

Gordon Lish and his Influence

Gordon Lish is perhaps best known as the authoritative, and thus controversial, editor of Raymond Carver, among numerous other authors. This characterization however, does a grave injustice to the scope of Lish's influence. Indeed, I would argue that no man has had a greater influence on the today's literary landscape. A prolific author in his own right, Lish also served as editor, publisher, and teacher to some of the most significant voices of the latter-half of the 20th century, as well as those of the 21st. With Lish, American publishing saw an unprecedented (and since unduplicated) output of challenging art by a major corporation, the occurrence of which came as direct result of one man's artistic vision. It is these books, which Lish published, wrote, or otherwise influenced, which are the subject of my collection.

In 1977, Gordon Lish left his position as Senior Editor of Esquire Magazine and accepted a job of the same title at Alfred A. Knopf. He worked at Knopf for eighteen years until parting ways in 1995, having assembled what is arguably one of the greatest editorial runs in the history of publishing. During these eighteen years Lish published many of the most memorable voices in contemporary fiction, many of whom he published for the first time. Among the authors who Lish brought into publication are: Raymond Carver, Don DeLillo, Amy Hempel, Barry Hannah, Cynthia Ozick, Joy Williams, and UMass's own, Noy Holland. What is perhaps most notable about Lish's time at Knopf however, is the level of freedom he was given in determining what Knopf would publish. As is the case with all of the major New

York publishing houses, Knopf is a corporation driven by revenue. It is therefore perhaps Lish's greatest achievement that he was able to get such a wide range of voices into print, from the accessible to the experimental, via one of the most widely read venues in America.

When I look back at catalogue released during Lish's time at Knopf, it is alarming to consider how many of these books would never have been published without Lish's influence. Lish frequently and successfully advocated for books which, for one reason or another, did not meet the expected norms of the American publishing houses. Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, now an indivisible part of the contemporary literary cannon, was en route to being rejected at Knopf until Lish threatened to quit were it not published.

During his run with Knopf, Lish accumulated an unprecedented level of freedom as regards the books published by Knopf. The commercial successes of Carver, DeLillo, and Ozick, among others, allowed Lish to turn his attention to other authors who otherwise would have likely been neglected. For one, Lish managed to publish a number first books by authors, a practice which major publishers generally avoided. Lish edited the now famous literary journal, *The Quarterly*, which, with its thirty-one issues, introduced America to a wider range of literary voices. During his time at Knopf Lish published a number of novellas, which due to printing costs were often rejected by major publishers, as well as some of the first books of micro-fictions (stories of approximately 500 words or less).

Perhaps most notably, he also published a number of books then labeled "experimental," but which we now recognize as any work which falls outside the

distinction of “realism.” Books with multiple narrators, nonlinear chronologies, or surreal landscapes were published in runs of 50,000, or more. Canadian author Ken Sparling’s first novel, *Dad Says He Saw You At The Mall*, is an apparently plot-less novel, written in over 500 disconnected snippets, which depicts the routinized lives of Ken Sparling and his wife and child. Ben Marcus’s *The Age of Wire and String* is a series of linked stories presented in the form of a handbook wherein the author redefines words such as dog, automobile, and weather, rendering an entirely implausible yet singular world.

While Lish’s contributions as a publisher were great, his contributions as an editor and teacher were perhaps even greater. It is staggering when I consider not only the influence Lish had on his own students, but the respective influence those writers have had their own students and colleagues. Former Lish students such as Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison served as seminal figures for the popular literary style of the 80s, minimalism. It seems that former Lish students are coming to dominate the circles in which creative writing gets taught, thus proliferating Lish’s teachings to another generation. Former students Ben Marcus and Sam Lipsyte direct Columbia’s MFA program in Creative Writing, Brian Evenson directs the Literary Arts program Brown, Mary Robison, Padgett Powell, Richard Ford, Amy Hempel, and Michalel Martone, among numerous others, are Creative Writing faculty members at various American Universities. Former Lish students Noy Holland and Sam Michel teach in Umass’s own Creative Writing program.

