

Citation metadata

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Date: Winter 1997
From: The Oral History Review(Vol. 24, Issue 2)
Publisher: Oral History Association
Document Type: Book review
Length: 2,212 words

Main content

Article Preview :

By David King Dunaway. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1995. 225 pp. Hardbound, \$21.00.

Readers of these four books are faced with a novel variation on the standard literary biography. In this form, which several of the books themselves identify as "oral biography," the subject's life appears not as a compilation of "objective" facts, but only as it is revealed in a series of subjective interviews with family and friends. Such an approach inevitably raises a number of questions -- questions, for example, about the genre's ability to offer a detached assessment of the author's life, to provide a larger context, and to ensure that its contents rise above the level of inessential trivia or gossip-mongering. Although, the books reviewed here resolve such issues in their own individual way and with varying degrees of success, collectively they tell us something about the merits and weaknesses of the "oral biography" genre and what it has to offer to the field of biography and of literary studies.

Halpert constructed *Raymond Carver: An Oral Biography* from transcripts of interviews he personally conducted with over a dozen family members, friends, and students who both worked and lived close to short story author, Raymond Carver. The work follows a loosely chronological sequence, starting with Carver's early life and career and concluding with the interviewees' reactions to his death.

Halpert's book is well-crafted, for to avoid the accusation of gossip-mongering or one-sided recollection, Halpert balances one interview account against another; many sides of the same story are presented, and it is the intersections and interstices of the accounts that furnish the reader with a sketch of Carver. Unlike a conventional biography, which is presumed to be presenting some sort of biographic, factual truth, Halpert's book gives one an impression of his subject through the memories of those who knew Carver personally. However, this impression is well-realized, for he prefaces each interview with a short biographic description of the interviewees in which he explains their connection to Carver, as well as his own encounters with them. This adds more than a touch of credibility to the interviewees' personal remembrances of decisive events in Carver's life. The outcome is that Halpert's book is able to make explicit the way in which anecdotes and events from Carver's life work themselves into Carver's fiction and thus to create a unique view of Raymond Carver's individual style, both in his life and his life's work.

On some particulars, however, the book is unfortunately disappointing. Most vexing are the holes in the sequence of Carver's life. Although the book loosely follows a chronology from youth to maturity, it never leaves space for a distinctly factual background. The reader is moved from voice to voice, relying only upon the interviewer's questions to generate some semblance of continuity, and certain questions regarding recorded events in Carver's life thus remain. A more conventional time line that juxtaposed exact dates and events in Carver's life with the interview transcriptions might improve upon this problem.

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Gibson, William L. "Aldous Huxley Recollected: An Oral History." *The Oral History Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1997, p. 101+. Accessed 6 Nov. 2020.

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