“What do any of us really know about love?” So asks Mel McGinnis, the main character in one of Raymond Carver’s finest stories, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.”

Mel’s question is rhetorical, of course, simply his way of introducing the subject to the three other people at the table. Like the rest of us, Mel considers himself an expert. As Scottish novelist and poet George MacDonald said, “There is no feeling in the human heart which exists in that heart alone—which is not, in some form or degree, in every heart.” We all recognize love when we see it, know it when we feel it, cherish its
Carver’s famous story. Right off the bat, the author establishes a number of facts. By the end of the second sentence we learn that Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and in the following three sentences we discover the immediate setting of the story—Mel’s kitchen—and the city in which the story takes place, Albuquerque, N.M. The other characters are introduced as well: Mel’s second wife, Terri; the narrator, Nick; and Nick’s wife, Laura. But that’s not all. Carver also tells us that the four are drinking gin and that “sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink.” Because I live in Albuquerque, I know the quality of this sunlight, its clarity and brilliance. Those of you in Cleveland or Minneapolis or elsewhere don’t have this advantage, but that’s OK. The story’s only a little less glorious for your not knowing the vivid blue of an Albuquerque sky.

So, what’s the sky got to do with it? Actually, a lot more than you might think. In order to establish characters, Carver has to place them in a particular location, and the sooner the better. For Carver, it isn’t enough to let us into Mel’s kitchen, ice bucket and bottle of gin on the table. He also puts Mel’s kitchen in a specific city, Albuquerque. In so doing, he allows readers to relax. We don’t have to be casting about for clues to set up this scene. It’s all there, in the first five sentences, which allows us to focus on the seminary before going to medical school, which explains why he believes that real love is “nothing less than spiritual love.”

Even sooner, in the middle of the first page, we get a description of Mel’s wife, Terri: “She was a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked necklaces made of turquoise, and long pendant earrings.” Note that the details about Terri’s jewelry reinforce our sense of place—New Mexico, where lots of women wear silver and turquoise.

**Terri’s description** comes before Mel’s because she’s the first to speak, and the reader must visualize her first. What she says is a bit shocking: She regales those at the table with the story of her ex-lover, a man who beat her and dragged her around the room by her ankles. “What do you do with love like that?” she asks those at the table (and us). It’s another rhetorical question, and one that provokes an argument. “My God, don’t be silly. That’s not love, and you know it,” Mel responds. “I don’t know what you’d call it, but I sure know you wouldn’t call it love.” Plenty of readers are sure to agree with him. They may even be relieved that someone in this story has his head on straight. (But keep in mind they haven’t yet finished the story.)

“People are different, Mel,” Terri replies. “Sure, sometimes he may have acted crazy. Okay. But he loved me. In his own way, maybe, but he loved me.” And there we have it, the essential catalyst of fiction: conflict. It unfolds quite naturally in the first two pages—so naturally we hardly notice—and it deepens and darkens, like the light from the kitchen window as day gives way to night.

Like everything else that matters,
for it." Mel scoffs at this notion. His preference is for chivalrous love, ethereal and everlasting. Late in the story, he admits that if he could be born in another day and time, he'd come back as a knight in shining armor. While our similarities bind us to the rest of humanity, our differences define us.

Writers have our theories on love. Southern writer Carson McCullers believed in what she called "the lover and the beloved." According to her, two people rarely have the good sense to love one another. Rather, she maintained that "love is a solitary thing," that we are destined to be either the lover or the beloved. My own theory has to do with childhood experience. As I see it, the way we make our way through this world is determined in large part by our pasts and, particularly, by what we experienced as children. Our definitions of love, our capacity for love—whom we love and why—are all strongly influenced by what we learned of love when we were young. Thus, I come to my characters through their childhoods. In developing them, I want to learn as much as possible about their formative experiences—for good and for ill.

Over the last seven years, I've written a novel called Deep in the Heart. Central to the story is a couple married about his bullying brother, Buddy.

I wrote whole chapters that have long since disappeared from the actual book. But the lost chapters were not a waste of time. Far from it. This sort of "research" is absolutely critical to my understanding of the characters' motivations. Because I did this work, I know that Carl yearns for unequivocal love, the sort that most of us get from our children. When he learns that his wife is pregnant for the first time, he is dumbstruck and overcome by an immense happiness he's desperate to convey to his miserable wife.

Needless to say, I felt fairly secure in my knowledge of these characters. It wasn't until after I sold the novel and made a trip to New York to meet my editors that I learned differently. During a two-hour meeting, I woke up to the limitations of my own process. Although I knew a great deal about some things, it turned out that I was entirely ignorant about others. "How did Hannah and Carl meet?" my editors asked. "How were the early years of their marriage? When did they stop being happy together?" I didn't have the faintest idea and had to admit it. A few days later, when the flush of embarrassment finally left me, I went over the notes of the meeting, then spent a month or so filling in the gaps. To do this, I turned to an exercise I've recommended to students over the

other meaningful scene, feeling and value multiply."

I called my list "Story of a Marriage." It begins when Hannah and Carl met and concludes some 20 years later, after they divorce and remarry. In that way, I discovered what becomes of them in the years after the book ends, and this, too, has been useful because it has granted me a sort of omniscience. Once, I happened to mention Carl's remarriage to my editor, Carla Riccio. "He gets married again!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I'm so glad to hear that, Sharon!" Somewhere along the way, Carl had ceased to be a collection of characteristics and had become—for us, anyway—a real human being.

Perhaps you've heard the truism that the only people who can understand a marriage are the two living inside it. Accurate as this may be in real life, it's wrong when it comes to fiction. Writers interested in the vagaries of love must inhabit a relationship in the same way the couple does, from the inside out. Only then will they know enough to convince the rest of us to care.

At the end of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," Mel—thoroughly drunk and waxing nostalgic—says he wants to call his kids. Terri discourages him, pointing out that Mel's ex-wife, Marjorie, might answer.

Why do stories about love and the lovelorn so often leave us cold?

17 years, Carl and Hannah Solace. While composing the first few drafts, I took great pains to discover the childhood histories of the two. I knew, for instance, about the death of Hannah's mother and the aftermath of that death, which turns out to be critical to Hannah's decision not to have children. I also learned/discovered/made up all I could about Carl's early life in Terrell, Texas; about his mother's job at the state hospital; about his father's retreat to a fishing cabin at Lake Texoma; and years but had never completed myself.

It comes from "Chronology in the Short Story" in The Passionate, Accurate Story by Carol Bly. She brings up a story by Richard Brautigan, "The World War I Los Angeles Airplane," a three-page wonder that's nothing more than a list of 33 items from one man's life. Upon reading that story, I immediately saw Bly's point: "We can learn a chronology lesson from Brautigan," she writes. "It is that if a meaningful scene, no matter how short, is set next to

Terri knows all about Marjorie: "There isn't a day goes by that Mel doesn't say he wishes she'd get married again. Or else die," she explains. While some readers (and delicate little Laura) may be surprised by this harsh comment, Terri isn't and neither is Carver. Even knights in shining armor have their soft spots—even knights miss their children and grieve over their failures. Losing love, they may turn to hate. We begin to understand what Mel knows about love, and yes, our hearts go out to him. #