In considering today’s literary landscape, the influence exerted by Lish strikes me as unparalleled. In my own studies, I have felt his influence in traceable

and wholly tangible ways. I have personally taken courses from two Lish students, as well as from three second-generation Lish students (students of students of Lish). As an aspiring writer, I have found that the most valuable exercise in improving my writing is my reading. I am an avid reader, and when I find an author who resonates with me particularly I pursue that writer deeply. I have found that many of my favorite writers were once Lish students, colleagues, or fit in some other way into his specific literary lineage. And while many of the authors Lish published and taught are still widely accessible, many others have been forgotten, remaindered, or were never reprinted. Should I be selected to receive this award, I would be able to search out those books that have since fallen into obscurity. I have compiled a list of over one hundred books that Lish either published, edited, or in some obvious way influenced. This award would allow me to further my collection, my library, the most important asset an aspiring writer might possess.

Works Cited

1. Broun, Hob. *Inner Tube: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1985. Print.

This book is a perfect example of a great writer who, for whatever reason, has found his books largely out of print. This book, along with at least four others, was published during Lish's run at Knopf. I found *Inner Tube* in a remainders bin in the Harvard Square bookstore. Broun's *Cardinal Numbers* is high on my wish list.

2. Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1981. Print.

This book has become a seminal piece of the contemporary literary cannon. It is perhaps Carver's most famous collection. The titular story actually appeared in the *New Yorker* several years in two versions: Carver's unedited manuscript, alongside the version with Lish's edits. For Lish enthusiasts like myself, it was fascinating to see the editorial mind at work.

3. Crawford, Stanley G. *Log of the S.S. The Mrs Unguentine*,. New York: Knopf, 1978. Print.

Stanley Crawford has actually taught in UMass's MFA Program as recently as last year. This is a beautiful book, and one which likely would not have been published were it not for Lish, and certainly not through such a major venue. It has since been reprinted by several smaller presses. In this surreal novel, a family subsists for forty years on a giant land-covered barge, tending gardens, inventing an artificial forest, and even raising a child. The sparseness of the prose here is emblematic of Lish's pen, while the humor and honesty are certainly unique to Crawford.

4. DeLillo, Don. *Players*. New York: Knopf, 1977. Print.

One of DeLillo's earlier, and in my opinion finer, novels. Published near the beginning of Lish's editorial run at Knopf. DeLillo dedicated the book Lish, his longtime friend. The book anticipates themes such as consumerism and terrorism that appear in later DeLillo novels such as *Underworld* and *Mao II*.

5. DeLillo, Don. *Running Dog*. New York: Knopf, 1978. Print.

One year after the former, appeared this book. I bought these books from a small bookshop on Cape Cod and read them in one week, mostly on the beach. I find it interesting to compare these earlier DeLillo works with his more recent novels. I find the earlier books to feel somehow riskier; they are more demanding on a sentence level and are absent of some of the sentimentality of his later works (such as *Falling Man*).

6. Evenson, Brian. *Altmann's Tongue: Stories and a Novella*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Print.

I adore this book. At the time of its publication, there was a great deal of controversy surrounding *Altmann's Tongue*. This being Evenson's first book, he was famously excommunicated from the Mormon Church after refusing to deliver a promise not to publish future books. I am confident that no other major publishing house would have taken the risk on this book. These stories are meditations on violence and isolation,

with a singular moral landscape reminiscent of Kafka's or Beckett's. This book was also reviewed by my favorite philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, this in fact being the only work of fiction Deleuze ever wrote a blurb for.

7. Hannah, Barry. *Airships*. New York: Knopf, 1978. Print.

This book of stories is now a contemporary classic. For my money, this is some of the finest writing as regards the Vietnam War to ever see print. This is one of those books that frightens me to consider what would not exist today had this book not been published. Barry Hannah has amassed such a school of imitators, that I find myself recognizing Hannah imitations almost as often as I do imitations of Hemingway. Hannah died three years ago this month, and with this the literary world suffered a grave loss.

