

SERIAL BOX

A Short Story Collection

By Robert Carnes

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INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of a book's introduction? Think of it like being introduced to a new person.

Meeting new people is awkward, and so is reading a book without knowing any context. The introduction is the ice-breaker to your conversation with a book. And since the author (in this case, me) already knows the book pretty well, they're the ones best suited to writing the introduction.

Just like with introductions between people, book introductions are best kept short.

Book, this is Reader. They're going to be looking at your pages for a little while.

Reader, this is Book. They have some words you might be interested in seeing.

This book is a short story collection. More than that, each story is a collection of smaller stories. Kind of like a Russian nesting doll. That's the one thing each work has in common—they're all made up of small fragments, which fit together to form a larger narrative. Kind of like a mosaic. Each story is told in a serialized format. And this collection boxes them all together. Thus the title.

I've written short introductions to most of these individual pieces to provide some additional context and to help make some sense of the nonsense you're reading.

Consider the literary ice broken. Now go read.

LISTORIES

I took a creative writing class in college. One of the assignments was to write a book where all of the chapters were exactly one sentence. The minimum requirement was to write ten chapters. I wrote one hundred and one chapters. Which isn't that crazy, because they were all just a sentence.

The first ten sentences were as random as I could imagine. From there, I tried to piece together a narrative. With some tweaking, I somewhat managed it. I added some more sentences. And a story gradually started to take shape.

That assignment was my first experience with what Stephen King describes as discovering a story. I didn't have a story in mind and when I sat down to write it. Instead, I started writing and Barking Mad just sort of appeared as I went along.

Out of necessity, I've made some adaptations to that story through the years. But it still remains to this day one of my favorite things I've ever written. It's weird and dark. I honestly don't know exactly what's going on. It's kind of like a mystery with clues you have to figure out for yourself.

I had so much fun writing that story that I set out to write a few more like it. Like the first, they're all lists of single sentences that make up a sort of disjointed narrative.

For that reason, I call them Listories. I'd always wanted to invent a portmanteau. And now I have.

BARKING MAD

A Case of Canine Carnage

Cave tibi cane muto, aqua silente.
Beware of silent dogs and still waters.
— *Latin proverb*

- Chapter 1 Dogs are always heavier than they appear.
- Chapter 2 The water was cold.
- Chapter 3 When the alarm clock howled at 6:15 a.m.,
he was already awake.
- Chapter 4 “How did you sleep?” she asked.
- Chapter 5 That morning, a body was found floating in
the pond.
- Chapter 6 Nothing in the newspapers revealed the ugly
truth.
- Chapter 7 Blood stains.
- Chapter 8 He no longer wore his favorite blue shirt to
work.
- Chapter 9 A white van collided with an Irish setter trav-
eling 42 miles per hour.
- Chapter 10 Every afternoon, she swam laps at the gym-
nasium pool.
- Chapter 11 Even while swimming, she wore the gold
necklace, which had been a gift.
- Chapter 12 By the time he arrived home from work, the
pot roast was cold.
- Chapter 13 Carrots improve eyesight, but not our under-
standing of the human condition.
- Chapter 14 Dogs don’t wear glasses.
- Chapter 15 At dinner, he tried to say “I love you,” but
nothing came out.

- Chapter 16 Love does not float in water, because love is heavy.
- Chapter 17 During the night, a coyote's cry was silenced by a gunshot.
- Chapter 18 Clues in the police report all led to dead ends.
- Chapter 19 Discoveries can be shocking.
- Chapter 20 The electric collar had been wired to channel 5,000 volts.
- Chapter 21 On the evening news, the anchor described the incidents as disturbing.
- Chapter 22 "Neither rain nor sleep nor snow," joked his boss.
- Chapter 23 Weighed down as it was, the burlap sack sank quickly to the bottom.
- Chapter 24 The litter was trash.
- Chapter 25 A news article mistakenly said only been twelve dead puppies had been found.
- Chapter 26 Sleeping dogs don't lie.
- Chapter 27 With his hair trimmed, he looked like a new man.
- Chapter 28 All men are male, but not all men are mailmen.
- Chapter 29 Clumps of hair on the barbershop floor made his skin crawl.
- Chapter 30 "Do you have to work so late?" she asked.
- Chapter 31 He did calisthenics in the dark while the city slept.
- Chapter 32 Insomnia ran in his family like an erratic marathon.
- Chapter 33 The noise persisted deep into the night.
- Chapter 34 Silence hounded him.
- Chapter 35 Neighbors began taking leash laws seriously.
- Chapter 36 Man's best friend had found an enemy.
- Chapter 37 The fear of hair is called chaetophobia.

