



Return to Oakpine

Ron Carlson

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From a widely admired author, a poignant novel about homecoming, friendship, growing up, and growing old for fans of Richard Ford and Richard Russo

In this finely wrought portrait of western American life, Ron Carlson takes us to the small town of Oakpine, Wyoming, and into the lives of four men trying to make peace with who they are in the world.

In high school, these men were in a band. One of them, Jimmy, left Oakpine for New York City after the tragic death of his brother. A successful novelist, he has returned thirty years later, in 1999—because he is dying.

With Carlson's characteristic grace, we learn what has become of these friends and the different directions of their lives. Craig and Frank never left; Mason, a top lawyer in Denver, is back in town to fix up and sell his parents' house. Now that they are reunited, getting the band back together might be the most important thing they can do.

Return to Oakpine is a generous, tender look at friendship, family, and the roads not taken, by a writer at the peak of his craft.

Return to Oakpine Details

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Author : Ron Carlson

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From Reader Review Return to Oakpine for online ebook

Nancy Rossman says

I'm on the fence 4 or 5.

It is such a beautifully written, nostalgic piece without sentimentality and this, I find, is rare. I didn't skip a word, I sighed, I cried, and in the end felt the author resolved all the drama in a most believable way.

For men who have had friends and you're close but you don't talk the way women do, but some how you know each other. It's a look, a feeling, a thought immediately shared without speech and you think you'll have these friends forever, but you don't. Life happens. Then, tragedy happens, as it does in all lives and the four men are reunited after 30 years. Most things are the same as far as feelings go but now NOW you talk. That is what this wonderfully crafted novel is about.

Recommended. Especially for men over fifty. Or women who want to try (!) and understand them. Ron Carlson does seem to get it right on the money.

Chris says

Part "coming of age" and "what have I done with my life" themes give this book energy and soul. The descriptions of light, landscape, and weather are evocative. Four 50 somethings reunite in a small Wyoming town. Two of them have stayed there. Two have returned, one to die. The teenage son of one of the men is featured as well- a great description of running by him sounds like something out of Zen. There was an accident that caused a brother to leave town. Carlson introduces them all to us at a leisurely pace as we discover their past, present and future. It's not predictable. It's beautifully written as it melds time and space and generations into a place. There's the quintessential high school small town football game and then there's the battle of the bands. There's also the clash between white and blue collar-men getting back to their roots or what's really important-they see it now some 30 years later. Lots of stuff in this great book. It's like Brokeback Mountain meets John Updike.

Amy says

There is something special about the friendships that are forged in young adulthood. There is also something about midlife that inspires the reexamination of life. Ron Carlson vividly tackles both of these themes in his latest novel Return to Oakpine. Set in a small town in Wyoming, the novel explores the lives of four friends, once members of an aspiring garage band, thirty years after their high school graduation. Craig Ralston married his high school sweetheart and manages the hardware store that was once his father's. Frank Gunderson owns a bar in town and has spent much of his life regretting never having gotten out of Oakpine. Mason Kirby, a flourishing Denver lawyer, has returned home to fix up his parent's home to be sold. Finally, Jimmy Brand, a successful writer, and in many ways the group's touchstone, has returned to Oakpine to live out his final days. The impromptu reunion challenges the friends to look at the events of the summer that tore them apart, and also to consider the men they have become, there is even talk of getting the band back together. Carlson's inclusion of youth in the form of Craig's son Larry, illustrates the universal growing pains suffered by each generation. Return to Oakpine is a tribute to home towns, friendship and youth, as well as an exploration of paths not taken. Eloquent and heartfelt it is a novel that is deeply moving, and quite

simply unforgettable.

Neil Connelly says

Whether you've been one of the multitudes following Ron Carlson for years or have only now come across him, this is a book you're sure to treasure. Decades ago, the four members of a small town garage band came together and captured something essential about youth. Now one, a prodigal who has lived in self-imposed exile, has returned home to die. How this shakes things up, for the rich ensemble cast of enthralling characters, gives Carlson a chance to juxtapose the whimsy, joys, and heartaches of being young with the hard-fought concessions and acceptance of experience. Full of lovely sentences, lovely scenes, of course it will have you floating through your own memories, but it also will make you take stock of where you are now. This is a deeply moving novel from a masterful writer.