8. Hannah, Barry. *Ray*. New York: Knopf, 1980. Print.

Barry Hannah's only novella, and, along with *Airships* often considered Hannah's greatest. This book is told entirely through an assortment of short (often less than a page) scenes. Lish published the book with Knopf in 1980. The book is dedicated to Lish, and a character based on Lish appears in the book, named Captain Gordon.

9. Hempel, Amy. *Reasons to Live: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1985. Print.

This is one of my all-time favorite collections, from one of my all-time favorite writers. This is one of those instances where Lish managed to convince Knopf to take a risk on a short book (116 pages) by an author who had not previously published a book. Many of these stories first appeared in *The Quarterly*, and the collection itself was dedicated to Lish.

10. Holland, Noy. *The Spectacle of the Body: Stories*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1994. Print.

These are difficult, dense, language-driven stories about, among other things, families and loss. This book appeared toward the end of Lish's run at Knopf, when he was publishing the highest number of "experimental" or challenging books as he knew his time at Knopf would soon be ending. Noy currently teaches in UMass' MFA program.

11. Lipsyte, Sam. *Venus Drive: Stories*. New York: Open City, 2000. Print.

This book (Lipsyte's first) was not published until well after Lish's time at Knopf. While Lish did not publish *Venus Drive*, he was Lipsyte's teacher, and published some of Lipsyte's first stories in *The Quarterly*. I think Sam Lipsyte is one of the most promising and accessible voices in 21st century fiction. And, through his position at Columbia University, Lipsyte is proliferating Lish's teachings to so many writing students of my own generation.

12. Lish, Gordon. *Collected Fictions*. New York: OR, 2010. Print.

This book was published just a couple years ago. The culminating work of a great writer. As friend and partner, Don DeLillo wrote, "Gordon Lish, famous for all the wrong reasons, has written some of the most fascinating American fiction of the last half-century."

13. Lish, Gordon. *Dear Mr. Capote: A Novel*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983. Print.

I think this is Lish's first, and I think best novel. It appeared first anonymously, in various installments, before being published by Lish himself, through an imprint of Knopf in 1983. It is the story of a serial killer who wants Truman Capote to write his biography.

14 – 39. Lish, Gordon. *The Quarterly*. New York: Vintage, 1987 - 1995. Print.

One of Gordon Lish's finest literary contributions was through his esteemed journal, *The Quarterly*. In addition to his publishing duties at Knopf and his own writing, Lish edited 31 issues of *The Quarterly* between 1987 and 1995. The journal was released four times a year through Vintage Books. Consistent with Lish's uncompromising style, *The Quarterly* took risks that no other journal housed by a major publisher would take. Along with a consistent cast of familiar names, Lish made a habit of publishing unheard of, and sometimes previously unpublished, writers. In one issue, Lish dedicated an entire ninety pages of the journal to publishing a single novella that he feared might otherwise go unpublished. In another issue, Lish used a whole seventy-four pages on a series of narrative cartoons. And with *The Quarterly*, Lish did something no other editor of a journal this size was doing (or has done since): he edited the stories himself. Rather than simply accepting or rejecting stories, he would edit the submissions he found promising himself, only publishing stories that he felt were truly finished. While thirty-one issues of the journal exist, some are harder to find than others. I currently own twenty-five of the thirty-one issues. The other six are certainly on my "wish list."

40. Lish, Gordon. *What I Know so Far*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984. Print.

My favorite story collection of Lish's, technically republished in his *Collected Fictions*. Like *Dear Mr. Capote*, Lish published this book through an imprint of Knopf. One story, "For Rupert – with no promises," was first published anonymously by *Esquire* (when Lish still served as an editor there) in 1977. Many speculated that the story was the work of reclusive author J.D. Salinger. It was later discovered to be a clever parody by Lish however, who is quoted as saying, "I tried to borrow Salinger's voice and the psychological circumstances of his life, as I imagine them to be now. And I tried to use those things to elaborate on certain circumstances and events in his fiction to deepen them and add complexity."

