



2023

Interview with Rob Carney

Whitnee Forest
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Forest, Whitnee (2023) "Interview with Rob Carney," *Inscape*: Vol. 43: No. 2, Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol43/iss2/13>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inscape* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Interview with Rob Carney

Rob Carney is the author of eight books of poems, including Call and Response (Black Lawrence Press, 2021) and The Book of Sharks (Black Lawrence Press, 2018), which was named a finalist for the Washington State Book Award. Additionally, he is the author of Accidental Gardens (Stormbird Press, 2021), a collection of 42 flash essays about the environment, politics, and poetics; and the children's book How the Baby Seal Was Born and Other Fables (Little Nomad, forthcoming). In 2014 he received the Robinson Jeffers/Tor House Foundation Award for Poetry. His work has appeared in Cave Wall, Columbia Journal, The Dark Mountain Project, and many others, and he writes a regularly featured series called "Old Roads, New Stories" for Terrain.org. He has a BA in English from Pacific Lutheran University (Tacoma, WA), an MFA: Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University (Spokane, WA), and a PhD from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette (Lafayette, LA). His teaching emphases include Modern American Literature, American Literature from 1865-to-Present, the Study of Drama, Poetry Writing, Modern Legacies for the Honors Program, as well as Special Topics and Eminent Authors courses.

Interviewed by Whitnee Forest

Inscape Journal: In the "Origin" section of *The Book of Sharks*, you write,

*There is no body called Carcharias we point to in the sky.
They are not our heaven.
We don't pray, "Forgive us our trespasses."
Few of us praise.
But we could if we wanted to. We could draw from star to star,*

To me, this felt like an invitation to reevaluate the metaphors that organize my life and the ones I place at the center of it. I was wondering, what do you think about what is lost or gained by the metaphors we choose or don't choose? And what is the value of meditating on or creating from new or different metaphors?

Rob Carney: Oh, well, I think there's always value in meditating on new metaphors. I couldn't be a poet if I didn't believe that. I mean, that is sort of our M.O. when we write poems. Otherwise, why work so hard to come up with them?

I'll just pick, for instance, those things that we have inherited as myths, as origin stories from the time we were little. Adults tell them to us and we just accept them without question and then stop examining them and stop thinking about how they apply to our lives. So if somebody introduces a new one, well, then we have to start thinking again. We can't do it habitually. We can't go on autopilot or just take some adult's point of view. New metaphors are good because they cause us to think for ourselves.

Now, the other thing is that once we know a story and we've known it well from the time we were young, chances are we don't ever really think about it again. So, for example, there's the origin story from the Greeks, Pandora. There's the origin story about the Garden of Eden, Eve. In both stories, they're both bad and it's their fault [they're both blamed for things going wrong with humanity]. Now, I think that's wrong. And it saddled a whole world of people with wrongness. So if you can come along and change that, then you're doing a good thing. And I did once in a poem that predates *The Book of Sharks* called "In the Beginning Was a Girl." Now, that's totally subversive right from the title. And it's in my book, *Story Problems*. It says,

*In the old songs about Washington, a girl woke up with feathers
instead of hair, woke up with silver eyes
and saw behind the moon, which was where the future tried to hide*

himself till it was time.

And it goes on from there. By the end of it, we have a totally different story. And it's one that's, I think, woman-centered and restorative instead of interested in laying blame on women for things falling apart.

IJ: I also loved some of the creation myths that you introduced in *New Fables, Old Songs*.

RC: *New Fables, Old Songs* has that. Yeah, I'm surprised you were able to find that because that's been out of print for ages. That was my very first published chapbook. It was done by Dream Horse Press and the publisher and editor, JP Dancing Bear (thank you for getting me started). Those poems roll over into the book I was just mentioning, *Story Problems*. So you can find them there still, even if you can't find the chapbook.

IJ: A recurring thread throughout *The Book of Sharks* shows up in the following phrase: "the best explanation I know was offered by a boy. / His father had died, and his mother couldn't hear." And some of the most gorgeous lines in the entire volume, I thought, were attributed to this boy. In "Origins," the boy said that "Sharks are the ocean's way of talking. / Like talking with your hands." I'm curious about whether this boy was at all based on someone you know in real life. And if not, why did you introduce this character and give him the words that he speaks?

