



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Five Skies

by Ron Carlson



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Preface

Ron Carlson "is one of the best-kept secrets in American letters," writes *Bookmarks*. "He's considered one of the best stylists working today, his name uttered along with those of Wallace Stegner, Thomas McGuane, Jim Harrison, Kent Haruf, and other writers who explore the terrain and unique spirit of the American West." A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts creative writing fellowship and "master of the short story" (*Booklist*), his distinguished oeuvre includes five collections of short stories, six novels, two poetry collections, one work of nonfiction, and appearances in many "Best Of" anthologies. *Five Skies* is the story of three men working a doomed construction project in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho. "In such traditionally masculine genres as private eye mysteries, techno-thrillers ... and 'hard' science fiction, there is one common theme: Men at Work," writes Carlson fan Michael Dirda in *The Washington Post*. "If one invests any work—building a ramp or writing a novel—with sufficient attention, care and reverence, the result can be a kind of prayer." Writes *Entertainment Weekly*: "Ron Carlson's beautifully crafted and emotionally wrenching novel about nonverbal but deep-feeling males in flyover country is more refreshing than an ice-cold Coors."



"Everything he'd put together for weeks was now loose in his heart and the pieces were sharp."

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining NEA Big Read.



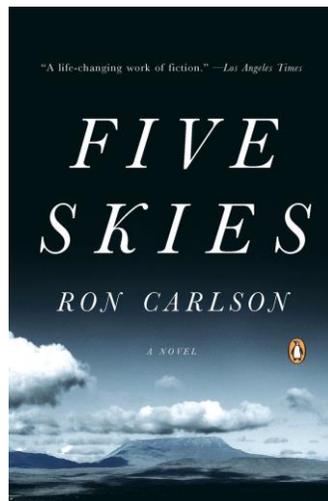
About the Book

"Regardless of how tech savvy we are, we are from a place and we live in a place. I've always used place or setting to find my stories." — Ron Carlson in superstition [review]

In the mountain desert plains of southern Idaho, a ranch foreman hires two drifters—a Hollywood stunt engineer and a 19-year-old runaway—to set up camp and spend a summer constructing a motorcycle ramp and spectator bleachers for a publicity stunt to launch a female daredevil across a deep river gorge. The three strangers are buoyed by hard work done well and, though they don't talk much, slowly begin to share past wounds and deep-felt regrets that haunt their days and nights. A sense of omnipresent foreboding runs through the narrative of Ron Carlson's novel *Five Skies* and its austere, isolated landscape. "Against our transient human sorrows Carlson subtly juxtaposes the ongoing natural world — the skies of Idaho, the steep gorge with the rushing river at its bottom, the dark starry nights, the omnipresence of death, when rabbits scream as a hawk strikes" (*The Washington Post*).

To build the ramp, the three men clear brush from the site, dig holes for posts, smooth asphalt for the runway and construct a fence along the canyon's edge. They wake early each morning to the smell of fresh coffee and a hearty breakfast sizzling on the grill. In his mid-60s and the former foreman of the nearby Rio Difficulto ranch, Darwin Gallegos is managing this job at the request of his former employer, Biff, and does all the cooking. When they need materials, the men drive their flatbed truck into Mercy, the nearest town, where—not long after the job began—they had to take Ronnie Panelli, the young kid, to attend to a bad injury to his shoulder. Mercy is home to Traci, the girl Ronnie takes a shine to, and her violent ex-boyfriend who sees Ronnie as a threat. Arthur Key, a large, strong, well-respected engineer taking a break from his life back in California, fills out the third part of the trio. He looks after Ronnie like an older brother. "The men do what they have to do, up against the real facts of the place and the day," Carlson told *New West*. "I wanted their reactions and interactions to be what men might do, not what characters serving a story might do."

Arthur wishes they were building a bridge instead of a ramp for what seems to him like a jump doomed to fail. With a reputation for dependable and safe structures to support film stunts, he's been known to walk away from a job when



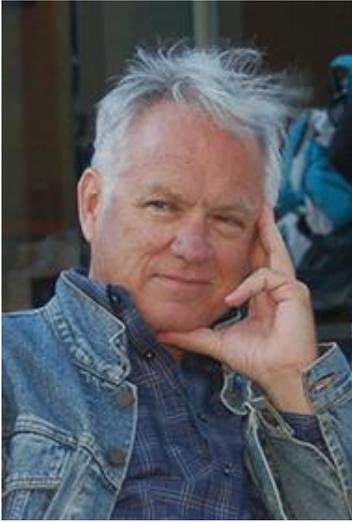
he thought the project might jeopardize lives. He's burdened with a deep guilt at failing to look after his younger brother who recklessly signed up to do a film stunt and died on the set. "I wanted [Arthur] to be a consummate craftsman/engineer who could deal with any broken thing in the real world, but I also knew he would be locked up, first as a man, and then by his past," Carlson told *New West*. "He can read a blueprint, but his heart is trickier, more coded, and he's learned not to trust it."