41. Lutz, Gary. *Stories in the Worst Way*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. Print.

This is arguably the most experimental book published during Lish's reign at Knopf (it was actually published after Lish had been released, but the book had been scheduled for printing while Lish was still editor). Gary Lutz has since become something of a cult figure, with his intense linguistic focus and seeming irreverence toward plot. Lutz has also written one of my favorite essays on the craft of writing ever, an essay called "The Sentence Is a Lonely Place," which appeared in *The Believer* in January 2009.

42. Marcus, Ben. *The Age of Wire and String: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1995. Print.

This is another experimental work obtained by Lish at the end of his time at Knopf. Marcus now works with Lipsyte in directing Columbia's graduate Creative Writing program. Marcus's last novel, *The Flame Alphabet*, was published by Knopf earlier this year, and has garnered Marcus an increased level of attention. Ben Marcus, to me, is one of the most important and distinctive writers writing today.

43. Marten, Eugene. *Waste*. Brooklyn, NY: Ellipsis, 2008. Print.

This is the only book of the 21st century Gordon Lish has written a blurb for. While Lish is mostly retired now, he still teaches occasional Master Classes in New York. Marten has attended a number of these classes. While Lish did not edit this book, he was greatly influential in seeing it to publication, even offering a blurb for the book as incentive for the small publisher to accept it.

44. Ozick, Cynthia. *The Shawl*. New York: Knopf, 1989. Print.

This book was published right in the meat of Lish's editorial run at Knopf. It is one of Ozick's earlier works, a novella, which likely would not have been published (or at least not published on its own) had it not been for Lish.

45. Raffel, Dawn. *In the Year of Long Division: Stories*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995. Print.

This is a book of short short-stories, Raffel's first, edited heavily by Lish before publication. These stories are spare, minute, and precise. Raffel's second collection, not edited by Lish, *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe* is one of those items on my "wish list."

46. Robison, Mary. *Days: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1979. Print.

This is one of the early works from the minimalist movement. Along with Carver, Hempel, and Frederick Barthelme, Robison is seen as one of the seminal figures of minimalism. After Lish left Knopf, Robison did not publish another book for some ten years, until finally finishing her beautiful novel, *Why Did I Ever?* Robison currently teaches with other former Lish student, Padgett Powell, in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Florida.

47. Schutt, Christine. *Nightwork: Stories*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. Print.

Christine Schutt writes some of the most beautiful sentences I have ever read. Sadly however, I feel that Schutt is one of those authors who have suffered severely without the edits of Lish. While her last novel, *All Souls*, was nominated for a National Book Award, I think it lacks a lot of the sentence-level attention that her Lish-edited work boasts. High on my "wish list" is Schutt's other book of stories, *A Day, A Night, Another Day, Summer*.

48. Sparling, Ken. *Dad Says He Saw You at the Mall: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1996. Print.

This is one of my all-time favorite novels. It is a novel I cannot imagine being published without Lish, a novel ostensibly about nothing. Not only was this Sparling's first novel, he had only published a handful of stories before this book, and most of those appeared in *Cananda*. While the novel has been out-of-print a long time, it has been announced that the small publisher mudluscious will be reprinting the book later this year.

49. Williams, Diane. *The Stupefaction*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. Print.

Diane Williams was a regular contributor to *The Quarterly*, appearing in over half of its issues. Williams is one of the most well-regarded practitioners of the micro-fiction genre, a genre which might never have found a wide readership had Lish not published this book, and others like it, during his time at Knopf.

50. Wilson, Rudy. *The Red Truck*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Print.

Holding perfectly with the adage, "last but not least," this is one of my favorite short novels. This book is surreal and dreamlike. It appropriates colors as its own medium of experience, using them as nouns, adjectives, and verbs. The rumor has it that Lish took the sections of this novel, and rearranging them as he saw fit. This novel was recently rereleased, along with an unedited book of stories. The stories felt clunky and sentimental, hardly seeming to have come from the same author. *The Red Truck*, is one of the most emotionally involved pieces of art I have experienced.