Melissa Stacy says

DNF on page 8

Life is just too short for this.

Look, I love Ron Carlson. Truly. As an author of literary fiction, and as a person. I enjoyed reading his novels "Five Skies" and "The Signal." I have enjoyed his short stories.

But the 2013 literary novel, "Return to Oakpine," threw up too many red flags in the opening pages for me to continue.

The plot of this book is pretty straightforward: four able-bodied white middle-class men in their fifties reconvene in the small white town of Oakpine, Wyoming, where they attended high school together. These aging men reflect on their lackluster lives for a while, and then they reform their high school garage band and make some music again, performing songs that are probably as lackluster as their lives, but so be it.

I fully admit that this premise does nothing for me. In a world of overwhelming problems to deal with, such as systemic poverty, racism, climate change, the mass death of plankton currently underway, ocean acidification, the ascendancy of porn culture in mainstream media, child sex trafficking, and pretty much NAME THE ISSUE of real life drama with the highest stakes possible, then I must admit that reading about some slouchy middle-class guys in their fifties who sigh and harrumph about their cushioned, privileged American lives is at the absolute bottom of my priority list.

But the glory of literary authors is that an insightful viewpoint and clean, crafted prose can turn any plot premise into the most gripping, high-stakes drama possible.

Herein lies the problem: the storytelling in "Return to Oakpine" is sloppy, and the prose is not crafted or clean.

The novel starts from the point of view of Craig Ralston, one of the four slouchy white men who will be reconvening in Wyoming. His opening pages are dull and unmemorable, but I was thinking, "Okay, whatever, boring white guy is just boring, I'll keep pushing on." Because readers do things like that for authors they love.

Then page 4 arrives, and the narrative shifts into the point of view of Craig's 17-year-old son, Larry. Larry speaks in dialogue that no teenage boy would ever speak in, because only an alien from Planet Xenon would ever talk this way:

(Larry talking to himself outside the house after a run): "I ran around the town. That town is captured in its entirety." (page 4 and 5)

(Larry speaking to his mother after he walks into the kitchen): "You going to get a tattoo? I'm sorry for asking, because your son is not a smartass but is dislocated by your behavior, but what's the answer: is a tattoo next?" (page 6)

(Larry talking to himself in the empty kitchen): "I ran around the town." (page 6)

(Larry talking to his father again in the living room): "Then I ran around the whole town." (page 6)

Ron Carlson usually writes lean, careful prose, but this novel is already repetitive as well as nonsensical. "Your son is dislocated by your behavior" would mean that Larry had to leave the kitchen where his mother is, which does not happen. His mother walks out of the room, so Larry "dislocates" her with his question. He is annoyed that his mother is washing dishes in a black sports bra without wearing a shirt, so Larry's tattoo question is meant to be off-putting snark to drive his mother out of the kitchen, and it succeeds. So, not only does Larry's dialogue sound inhuman, it's not even accurate within the story.

And then there are sentences like this one:

"Larry found his burger under the bun in the cast iron frying pan on the stove and scooped it up with his left hand, dripping grease along his palm, which he licked away while opening the fridge with his right hand and grabbing the glass bottle of milk, half full, setting it down to pull the top off, and lifting it in a long cold drink." (page 6)

I'm not opposed to multiple modifiers, multiple prepositional phrases all using multiple modifiers, or the kind of run-on-ish expository sentence that many literary authors favor.

My problem is the use of detail that does not matter, is inherently useless, and should have been struck. In that sentence, "with his right hand" is useless. The reader can infer that if the burger is in his left hand, then his right hand is the one opening the fridge and grabbing the milk. Whether the bottle is "half full" or not also does not make a bit of difference. This information is not signifying anything about this family or their lives, it's just useless detail. Literary prose has too high a standard to meet for drag like this to appear in a sentence. Ron Carlson knows better, too. I just don't understand the verbosity. Was this not edited? Did an editor just assume Ron Carlson didn't need a red pen anymore, just because he's Ron Carlson? I can't explain this.

