

Ann Elizabeth Carson's *We All Become Stories* Launched at Gore Bay Museum
By Isobel Harry,
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Ann Elizabeth Carson is a statuesque woman, tall and lean with close-cropped hair and fiercely intelligent eyes. She looks around the gallery at the Gore Bay Museum where her latest book, *We All Become Stories*, is being launched, and acknowledges the assembled audience with a smile. As she reads selected excerpts, her tone is confidential, intimate. People are leaning forward, as though listening to a friend reveal secrets.

We All Become Stories is Ann Elizabeth Carson's fourth book. She has been writing since high school, and is also a poet and sculptor who works in Toronto, and on Manitoulin Island for the last twenty summers. She has given workshops on art and writing and on understanding and enhancing our memory. She's curious about people and believes in the power of creativity to transform lives; these traits inform her latest effort, among her life-long efforts, to link the inner life of humans and the desire for a more fulfilling life.

Biases against aging and old people are deeply entrenched in our youth-obsessed culture and society, and not 'showing one's age' is wildly admired. But there is a movement afoot to redress ageist stereotypes: some attempts are parodies of sorts, "look at us, we're cool, we've had our faces done, we still rock!" Others, more serious, examine issues of well-being, financial security and alternatives to ending one's days lonely and depressed. There are more studies now on the value of older, experienced persons in the workplace and community beyond the cliché retirement age. Other cultures, more respectful of their elders, are being investigated for insights into aging with dignity and usefully, such as in mentoring youth.

Ann Elizabeth Carson synthesizes a lifetime of thought, research and creative work into *We All Become Stories*, through interviews with "12 aging voices – plus one (the author's)" and poems. She spent 30 years, beginning when she was in her forties herself, talking with elders about their lives and the aging process, and "listening deeply". Her interview subjects, the elders, were all seeking "to find a place in a society that seldom welcomes or respects old age" and we journey along with her, meeting "teachers, blue collar workers, clerks, artists, musicians, a librarian, a housewife and a furniture maker, all of European descent ordinary people looking for ways to lead satisfying lives in their old age." Carson met seven of the elders on a remote island off the coast of Maine where she and they spent summer months, the rest are family friends and participants at the seniors' centre in Toronto where she taught memory classes.

Because Ms. Carson is such a good listener with an innate interest in people, her subjects come to the forefront of the book; we learn of the author's concerns through her line of gentle questioning and her unobtrusive asides. The result is that the personality of each speaker is left unmolested by stage direction and shines through the text with a unique voice and free expression. This sense of trust between interviewer and interviewee is extended to the reader, rendering the people and the conversations palpably human: frailties, foibles and all. We feel a bond of kinship with the subject,

and with the writer; these stories are about us all, we learn from them about ourselves and each other.

Thus we see how each speaker is challenging traditional stereotypes of aging: by looking within to discover interests and passions that give meaning to life. This is an act of 'subversion' according to Carson, requiring pushing against the barriers of old age, going against the labels that are affixed and that tend to suffocate; this is no easy task, and "requires enormous resolve and strength." Using the experience of memory, *We All Become Stories* explores 12 very different individual journeys to redefine the meaning of old age and recast it in more life-affirming terms, creating "new ways to take pleasure in life."

We meet Martha, who, reaching back into her roots in religion and finding a God who deemed her worthy of love, began looking at herself and this allowed her to restore her self-esteem, find a supportive community, divorce her demeaning husband, and recover from the deaths of her two sons. She realized that her heart needed to be "a miracle of quiet to endure the intensity" of her life.

All the stories look at the gradual loss of ease of physical movement, as well as of cognitive faculties such as memory, and what each person has done to mitigate these. In the context of old age, what matters most to the storytellers is to find meaning and purpose within the constraints of body and mind that are naturally slowing down and often giving varying degrees of trouble. Reminiscences serve as the key that can unlock a fresh awareness based on learning from past experience, setting the stage for a dynamic life even into old age. Meyer, a musician, says, " the greatest gift we have is consciousness Living or dying, you need to know what's going on in you to be able to cope with the world ... either you ask questions or else you just accept every knock, just lie down and let things happen to you."

Carson's story tellers reveal the ways that "sensory awareness" is critical to understanding and memory. Miriam, a housewife, realized she needed to feel stimulated to feel alive as she aged, but not from current events in the world, or from "all the babble I've heard so many times", but from nature that is "never boring" and from observing people and being attentive to them. She suffered as a child and young woman from lack of attention from her "oblivious father" and "miserable mother", and through a process of conscious remembering, transformed the unhappy memories into what inspires her most in old age, and gives her life meaning now: "attentiveness to the person. So that now, because I know I remember in a sensory way I never have to say I forget. Seeing into, sensing something about what people are really doing ... what they are feeling ... how people's emotions make meaning. That is what people remember and talk about."

Beatrice, a lifelong friend of Ann Elizabeth Carson's mother's, has a physical disability and is living in "The Manor", a seniors' residence, where she quickly found no-one shared her interests. She is old in body, but not in mind: "I didn't think you'd continue to think young," she says, and has kept up her old enthusiasms as much as possible. "You don't turn off, you adapt. You say to yourself that maybe you can't do everything, but you can do something, like finding out if there's a way for disabled people to get into the pool."

We All Become Stories is a necessary addition to the conversations that are occurring around us about the quantity of old people about to monopolize the landscape; the aging “baby boomers” are in the news again, this time for aging in unprecedented numbers. This book is a reminder that aging is a time of great opportunity to re-define oneself, to reject stereotypes imposed by a society that very often pigeonholes old people and restricts their potential.

Carson brings new vigour and vitality to the current debate about aging. *We All Become Stories* is full of hope for a future where it is no longer acceptable to describe old people as relics, as useless and irrelevant, to insist they ‘retire’ and park themselves in a chair to watch the sunset until they simply die of ennui. This work pleads the case for making space for old people to be able to continue participating in and contributing to society, for staying engaged in the world, however they define it for themselves. The stories it tells “are tales of how we grow into our singularity”. The elders in *We All Become Stories* show us that physical failing does not equate to a weak mind or spirit. Carson believes it is that spirit in each person that we must respect and cherish.

Compassionately and poetically, Ann Elizabeth Carson has made an important contribution to the dialogue on aging by reminding us of the dimension of the soul of all humanity.