

WE ALL BECOME STORIES

Ann Elizabeth Carson. Cobourg, ON: Blue Denim Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Trudy Medcalf, October 2013

Decades ago, Ann Elizabeth Carson made a number of visits to an island off the coast of Maine. "The island captured me and changed my life." It was there that she, with islanders and visitors, "watched the sunset...communal witness to the end of day," and there that she, through conversations with a series of island visitors much older than herself, began to listen eagerly to the stories of their lives. The elders' stories, augmented later by the stories of a number of Ontario elders, provide the rich foundation on which Carson layers her exploration of aging and memory, the elders' and her own.

A chapter is devoted to each of twelve elders. Their stories are textured, threaded in an interactive way that incorporates Carson's listening and respectful response to the storyteller, her reflection given to the reader, and that inaudible, internal reflection that you know Carson is making as it continuously informs her writing. At the end of each elder's chapter, Carson, also a noted poet, presents a finely-crafted poem written in response to her experience of the elder and the elder's story. It is a graceful touch, each poem seeming to me to be given in gratitude, the elder's gift of story reciprocated.

Carson clearly delineates the boundaries of her story project. Twelve older adults, many in their 80s when their stories were recorded, women and men of European background who were at the time living in urban centres in Ontario, New York state and Massachusetts. Some were Carson's fellow students in sensory awareness and sensory memory classes, some were students in similar classes that she gave in Toronto, some were family friends. With each in turn she explores the subject of memory – remembering and forgetting, how each has been applied in the elder's life experience, the widely-varying insights that each elder brings to the conversation, and Carson's own journey into sensory awareness. "...the senses, they seemed to be saying, were the basis of everything we feel, and experience, and know."

For me, Carson's work links to this often-quoted passage from C.G. Jung's book, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, originally published in 1933:

Wholly unprepared, they embark upon the second half of life. Or are there perhaps colleges for forty-year-olds which prepare them for their coming life and its demands as the ordinary colleges introduce our young people to a knowledge of the world and of life? No, there are none. Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon of life...but we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning—for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.

Carson has, in a sense, created her own personal “college for forty-year-olds,” with the relationships she began on the Island, when she was herself that age. So many of the lessons learned from her elder mentors appear to have been carefully banked, lessons received long ago that she now applies in her own old age. Lessons that she shares with us, her readers. But the central teaching of Jung’s quote lies of course in the second part. Carson’s elder mentors show her that “what we need and want to remember and forget changes frequently,” and that accepting and indeed welcoming change “to the very end holds a kind of gleeful challenge.” By sharing their stories, twelve elders helped Carson first to acknowledge and appreciate their aging process and later, with cherished experiences and memories of her own, to negotiate the shift to the evening of her own life.

In its careful presentation of the elders’ life stories – banked, distilled, revisited, sparking Carson’s own growth and interwoven with her own epiphanies – this book appears to float free of time. In the words of Meyer, whose story you will find in Carson’s book, “It doesn’t matter how old you are, are you learning something?”