The worst offense is that the story is following Larry, giving Larry an intense level of detail about what he is holding in his left hand and in his right hand, how he enjoys running around town and snarking his mother -- when this novel is NOT about Larry. It's about his aging father, Craig, and his father's three aging friends reconvening in Oakpine: Frank Gunderson, Mason Kirby, and Jimmy Brand. This is a novel that will be packed with minutia about these four boring men and their high school lives, told from their points of view. I sure as hell don't need to be spending time watching Larry drink milk and eat a burger his mother cooked for him.

I was hoping to sink into this novel the same way I have with Ron Carlson's other work, enjoying his lean prose and careful observations of life. But "Return to Oakpine" is too poorly written and frustrating. I still love Ron Carlson, but I can't even finish this book, much less recommend it.

Vivien says

Return to Oakpine is a portrait of western American life. Set in the small town of Oakpine, Wyoming, four men are trying to make peace with who they are in the world.

Decades ago, these men were in a band while in high school. Jimmy ended up leaving Oakpine when his brother tragically died. He became a successful novelist but returns home from New York City after thirty years, because he is dying.

We learn what has become of these friends and the different directions of their lives. Craig and Frank never left; Mason, a top lawyer in Denver, is back in town to fix up and sell his parents' house. Now that they are reunited, getting the band back together might be the most important thing they can do.

I won this book in a First Reads Goodreads giveaway. My first reaction is that I'm not the target audience. Usually, that doesn't make a difference, but with this book it certainly did. Unfortunately, it didn't make a meaningful impact.

I found this read to be rather mundane and a struggle to get through. With this kind of predictable plot, I found Return to Oakpine just skimmed the surface of the characters. I didn't find any of them engaging.

The main issue is that the book is just too short. A coming of age story needs to have depth and this novel felt condensed. The writing was decent enough to keep my attention to the end. Had the author really dug deep and fleshed out characters, I feel it would have been a more captivating novel.

Cheryl says

This is a fast read but in this case this is not a good thing. Fast because I was going through the motions but not rememberable. I got about half way into the book. Which I stopped at chapter 6. Yes, this is a shorter book than my usual reading at 264 pages. Anyways, I went to pick up this book again to start reading it and promptly put it back down after a page and a half. The reason for this is because I could not remember anything that happened in the first five chapters/half of the book. None of the characters were engaging with their back stories. I did see some brief glimmer of promise that this book could be good but maybe for someone else.

Larry H says

I'm a big fan of books that chronicle the reunion of childhood friends long separated. The opportunity to relate as an adult to people who knew you when you were younger, to see how life has affected them (and let them see how it has affected you), are tremendously compelling narrative devices, and if you combine those with a little bit of emotional poignancy, you've got a winner as far as I'm concerned. So it should come as no surprise that I was utterly taken in by Ron Carlson's wonderful new novel, Return to Oakpine.

In the late 1960s, Craig Ralston, Jimmy Brand, Mason Kirby, and Frank Gunderson were inseparable friends

in the small town of Oakpine, Wyoming. During high school, they formed a band, called interchangeably The Rangemen, Wildfire, and Life on Earth. The band brought a fervent excitement to their lives and their small town, and through all of the practices and performances, their friendships deepened, until one day, a tragic accident claimed the life of Jimmy's older brother, Matt, the town's most highly regarded athlete. Unable to deal with his parents' reaction to the accident, as well as his own homosexuality, Jimmy left Oakpine shortly thereafter, moving to New York to become a well-established writer.

Thirty years later, Jimmy, destitute and dying of AIDS, returns to Oakpine. Banished by his father to live in the refurbished garage, Jimmy renews contact with his old friends. Craig and Frank never left the town—Craig took over his family's hardware store, while Frank owns a restaurant/bar. Mason became a successful lawyer in Colorado, but returns home to sell his parents' house, and finds himself caught up in his friends' lives again, while dealing with the dissolution of his marriage and uncertainty about his future.