Darwin, who's managing the ramp project and has lived in the area for years, is coping with his own despair. He recently lost his longtime, beloved wife to a small plane accident and is plagued with a simmering anger and spiritual emptiness. "He doesn't wish to be healed, but long days of physical labor help him, as they do Arthur" (*The Washington Post*). "Oddly enough in literature: work is exotic," said Carlson. "We don't have much of it in song or story" (*Juked*).

In many ways, it is the teenager, Ronnie, who gives the other two men hope as they take him under their wing. A former petty thief, Ronnie fills them with pride as he learns how to operate the machinery and use the tools and becomes a fine carpenter, all the while learning to believe in himself and show restraint. "I wanted these to be simple men, each hauling his life forward as well as he could," says Carlson. "They have been reduced by their histories, and they are weary or incapable of subterfuge. Sometimes, all you've got is the day, and I tried to use the days of their time together to test them, to see how they might emerge" (Penguin). "*Five Skies* is like one of those heartbreaking Raymond Carver stories in which a luckless character catches a glimpse of something better, a small moment of rightness about the world, and, instead of cheering us, this glimmer of hope makes us even more anxious—because we know it can't possibly last" (*The New York Times*).

About the Author

Ron Carlson (b. 1947)



Ron Carlson (photo: Tracy Hall)

"There is terrific value in a good day's work, committed carefully." — Ron Carlson in *New West*

Ron Carlson was born in Logan, Utah, and grew up in Salt Lake City, fishing and camping every summer with his father, a welding engineer who worked on large structures. His parents were from big farming families in South Dakota; his dad went to Utah State

University on the G.I. Bill when he got out of the

Navy after the war. "He loved the west and its history," said Carlson. He "told me about the famous accidents in building design, bridges and hotel balconies. His drawings were beautiful" (*Penguin*). Carlson's mother was "a word person, a real quipster" (*Publishers Weekly*). In the 1950s, an era of contests, she was known for her winning jingles and poems and epigrams for various product promotions. "She won my bicycle, my basketball, records and a hi-fi and later some money. She loved words."

Carlson grew up across the street from a park. "My brothers and I played a lot of baseball and football and pickup games of all sorts. We had friends and bicycles and a railroad track and even a river; it was perfect." The City of Salt Lake paid Carlson to water the park when he was 16. "I could do most of the job barefoot." In college, he worked as a fry cook—"My copy of *Othello* is greased up pretty good from that period"—and as a resident advisor in the dorms; as a senior, he was a night watchman at a nearby college. Writing and reading, however, he came to on his own at a young age. "I always loved stories and as soon as I saw some Tarzan movies and those old monster movies ... and Mrs. Ballstead read us 'Leiningen Versus the Ants' and 'The Most Dangerous Game' in fifth grade, I was a goner," writes Carlson. "I wrote skits, all of them richly derivative: there was always a jungle and a monster and a dangerous cliff."

After receiving his master's degree in English from the University of Utah, Carlson taught English and creative writing at a Connecticut high school for ten years, during which he published his first, critically acclaimed novel, *Betrayed by F. Scott Fitzgerald* (W.W. Norton, 1977). In 1981, he returned to Utah to write fiction and teach for state

arts councils in Utah, Idaho, and Alaska. "When I'm in Utah or Idaho or Wyoming, the sky fits.... That world fills me with hope and with longing and a sort of sadness that feels real.... I love to be where I can sense I'm on a planet" (*Juked*).

