
David R. Johnson. *Conrad Richter: A Writer's Life*. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. 407p.

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Carl Richter (1890-1968), novelist and regional writer of the American West, also authored a little-read treatise on human consciousness and alternative spirituality: *Human Vibration: The Mechanics of Life and Mind*. He struggled and clearly suffered in order to support his family with his writing. Unlike more popular American authors such as Cather, Steinbeck, or Hemingway, fame eluded Richter and circumstance threw him into debt, making him at times despondent. Fortunately for us, Richter was also a compulsive diarist who charted the ups and downs of his marital, professional, scientific, artistic, and spiritual lives.

A native New Yorker unfamiliar with Richter's writing, I was drawn to David Johnson's biography, *Conrad Richter: A Writer's Life*. As a budding story writer and teacher of the novel form, I discovered that I was learning from the challenges and disheartening rejections Richter faced as he honed his craft. The record of his correspondence with interested editors willing to help him with close critiques constitutes a treatise on how to write *marketable* narrative.

Johnson's well-paced chronological approach offers us a context for the intense intellectual, artistic, and spiritual questioning permeating Richter's diaries and fiction. And Johnson succeeds in offering us the family context behind the emotional disturbances that wracked Richter's life, at times keeping him from writing. Morbidly private and so shy that he refused to speak in public, Richter searched for answers to some of life's largest, most unanswerable questions, such as whether God is a universal principle of order.

Richter's meditation on the purpose of human suffering and its part in a divine plan, parallels his fiction interests—stories featuring strong-willed characters who succumb neither to physical nor psychic despair. Johnson sketches for us the complex portrait of a young man both ambitious and dogged, whose desire to succeed as a writer is so fierce that he makes it happen despite discouraging rejections and repeated nervous collapse.

Richter's creative saga also reveals the portrait of an artist as a young, and aging, man. Johnson includes lifetime correspondence between editors, agents, and Richter, their advice providing him, and us, invaluable guidance. Later we see the author in his at-times stormy relationship with powerful New York publisher Alfred Knopf, a lifelong admirer of Richter's writing. Johnson's inclusion of the

economic travails Richter experiences offers readers a fuller understanding of the market and business aspects of a writer's career.

Scholars of twentieth-century literature will find interest in this well-researched history of a writer's sometimes painful journey to produce consistently high-quality writing over several decades. Richter's dealings with Hollywood, where he felt ill-at-ease and superfluous, provide added nuance to a man we learn cannot be corrupted by the promise of fame and wealth.

Johnson's biography also provides a close look at the genesis and production of twentieth-century American literature of the West. While Richter's early stories focused on the pioneer men and women who crossed the plains to settle America, wife Harvena Richter's health problems brought them to Albuquerque. There the author came in contact with a dying breed of cowboys and ranchers, homesteaders and their women, whose passing would signal the loss of old frontier ways. Richter listened and recorded the stories; they would serve as basis for short fiction and novels such as his first, *The Sea of Grass*.

As literary biography, Johnson's work is thorough, perceptive, and rendered in writing both clear and accessible. He appreciates Richter's uniqueness, for the novelist was an avid student of philosophical and psychological movements. Richter's biography offers an insightful reading of Richter as writer, by a scholar able to appreciate Richter as a person aspiring to a life of higher possibility. Johnson's nimble interweaving of Richter's personal history and artistic progress inspired me to read Richter. Before long I was taken with his strong, evocative prose. Even the flaws in *The Sea of Grass* are instructive—so much so, I assigned the book to my novel-writing class.

For teachers of literature, Western or otherwise, Richter's regional themes offer good examples of how the West has been represented in the early part of the early twentieth century as the frontier fast disappeared. Richter's fortunes rise as soon as he taps into the mythic version of the West Americans love: as full of larger than life men and women in a land still untamed, still full of possibility. My students will get to explore the achievements and weaknesses in Richter's inaugural novel using Johnson's chapter on that novel. And, for those of us actively struggling with our own artistic demons, Richter's odyssey proves pertinent, and, dare I say it, inspirational. ✨