RC: Well, I think one of the things that's different about being a fiction writer—and I'm just guessing because I'm not that, I'm an essayist and a poet—is that people believe from the beginning that all of the characters are invented. Whereas it seems that when you are a poet, people think that it's all first-person and fact. So no, there was no particular boy in my own boyhood who said those things. In fact, one of the things I'm trying to do is create a sort of speaker who isn't me, and a kind of universality. I don't ever nail down, for instance, what coast, what ocean, what place, what harbor, what cliff. Wherever anybody's reading it, they can imagine the coastline themselves, right? They don't have to look it up on a map. So that boy is more, I would say, me imagining what I might have been like had I grown up in whatever coastal place with my best friend, Jay Taylor. And I could imagine the two of us going through that. But Jay is a real person and his mom, Desta Taylor, is not deaf. She did not speak through sign. In the poem, that's just invented. But it seemed to me like something was needed—that the primary speaker couldn't be the only voice. Allowing for dialogue changes everything, I think, in a play, in a story, and hopefully in poems, too.

When you switch to dialogue, all of a sudden there's a new energy, a new direction. It has the same power, I think, as a turn does in a sonnet or another type of poem. It has as much power as the conjunction "but" that tells us something's going to happen—some redirect. So I did that because I thought it gave the flow a new direction and a bigger kick.

IJ: So, again, in *The Book of Sharks*, you say, "I have no stories or rituals, but maps to them, so I begin." And that's the very kind of last line of the book.

RC: Right, right.

IJ: And I was wondering: what are our maps to ritual? In *Weather Report*, I think you talk about creating a sort of ritual on the first snow of the year where everybody just stops in silence and gathers. How do we create those types of rituals?

RC: I think that ritual is just automatic. But over time—I think probably throughout the 20th century, starting with radio—the "ritual" changed. People would gather to listen to somebody else tell a story, which was still a kind of active listening.

But you don't really have a fire going anymore. Or people gathered around listening to the storyteller.

You kind of do. But TV, I think, is different—you could consider TV like theater, but not really. I don't want to say TV's an induced trance, because I don't think that happens. I think we sort of turn it on and let it wash over us. And we're passive rather than actively engaged in listening. And a part of that is, we're not doing it communally and collectively. When you go to a movie theater, you're at least not there alone and there is some sort of connection to others that happens whether we're really aware of it or not. There are people who will cheer at a screening of a movie, and I don't think they would do that at home. There's something about being in the presence of other people when story is happening. And I also think that there's something about having to listen and not having the images—that's a powerful hook in storytelling. I think radio really is better at that than television.

So what are the maps? The maps are back to story. And that means that whatever it is, it's got to be long enough to hook us and then follow through and resolve. And little tiny videos aren't that. They're distractions, but they're not a type of ritual. I mean, hypothetically, you could decree, "Every day at ten o'clock we shall gather together and have a flash mob." Fine for the people who are at home watching. It's kind of neat. But for the people who are doing it, it's participatory. It's a thing. It's an event. And so what your personal map would be, I don't know. But I do think that you have to get out of habits. So whether it's to pick up books again or go to hear readings from people, those maps have to direct us towards some kind of engagement. And the thing that doesn't seem to engage people (because they sort of zone out or zombie off) is thumb scrolling through a telephone. So I would say, you know, first map: don't do that. Second: re-engage in some of these older things that were always archetypal and powerful.

IJ: I was hoping to tie together *The Book of Sharks* and *Call and Response* with this question. In *The Book of Sharks*, you say, "Let's say I'm a gatherer in the same way clouds are gatherers." And in "Art is Such a Good Journey," from *Call and Response*, you talk about Kari's grandmother, "who could make you young-eyed when teaching you to paint." So I was wondering, what advice would you have for young writers about seeing, hearing, and gathering? And how does creating art impact the way you personally see, listen to, and engage with the world?