In 1986, he joined the faculty of Arizona State University, where he remained the director of the creative writing program for 20 years until he took a similar position at the University of California, Irvine. He has a legion of devoted former students, including Pulitzer Prize-winning author Adam Johnson, who enrolled in Carlson's class after years as an industrial construction worker. Carlson's class "was the only epiphany in my life, honestly," he told the *The New York Times*. "All my life, I'd been told that I was an average student, a daydreamer, an exaggerator, a rubbernecker. In [Carlson's] class, all of those were attributes." Writes author Tayari Jones, "His stamp on my work is so indelible that I sometimes call myself, as his protégé, a 'Carlsonite'.... Yet just as valuable as his instruction about which words to set next is his guidance on the life of an author" (*Cosmonauts Avenue*). More than a few of Carlson's students have remarked on his vivid and sometimes confusing blackboard illustrations of the craft of fiction. "I would remind any of my old students," says Carlson, "that all of those drawings are copyrighted!"

A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts creative writing fellowship and hailed by *Booklist* as a "master of the short story" with five story collections to his credit along with six novels, a book on craft, and two books of poetry, Carlson feels comfortable writing in both short and long form. "The opportunities in a novel are so different from those in a story," Carlson explains. "The world is larger and requires patience in every way. The writing isn't full of sudden surprises, but discoveries that evolve credibly over time" (*Penguin*). While he continued to write short stories, there was more than a 25-year gap between the publication of *Five Skies* in 2007 and his previous novel. "I don't feel like there's been any time between anything," he told the *Los Angeles Times* after *Five Skies* appeared. "I just fell so deeply in love with the short story. Finally, I had the material I needed to get the novel right."

Filled with as much poetry as prose, Carlson's writing office "is a cozy space filled with his own artwork and vintage curiosities that he scours thrift shops for: a 1950s adding machine, a pair of wooden duck decoys, a stack of vintage American comic books" (*Publishers Weekly*). He has two thrift store paintings that his sons modified and sent him that make him smile: one of a cowboy and an asteroid and one of a deer café full of animals. "I have a spider on a string over my computer who descends whenever I'm

Skyping with my grandsons," he said. "You tell them there was a spider here earlier and you look to the side and secretly lower the arachnid and you'll hear their sweet voices warning you: 'Grandpa! Grandpa!'" Carlson is a writer, teacher, family man and Westerner, but perhaps most of all, he's an optimist. "Any story extended far enough," he says, "ends happily" (*Juked*).

Discussion Questions

1. Why has Ron Carlson titled the novel *Five Skies*? Why does Arthur Key tell Harry, when he asks what it's like in Idaho, "There's five skies, Harry. . . . There's five skies every day"?
2. SPOILER ALERT: At the beginning of the job, Arthur tells Darwin that the plans "are wrong from top to bottom. But it doesn't matter, does it? I mean, somebody's going to get killed out here. . . . Right here. That's all this means." Why does Key feel so strongly that someone will be killed here? Is Ronnie's death in some sense fated? Is his death sacrificial?
3. When Key tells Ronnie "We'll have a little supper here and then find [Traci] so you can give her your note, and we'll go back to camp and work another week," the narrator comments that "the sentence sounded like good work itself, sane and filled with promise." What is it about "good work," a job done right, that is so satisfying in the novel? In what ways is work "sane and full of promise" for Ronnie, Darwin, and Key? What does it give them? In what ways is the novel itself both a story about and an embodiment of "good work"?
4. Why is it so difficult for Arthur to tell his story? Why does he feel "simplified and quiet" after he finally does tell it to Darwin?
5. How do each of the main characters—Key, Darwin, and Ronnie—change over the course of the novel? In what subtle ways do they help one another?
6. Why do Key, Darwin, and Ronnie find it so difficult to talk about the pain in their pasts? What do they fear? How is each of them transformed when they are able to talk about their pasts?
7. SPOILER ALERT: After Key burns down the ramp that they've spent all summer building, Darwin asks him, "What did you do?" Key replies: "Woke up." What does he mean by this? What kind of awakening has he experienced? In what sense was he asleep, or dreaming, before this moment? How are we to understand Key's waking in relation to Darwin's statement, farther down the same page, that Ronnie "didn't wake up"?
8. Does Arthur Key attain a kind of redemption at the end of the novel? Has he forgiven himself for his brother's death and his own adultery?
9. SPOILER ALERT: When the promoters say that the jump will happen "barring an act of God," Key says, "He doesn't act out here. It's just us." Yet when he burns down the stunt ramp, Key thinks to himself that "this was already an act of God, regardless of the weather." How are we to understand these two statements? How do Darwin and Key feel about God?
10. What does *Five Skies* as a whole suggest about the relationship among grief, memory, work, talk, and friendship?

Credits

Five Skies discussion questions provided with permission of Penguin Random House.

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The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



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