Meanwhile, Craig's son, Larry, a high school senior, is dealing with many of the same problems his father and his friends did 30 years ago. Caught between loyalty to his best friend Wade and his love for Wade's girlfriend, Wendy, he is ready to leave Oakpine for good after high school, although he and Wendy develop a close relationship with Jimmy. And Craig and Frank both must deal with the women in their lives as well.

It is both nostalgia and Jimmy's looming mortality that push the four to reunite their band. This decision opens up old feelings, brings back long-forgotten memories and joys, and pushes them toward the future, but a future faced together, not apart.

Ron Carlson is a fantastic writer. In his previous books I've loved both his use of language and imagery to capture both emotions and the evocative nature of the West. But I feel he's utterly outdone himself with *Return to Oakpine*. It's a familiar story, one you've read before and one whose ending you can predict, but it is so beautifully told, so emotionally poignant, it's still as powerful as if you had never read a story with this plot before. While some of the characters' quirks—particularly in dialogue—took a little getting used to, I found myself torn between wanting to devour the story as quickly as possible and wanting to savor it for as long as I could, because I knew I would be sad when it ended.

"If a person was raised here, he knows the way the light falls in this town on any given week, even you who have been absent for years. That isn't true for any other place for you."

Going home after being away for so long isn't always easy, and reconnecting with old friends doesn't always work the way you hope it will. But *Return to Oakpine* made you long for those feelings, and captured them so perfectly. I know I'm a bit of a sap, but I thought this was really terrific.

Heather says

Pub date July 2013, sold to me by the publisher as 'man lit' (as opposed to chick lit).

Kind of a mellow flowing picture of life in a small town, and how life turns full circle. Some of the descriptive passages were just beautifully written. I particularly liked Lenny-and his youth, energy, and magical descriptions of running. It almost inspires me to do the same-almost.

Summary from publisher: In the small town of Oakpine, Wyoming, four men are trying to make peace with who they are in the world. In high school, these men were in a band. One of them, Jimmy, left Oakpine for New York City after the tragic death of his brother. A successful novelist, he has returned thirty years later, in 1999--because he is dying. With Carlson's characteristic grace, we learn what has become of these friends

and the different directions of their lives. Craig and Frank never left; Mason, a top lawyer in Denver, is back in town to fix up and sell his parents' house. Now that they are reunited, getting the band back together might be the most important thing they can do. Return to Oakpine is a generous, tender look at friendship, family, and the roads not taken, by a writer at the peak of his craft.

Chrissy (The Every Free Chance Reader) says

Did I enjoy this book: I spent the first two hundred pages wondering if perhaps I'm not quite old enough to enjoy a book as nostalgic as Return to Oakpine. I didn't notice I'd fallen in love until I'd nearly finished reading, and now I'm wishing I'd have read more slowly and enjoyed it a bit more (insert Yo Dawg meme here). The whole "everything is like high school" theme was a bit too blatant for my taste, and MILD SPOILER ALERT the timing of Jimmy's death was just a touch too convenient to be believable. Ultimately, though, Carlson's written a lovely book about human nature that I'm glad I read.

Would I recommend it: You'll love it if you're in the mood for nostalgia.

As reviewed by Melissa at Every Free Chance Reviews.

Disclosure: I received a complimentary copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

<http://everyfreechance.com/2015/03/me...>

David Pace says

This is an exquisitely wrought book of middle-aged male friendship and its accompanying longing for the ineffable. It is also a lovingly detailed look at small town Mountain America life. That said, life in a the small Wyoming town of Oakpine is not rendered here in a sentimental way. In fact the catalyst for the story is the return of Jimmy who is dying of AIDS. What happens to 50+ year-old-men who once jammed together in a garage band before a tragic accident shortly after high school graduation? Where does everyone go, physically and spiritually? Jimmie ends up in New York City where he becomes an author. Others stay put, or move to nearby Denver to become an attorney. But all of them in this stellar novel gather to pay tribute to the life they once had, the women (and men) with whom they once coupled, had kids, and divorced...or not. And to their haunting past as it is reflected in the present, in their lives, and in the vast landscape and sky of the West. Carlson's language has the authority and tenderness that only a master of the art form can offer.

