Son" I saw that it ended in the rain. It's raining in Houston! The two young geniuses are standing in the light rain and the narrator, knowing they are geniuses, says, "I counted on their being able to find a way out of it."

I bit my lip for a second and then thought: that's okay. It's raining. I'm keeping it.

I answered one of the last e-mails I received about my story "The Ordinary Son" by illuminating yet another possible theme, this time citing the genius father's drafting table that blocks the entrance of their house and creates the theme of work, and then I told the student that his teacher owed me a double milkshake by now for helping her class with its papers. The student wrote back. He was in Montreal, and the story—along with the questions about theme—was on the provincial year-end exams. He said he was going to sneak a copy from the room the next day and copy it in the library for me. As I typed my reply, hoping to avoid an international incident, I had that little thrill of recognition again: a story idea. Some kid raises his hand in Canada and asks to go to the washroom. Inside his jacket are the secret documents.