RC: Oh, well, what advice do I have? That's a heavy one. My advice is that many people talk more than they listen, and that's probably not the best way to do it, especially if you want to learn things, and especially if you want to find your own voice. I mean, one of the things that I think people need when they're writers is to find their own voice. And if they're always talking, talking, talking and not listening, then they can't hear what other people are saying and have that inform their understanding of regionalism and voice. They also can't hear their own thoughts as they're happening. If you're talking all the time, you can't ever be quiet. And then you can't hear your own voice. When that happens, you've already missed. And you've lost the enthusiasm to discover something and write it down because you already blurted it out, right? It's just done.

There's a writer named Rick Bass who talks about holding on to, and protecting, and keeping that magic. He means you've got to be still and quiet—writers probably more than other people. It's tough to be a writer if you're always out talking, socializing, and being performative because you've already expressed yourself. To come home and try again might feel tiring or even redundant. I don't know if that's advice, and I don't know if that works for everybody, but I do think it works for me.

Regarding the second question: creativity, art—both of them, I think, are a way of engaging with the world. Maybe not the world as it is ordinarily, just going about its chores, getting in its traffic jams, but the world that you could imagine being ideal, right? So it gives you a chance to engage with the world in the way that you wish the world really were. And sometimes we might say, "Oh, that's just nostalgia for a past time when things were simpler"; that's not what I mean. I know, for instance, that my home state, Washington, where I grew up, is not there anymore. There's something else on top of it now. But that doesn't mean that I can't still feel moved about the way it used to be and then use that as setting or put characters in a setting like that and have them, you know, play out their story. Because you want things to be better than they are. I mean, I don't want to just nag about problems. Nobody wants to listen to somebody nag about problems. Instead, I think they would rather have a different vision, maybe a better

vision, so that they can incorporate that and think, “I like that, I would like that vision to be real,” and then do what they can to act in ways that make it real.

IJ: I really appreciated what you said at the beginning about talking less and listening more as a way of finding your voice. It seems counterintuitive compared to cultural messages I’ve received about that, but it really rings true.

RC: Do you have an example? What do you mean about a cultural message that told you to talk more?

IJ: I guess social media, since we’ve talked about that a bit. I don’t have a specific example, but just the general idea that it’s really important to be expressing your opinions all the time. That something’s wrong if you’re not doing that, you know? And so I guess that’s where my mind went.

RC: I think that maybe as a kid when that was going on, I was one of the people who sort of hung back for a while and maybe I would make some smart-alec remark to the person next to me, like I wasn’t part of this giant group. Find the other person who seemed sort of like me or whatever, and if they laughed, I thought, “OK, that’s good.”

Now, there are other times I can’t help it. I just jump right in and argue the same as all other human beings. But, you know, I went to grad school twice. And I’ve got to say, there is no way I could have ever blasted through as the opinionator in a realm of those people, because my goodness, graduate students talk and talk and talk and talk. So sometimes it was better just to listen. And then you could say, “Well, wait a minute,” and undercut that. Because a lot of times people—in graduate school, at least—get awfully full of their own opinions, so for somebody to come along and, you know, stick a needle in that sometimes, is probably a social service.

IJ: In your volume, *Weather Report*, you write that “questions climb higher than answers.” I love that idea. And I was wondering, what are some poems or poets that have led you to bigger and better questions?

RC: Oh, wow. Well, there’s an American poet that not enough people read named Robinson Jeffers. He’s probably first because he’s the first poet I ever encountered whose work wasn’t on somebody’s syllabus. I wasn’t assigned to read it. It was a discovery.

The other person who was great with questions is the poet Theodore Roethke. I think Anne Sexton is overlooked. And I think that she caused me to think a whole bunch, and differently than I used to. And then there are two Eastern European poets who, when I was assigned to read them, I just couldn’t believe what I was reading. It just seemed like a miracle. I didn’t know this kind of writing was possible or allowed. They’re Eastern European poets named Tomaž Šalamun and Vasko Popa. And I suppose the translator makes a difference. The translator of the volume by Šalamun is Charles Simic, and the translator I liked of Vasko Popa was also Charles Simic. So I think those five, for sure, made me ask questions.

