

WE ALL BECOME STORIES

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

REVIEWED BY TRUDY
MEDCALF

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 participants 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?”

Trudy Medcalf’s current research interests include online learning circles for older adults as a way to combat social isolation. Through her doctoral work in education and social gerontology, she learned about the power of participatory research and the importance of engaging elders in the shift toward a new understanding of what it means to grow old.

HARRIET TUBMAN: FREEDOM LEADER, FREEDOM SEEKER

Rosemary Sadlier
Toronto: Dundurn, 2012

REVIEWED BY ROWENA I.
ALFONSO

In *Harriet Tubman: Freedom Leader, Freedom Seeker*, Rosemary Sadlier paints a portrait of an escaped slave who became a leader of the Under-

ground Railroad, the network of abolitionists who ferried runaway slaves from the United States to Canada. While much has been written about Tubman as a heroine of American history, Sadlier's contribution is her successful attempt to place Tubman within the context of Canadian women's history. Harriet Tubman ran away from slavery in Maryland to Pennsylvania in 1849 and arrived in Canada in 1850. In her lifetime, Tubman made approximately nineteen illicit trips across the border and rescued over 300 enslaved African Americans. Demographics, Sadlier maintains, was a key factor in Tubman's decision to bring enslaved runaways all the way to Canadian cities as opposed to staying in the American North. She writes, "St. Catharines was a significant centre for the reception of black people on the Underground Railroad, with an African-Canadian population of over 1,000 out of a total population of about 7,000." Sadlier uses oral family histories, interviewing descendants of Tubman in the U.S. and Canada, to supplement archival documents charting the different routes taken by Tubman in her underground journeys.

Sadlier emphasizes the barriers that Tubman overcame not only as a slave but also as a woman. She states, "Running away was not the sort of thing that black women usually did to resist slavery. It tended to be a man's form of resistance. Because of the stake that women had in the care of their children, or because they were working so closely supervised in the master's house, the absence of enslaved women would be noticed quickly." Yet even with such disadvantages, Tubman managed to liberate herself and many others. Sadlier highlights little-known aspects of Tubman's life, including her service in the Union army as a nurse, a spy, and a scout. During the Civil War,

Tubman led a raid on the Combahee River that freed over 750 enslaved African Americans. According to Sadlier, "This made Harriet Tubman the first woman to lead a military assault in American history."

This biography falters, however, in its vague claims about slavery in general. For instance, Sadlier argues,

Due to the way that enslaved African women were forcibly taken, the children the women bore could not just be their child, but could also be their sibling, their grandchild, or their cousin. It was about violence against the body, control, and incest.

Sadlier provides no further explanation, leaving the reader to infer the meaning of the statement. This assumes that the reader is already well-versed in the history of sexual violence in the antebellum American South.

A similarly problematic passage approaches the issue of coerced sexual relations between masters and their female slaves from the point of view of male slaves. Sadlier asks, "What did this mean to his sense of self as a protector when he could not intervene in the treatment of his wife?" Instead of stressing the violation of a woman's body during rape, Sadlier shifts the focus to the loss of the enslaved man's rights as a husband.

Another questionable claim deals with differences in complexion among enslaved African Americans. Sadlier insists,

Having the lighter skinned slaves in the house to do the lighter work and the darker skinned slaves in the fields was due to the fact that the lighter ones were the owner's children. It also had the effect of further colourizing class. In trying to

find ways to further care for one's own children, white plantation owners supported the establishment of the 'black' universities where their offspring could be educated.

This unclear assertion raises some unanswered questions. What does 'colourizing class' mean? Frederick Douglass, for example, the son of a white father and an enslaved black mother, belonged to the category of 'lighter skinned slaves.' Despite his complexion, however, he was forced to labour and received no special privileges from his white parentage. The mention of 'black universities' is strange because it was illegal for enslaved African Americans to read or write in the antebellum period. Black universities were not established until *after* the Civil War so plantation owners could not have been the ones supporting them.

In spite of the ambiguous generalities made about slavery, when it comes to the specificities of Tubman's life itself, Sadlier's biography is well-researched. What emerges is a balanced portrait of Harriet Tubman, runaway slave, Underground Railroad leader, and a brave Canadian woman.

Rowena I. Alfonso is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on African Americans and racial discrimination in post-WWII Buffalo, New York. She currently teaches the history of the American Civil War at the University of Toronto Scarborough.