Charlene Intriago says

This book was just okay for me. The story was so-so and even though there were a couple of times when I could relate to the story and the characters, it just didn't click for me.

David Abrams says

Is there any pen Ron Carlson touches that doesn't turn to gold?

I've fallen headlong in love with every book he's written (with the exception of the best-forgotten *Betrayed* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, an early clunker from 1977). His short story collection *At the Jim Bridger* is damn near perfect; *The Signal* is a harrowing story of wilderness survival; and you won't find a better novel about blue-collar work than in the pages of *Five Skies*.

In *Return to Oakpine*, Carlson turns a sentimental eye (perhaps too sentimental for some readers) on life in a small town. Thirty years after they graduated high school, four friends reunite in their hometown, the fictional Oakpine, Wyoming. Frank, a hardware store owner, and Craig, a bartender, never left. Mason, a freshly divorced lawyer, comes back to Oakpine from Denver looking for "a change, an end, some new chapter in this old life." And then there's Jimmy, who left Oakpine for New York City after the tragic death of his brother. A successful novelist, he's come back to live with his estranged parents because he's dying. Carlson deftly captures the pull-and-resistance feeling of going back to your roots. You *can* go home again, but it's never quite the same, is it? (I speak as one who recently returned to his own hometown in Wyoming after a 15-year absence.)

As Carlson writes of Larry, Craig's ambitious track-star son who runs the length and breadth of Oakpine on a daily basis, "Anybody with any dignity got out of Oakpine....Larry had no idea where he was going, but he was going, that was for sure." Somehow, I get the feeling that if you pay a visit to Craig's hardware store ten years down the line, you'll find Larry there behind the counter.

Return to Oakpine is full of sentences that I kept stopping to re-read, savoring Carlson's wordcraft. For instance, I could practically taste the afternoon of a small town in these fine sentences:

The two men sat in the quiet bar. Suddenly the light dimmed again under a cloud, and it was a moment that went out on them, through the big plate-glass window across the gray street and up above the town in a moment, reaching past the last house and the few bad roads newly bladed into the prairie and the antelope in clusters on greengray hillsides beyond that and then hovering beyond and beyond, the world, their lives, the full gravid sense of afternoon. There was nothing to do or say except ride this part of the day together there, both men feeling the weight register; the men they'd become. It was a beery afternoon in their hometown.

Tuck says

do 50 year olds ever have sex? (i'll not answer that). author carlson sure doesn't think so. some huggin', bit of kissin', a brief torso rub up, but no sex. shame. the high school kids seem to fuck like rabbits in good ole oakpine, but the 50 year olds, nope.

there was a good question here though, in amongst the reminiscences, yuppies bitchin' bout how hardddd life is being a yuppy, a 50 year old yuppy, Q. what does a modern woman want? A. to save the folks in the burning house, to put the fire out, and to be saved from the burning house, by those strong arms.

carlson is probably writing as beautifully as he ever has, and cadences and plant life, and political and social issues, all spot on. i like it better when his stories are about poor people though, his yuppies are so sexless (perhaps carlson has spent too long in huntington beach califa?, that could very easily skew anyone's perspective).

more horses and broke cowboys next time please ron carlson.

ps i DID cry during the battle of the bands/best buddy dying of aids/boy-girl hookup finale. a little anyway.

georgia says

2013 264 pages

the jacket of this book is a terrific set up for the story. I just needed a hammock to read this tender story of men reuniting after a 30 year separation just due to life choices.

This is a story of how a small town tragedy affected all 4 men and some of the women they knew. High school memories are shared, a garage band was created, whose speciality was "Help me Rhonda" and hearts are healed.

Be prepared to laugh and cry. Be prepared to remember your "first" days in high school. Be prepared to look for more pages.