- Chapter 38 The wool sweater itched fiercely, but it was a gift from her.
- Chapter 39 Hair smells awful when it burns.
- Chapter 40 Dental records revealed that it had once been a Saint Bernard.
- Chapter 41 The candle wasn't the only thing he was burning at both ends.
- Chapter 42 Reservations for the bayside restaurant had to be made weeks in advance.
- Chapter 43 Baked potatoes do not make sufficient conversation pieces.
- Chapter 44 The chatty waiter interrupted the silent meal to refill his glass of water.
- Chapter 45 Dancing around the truth requires no music.
- Chapter 46 At night, the park was deserted.
- Chapter 47 Wind shook the trees as though it meant to harm them.
- Chapter 48 Murder is not an effective means of communication.
- Chapter 49 "I always enjoy our one-sided conversations," said his father on the phone.
- Chapter 50 While the gym was closed for renovations, she picked up gardening.
- Chapter 51 One of the workers vomited into his orange hard hat upon seeing what had been done with the forklift.
- Chapter 52 Construction was delayed three days.
- Chapter 53 Bloodhound became an unfortunately applicable name for the breed.
- Chapter 54 Not all societies are humane.
- Chapter 55 Tomato plants grew faster than expected in the fertile backyard.
- Chapter 56 Dogs are not the only ones who bury bones.
- Chapter 57 The question he yearned to ask would remain unanswered.

- Chapter 58 Who watches the watchdogs?
- Chapter 59 Investigators had no leads.
- Chapter 60 The assumption that no news is good news is dead wrong.
- Chapter 61 “Are you enjoying the meatloaf?” she asked.
- Chapter 62 Revenge is a dish best served cold.
- Chapter 63 Dogs don’t take revenge.
- Chapter 64 Periodically, he would daydream about swimming together in the pond he drove past on his route.
- Chapter 65 Long-term sleep deprivation has been known to cause death in lab animals.
- Chapter 66 Science could not explain what had been done to the poodle.
- Chapter 67 Morticians are not so easily distraught.
- Chapter 68 “This cold front will bring in the first signs of winter weather,” explained the meteorologist on the morning broadcast.
- Chapter 69 Detectives were thrown off the scent.
- Chapter 70 “If silence is golden, then you’ve found Midas,” muttered her mother over the phone.
- Chapter 71 Her hair hung limp as she changed out of her wet swimsuit.
- Chapter 72 The gold necklace showed evidence of rust around the edges.
- Chapter 73 Wet dogs smell like wet dog.
- Chapter 74 The Golden Retriever could no longer doggie paddle.
- Chapter 75 Proof was buried beneath the frozen surface.
- Chapter 76 Words, like bodies of water, are always deeper than first imagined.
- Chapter 77 Snow is just colder water.
- Chapter 78 Sitting by the fireplace, she painted a watercolor of the barren landscape.

- Chapter 79 On the muted television, the meteorologist chatted casually with the news anchor about the frigid conditions.
- Chapter 80 Lasagna tastes better when eaten by candlelight after the power has gone out.
- Chapter 81 Cold shoulders eventually thaw.
- Chapter 82 Red wine spilled onto the canvas, adding color to the white background.
- Chapter 83 She hung the painting above the bed.
- Chapter 84 At 2:45 a.m., the lights suddenly came back on.
- Chapter 85 “Were you watching me sleep?” she asked.
- Chapter 86 Newspaper clippings yellowed as the news went cold.
- Chapter 87 Children played in the snow without any great concern for their safety.
- Chapter 88 So much for the azaleas.
- Chapter 89 Like her, the puppy came neutered.
- Chapter 90 A pet was the only gift she could give.
- Chapter 91 He could no longer conceal his disappointment.
- Chapter 92 Secrets cease being secrets when everyone knows.
- Chapter 93 Dogs are guilty until proven innocent.
- Chapter 94 Not every man can speak, but even a dog can bark.
- Chapter 95 He had no bark, only bite.
- Chapter 96 He rolled up his shirt sleeves to the elbow.
- Chapter 97 As the phone rang, water spilled over the edge of the tub.
- Chapter 98 Submerged, her hair looked brown.
- Chapter 99 The police would find no signs of foul play.
- Chapter 100 A funeral requires death, but not vice versa.
- Chapter 101 Woof.

STUCK

*“Frisbeetarianism is the belief that when you die,
your soul goes up on the roof and gets stuck.”*

— *George Carlin*

In the television business, a bottle episode is a term that refers to an episode with specific limitations. For example, it could take place on a single day or within a single room, with only specific characters. It’s as if these episodes are each a ship in a bottle, containing only what is inside.

Initially, these episodes were written to save time and money. Because it meant using less set pieces and fewer actors. However, there is a certain beauty in the limitations of bottle episodes. Just like a ship in a bottle, they must be crafted carefully and paying attention to detail.