As a high school student, T.S. Eliot made me ask a lot of questions. And it wasn’t just, “What is this guy saying?” but “Why do I like this, even if I don’t necessarily understand it?” And I think that’s good, you know. I’m not saying I’m a huge Eliot fan still. But that was pretty cool.

And I love E.E. Cummings. And I think that that guy has totally turned upside down what people think of as the “life force” and the “death force” and in good ways and important ways. So I don’t know if he was causing me to ask questions as much as go, “Right on, man. I’m with you.” And Walt Whitman, you can’t you can’t forget him. That guy’s the ocean.

IJ: A related question I have is, do you start writing poems with a question in mind, or do you write poems to figure out or better articulate what your questions actually are?

RC: Well, a dumb answer is that it depends, right? And it's not always the same. The better answer is that I like to find out what I'm thinking as I go. So I don't usually start with the answer in advance. Sometimes I'm just prompted by something surprising. You mentioned *Weather Report* earlier. And you even quoted a line, thank you, from "The Mother of the Mountains," which is a seven-part epic origin-story kind of poem. And that started because somebody that I had met said she didn't approve of skiing. And I asked, "Why not?" And she said, "Because it's bad for the mountains." My answer was, "What are you, the mother of the mountains?" And then I thought, "Go away, go away, because I want to write now about the Mother of the Mountains."

Toward the end of writing the poem, I felt like—"I really liked that. Where did that come from?" And I knew I wasn't done. The other six parts happened incrementally over the next year, but it started with, "Who's the Mother of the Mountains? That would be fun to find out." So in that case, I accidentally invented a character, which caused me to ask a question, which caused me to write.

IJ: Another quote from *Call and Response* about questions:
You'll have to ask in a foreign language, not Dutch, not Spanish or Bulgarian.

I mean, on a drum.

I mean, with your lifeblood thumping.

And I loved that so much. But I was thinking, are there any questions at the core of your poems that might be nonverbal, or too difficult to articulate with words, as this poem describes?

RC: Oh, wow. That's a... I think the word for that is "paradox"—asking a writer if there are any nonverbal questions in their writing. I might not be the best person to answer that. It might just need to be somebody who is an astute reader, a good and accessible kind of critic, somebody with those kinds of abilities to concisely zero in and make my writings and intentions clear to other people.

I don't know if there are nonverbal questions in the settings I choose, but maybe. I think place is humongously important and absolutely instrumental, and I am 100% a poet of the West. How come? Because this is where I'm from, and you too, unless you're moved here from somewhere else. And it's the best. The American West is just astonishing. Huge, incredible, impressive. You want some trees? Take a look at Northern California or Alaska or Washington. Or we could throw Canada in there too and include British Columbia. You want some mountains? Try growing up by Mount Rainier or here along the Wasatch.

I think in some ways, maybe the question is, can you live where you live if it isn't a place you love? Can you live where you live if it doesn't seem to you beautiful? And if you can't, then why aren't you moving?

IJ: I love the way your volumes are organized. I found that aspect of each work very interesting—all of them seemed uniquely organized. And in *Call and Response*, I was especially drawn to sections one, three, six and eight, which are all stand-alone poems. Specifically, "Poetic Justice," "In the Beginning was a River," "North and West of Winnemucca," and "Call and Response," the title poem. In all of those poems, I saw themes of both welcoming and loss (loss being especially pronounced in "North and West of Winnemucca"). And I was curious about whether you could speak to the common threads that connect those stand-alone poems in the context of that volume.

RC: Well, "Poetic Justice" is a throw down. That's a big gesture to open with. It's about payback because of cruelty that went on, locally and nationally. It's like wish fulfillment, you know—a ghost story, a revenge story. But it starts with perspective. You have to start by journeying back and realize there are a whole lot of things that have been on this planet a lot longer than we have, so where do we get off thinking that we're so important, especially about, oh, I don't know, the result of that 2016 election? "North and West of Winnemucca" is a journey also, but it's not a journey in which you're having somebody righteously dispatched only to be resurrected and dispatched again and again and again in new and inventive ways. It's different in that it's much more of a cross-country journey, going from where we are out to the coast, and discovering all along the way a kind of lonesomeness.