These stories are my own version of bottle episodes—because each one involves people getting stuck in certain places. Each one is an experiment of wedging a character in place and watching to see what happens.

Church Confessional

Wayne Gilbert had been confessing that he'd killed Princess Diana when he realized that the father was no longer listening.

In fact, he was no longer there. Wayne had been so deeply focused on his prayerful admissions that he'd not noticed the reverend sneak out of the other side.

Of course, all of Wayne's confessions were fake.

If he'd been telling the truth to the padre, that would be the first one he'd need to cop to—bearing false witness. Because Wayne Gilbert had been lying to the Lord through the men of the cloth for over twenty years now.

It felt good to confess. And the preacher was bound by God to not utter a word of what was said in the cozy confines of the confessional booth to anyone but the Heavenly Father Himself. And of course, the big man upstairs already knew Wayne Gilbert's sins. None of which Wayne actually bothered to share with the minister.

Wayne enjoyed confessing to elaborately untrue sins because it helped him live with the sins he'd actually committed. Like shoplifting as a teenager. And having premarital intercourse with several women—one of whom was married at the time. But Wayne had no interest in telling tales of what he'd done. He'd rather share about what he wished he could.

Over the years, Wayne had confessed to murder, arson, vandalism, rape, grand theft auto and minor acts of domestic terrorism. He improvised in excruciating detail his imaginary exploits. Each confession was even

more exaggerated and ridiculous than the one before.

Wayne didn't fooling himself into thinking that the priests actually believed the lies he told. Not even a blind monk would believe that a 42-year-old man with a tenth-grade education and a station wagon was capable of stealing the tyrannosaurus Rex skull from the Smithsonian Museum and beating Elvis to death with it while watching pornography. That would surely have made the evening news.

But Wayne took grim satisfaction in the fact that the vicar was stuck in the confessional booth, same as him. As long as Wayne kept fibbing, he could keep the cleric occupied in the wooden box. Which was that much less time the holy man had to try and convert more people to his hokey religion. Nor could the preacher deny Wayne the chance to confess, or call him a liar and throw him out. That was the beauty of the confessional—it was a true judgement-free zone. The dirtier he acted inside, the cleaner he felt when he re-emerged an hour later, with his imaginary burdens lifted.

This time, however, the bishop had flown the coop. He'd snuck out at some point when Wayne was illustrating how he had sodomized the entire British royal family with an illegally poached Black rhino horn. Wayne had been particularly proud of that work of fiction. But the priest had missed the whole thing. There was some twisted part of Wayne Gilbert that imagined the clergy got as much enjoyment out of his little charade as he did. After all, the stories were downright entertaining.

Regardless, he would show himself out of the church and come back next Saturday for another ses-

sion. Wayne had already started thinking of fresh new wrongdoings to admit to. But the confessional door was stuck. He tried it again, but it wouldn't budge. He jiggled the handle—no luck. He put his shoulder into it—still nothing. What in the devil was going on?

Unbeknownst to Wayne, the minister had grown weary of the obvious falsehoods and taken it upon himself to teach the dishonest miscreant a lesson. He'd snuck out mid-confession and slid several heavy church pews against the door of the confessional booth. It would give the poor man a scare, but the priest would let him out again in due time.

Inside the confessional, Wayne Gilbert began to sweat. He'd never been claustrophobic before, but the walls of the booth seemed to be shrinking in around him. It was as if he was in his own coffin and being lowered into the ground for his final resting place. He gasped for air. This is it, he thought to himself. This is the end.

Panicking, Wayne dropped to his knees and began to pray.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Carnes is a freelance writer and storyteller. He's the author of *The Original Storyteller: Becoming a Better Storyteller in 30 Days*. He regularly contributes to several blogs and online publications.

Carnes has worked for a number of years in marketing and communications for churches and non-profits. He currently serves as a writer and editor at Orange—an organization that influences those who influence the next generation.

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ABOUT *THE ORIGINAL STORYTELLER*

The *Original Storyteller* is another book by Robert Carnes. If you liked this one, maybe you should check it out, too.

Stories are everywhere. They are the common theme shared by all people. They exist in every language, culture, time period and nation. Stories engage and entertain. They create emotion and empathy. Stories unite and connect.

But why? What makes stories so powerful? Why are they so universal? How is a good story able to penetrate the distractions of a busy world? What causes a story to activate the minds of people anywhere?

The *Original Storyteller* seeks to answer those questions through the lens of God's stories. He is the first and best storyteller. His stories reveal the essence of all great stories. Take the 30-day journey towards becoming a better storyteller.

Go to OriginalStoryteller.com to find out more.