I mean, my dad did die. That is factual. And, you know, I think that when you're heading out to the ocean, somehow you start to reconcile with that because you've got all this time to think and feel, but also you're arriving at a place that is absolutely... you know, the ocean is kind of a Heaven on Earth, isn't it? At least it is to me.

And so that feels very different. It's no longer about visiting justice upon the unjust as a corrective. It's about, how do you correct your own inner imbalance when you're dealing with a huge loss? And then "Call and Response," the fourth of those, actually works more like a mirror, I think, to "Poetic Justice." "Poetic Justice" shows what's wrong. "Call and Response," through the assembling of verses by literary giants—Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens, Richard Hugo, Anne Sexton—is like the answer to that, right? You start with what's wrong, then you finish with the thing that's restorative, and the last word is "Amen."

In between "Poetic Justice" and "North and West of Winnemucca" is a different kind of journey called "In the Beginning Was a River." That one is also political because that one is about how people in New Zealand got it right, and we need to follow that. That's the model.

And I love the first line, which surprised me. And I knew that if I was surprised, then I should keep writing: "People who know me know this. I don't pretend to be an expert on the legal codes of New Zealand." But then I'm in, and along the way, I get to just sort of river along because it's about rivers, and what does a river do? It widens, deepens, slows down, speeds up, discovers, and sustains. And I think that, you know, I want human rights to be doing all of those same things, to find a way to fuse them. So I go from something that's opening in kind of anger, and with a sense of purpose and justice, to something that is hopeful as a model, and then to something that's more personal as a journey, and then something that, by the end of it, reconciles. It's the same way that, when you lose somebody, a lot of people go to church; the book ends in a kind of literary church in this case. It ends on a Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, Anne Sexton-esque kind of "Amen." I like that. I don't know if that poem really works, though, because you have to jump back and forth between the text and the footnotes.

IJ: I loved the footnotes.

RC: Oh, thank you. I wasn't sure about it. But the publisher seemed to like it, too. So I guess I hit on—at least for that one book—the right kind of closure.

IJ: That's actually related to the last question I have for you. There are so many ending lines that I loved in *Call and Response*. In "For Your Essay, Describe Nature," you said, "You can lovetalk forever about nature. / It'll still kick your ass." I loved that one. And then "Call and Response" is such a great, I think, "amen" to the volume as a whole. So I guess my question is, what helps your ear land on good endings, and how do you know a poem is done?

RC: Well, probably time. And there is this benefit that readers don't know because they see the poem when it's done instead of through all the revision, where I probably found an ending that I couldn't find in the first draft, the second draft, the scratching, and the crossing out. Over time, you develop an ear, and you develop a trust.

And also, nobody gets to see the mess that is the kitchen. They only get to see the thing that I brought out and set on the table. So, did I have that in the first draft? I'd like to think so, because that would make me seem, I don't know, a *natural*. But I probably did not. I probably had to fail a few times before I found that.

Also, this is the case in the line, "You can lovetalk forever about nature." OK, two things: I modeled all of the short poems on one exercise. It is something that my friend Rick McDonald suggested to me. He said, "Try translations of poems, but not as in a real translation, more like how the language looks, and work it out.." He meant, size up the language visually and guesstimate what those word-equivalents would be in English. And in this case, all of the poems that are the short ones were prompted by the work of an Icelandic poet named Magnus Sigurdsson. And there may have very well been words that looked enough to me like that line that you're talking about, that I got to sort of have an accidental discovery just by

being baffled by Icelandic words. So that's one thing. And then the other thing is, I may have struggled with the fact that I wrote that line rather rapidly. I can't say that this poem specifically happened that way, but all of them did happen rather rapidly, and because I felt like I wasn't the controller—that I wasn't choosing a subject—I thought, "How do I trust that this is any good?"

And then you have to think, "Well, no, it's doing something interesting, and even if I was not in charge, I like what happened, so don't cross that out. Don't try to overwork it. Because sometimes, sometimes, you just do it right." And you have to tell your inner editor to shut up.