



Courtesy of Bob Carr

BIOGRAPHY

James Lloyd Carr was born in Yorkshire in 1912. Carr joined the Royal Air Force and served in Sierra Leone during the Second World War; served for more than a decade as a famously unorthodox headmaster of a British secondary school; launched a successful cottage industry publishing business; and wrote two books that were shortlisted for the Booker Prize: *A Month in the Country* (1980) and *Pollock's Crossing* (1985). *A Month in the Country* won the Guardian Fiction Prize and was made into a 1987 film written by Simon Gray and starring Kenneth Branagh, Colin Firth, and Natasha Richardson. Carr died in 1994.

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

by J. L. Carr

Introduction by Michael Holroyd

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“Carr’s prose is spare, elegant and buoyed with wit; the idyllic countryside and its inhabitants are rendered in affectionate detail.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Carr’s blessedly small tale of lost love is also a small hymn about art and the compensating joy of the artist, both in giving and receiving.

It stays with us, too, and is oddly haunting.” —*The New Yorker*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

A Month in the Country is J.L. Carr’s novel about a shell-shocked veteran of the First World War. Afflicted both by a nervous condition brought on by his experience of battle and by his wife’s betrayal of him while he was away at war, Tom Birkin comes to the village of Oxgodby to restore a medieval painting in a church. There, during a glorious English summer, he slowly begins to heal. Befriended by his neighbors, including Moon, a fellow veteran, and the family of fourteen-year-old Kathy Ellerbeck, he grows to feel at home in the village. He later falls in love with the bewitching and lonely Alice Keach, who is unhappily married to the disagreeable vicar. With each day that passes, more of the miraculous, apocalyptic painting is revealed, and Birkin begins to feel a mysterious kinship with the unknown artist who toiled in Oxgodby so long ago. But as summer wanes and his work comes to an end, Birkin must move on. Recounting these events many years later, he looks back on the summer of 1920 with a poignant sense of loss and longing—fleeting though that month in the country was, it has left an indelible impression on him. In the end, J.L. Carr’s deceptively simple story is a meditation on the redemptive power of art and community.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Moon tells Birkin that “Oxgodby’s just about ironed you out” (p. 97). What about life at Oxgodby allows Birkin to begin to heal from the emotional scars of the war and his broken marriage?
2. How does Carr use descriptions of the natural world to evoke mood and tone? How does nature affect Birkin? How integral is it to his recovery?
3. Birkin believes that in the mural, the nameless painter is saying, “If any part of me survives from time’s corruption, let it be this. For this was the sort of man I was” (p. 35). How does Birkin’s experience in the War deepen the connection he feels, both to the painter and to the long gone congregations who used to see his painting each time they came to church?
4. How well educated is Birkin? How do you know? Is it surprising that someone with his education is doing the work he is doing? Why do you think he’s chosen to do this work?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

The Go-Between

L. P. Hartley
(introduction by Colm Tóibín)

The Fountain Overflows

Rebecca West
(introduction by Andrea Barrett)

Cassandra at the Wedding

Dorothy Baker
(afterword by Deborah Eisenberg)

My Father and Myself

J. R. Ackerley
(introduction by W. H. Auden)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Thomas Hardy,
Under the Greenwood Tree

Ernest Hemingway,
The Sun Also Rises

Marcel Proust,
Remembrance of Things Past

Kazuo Ishiguro,
The Remains of the Day

Pat Barker, *Regeneration*

Tim O'Brien,
In the Lake of the Woods

Michael Frayn, *Headlong*

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

A Month in the Country, starring Colin Firth, Kenneth Branagh and Natasha Richardson, directed by Pat O'Connor (film, England, 1987)

5. Why do you think Carr chose to have the narrator tell the story forty or fifty years after the events it describes?
6. Why does Birkin instantly like Moon? Why does Birkin feel that he and Kathy Ellerbeck are kindred spirits? How would you describe Moon and Kathy?
7. Discuss the significance of the three epigraphs.
8. Birkin says, "Nothing's so secret as what's between man and wife" (p. 96). What is your impression of the Keachs' marriage? Why do the vicar and his wife seem so different inside their house than they do outside it? When Keach gives Birkin his final payment, does Keach's appeal for sympathy change your impression of him?
9. "It simply isn't possible to return a five-hundred-year-old wall-painting to its original state. At best, I aimed at approximation, uniformity, something that looked right" (p. 46). What are some parallels between the task of restoring the painting and the task of restoring Birkin's emotional health after the War?
10. Death haunts the novel, from those killed on the battlefields, to the man whose remains Moon has been hired to exhume, to Birkin's reflections on the long-deceased painter and former patrons of the church. In light of the universality—and often the horror—of death, what effect does the death of young Emily Clough have on Birkin? On you as a reader?
11. "And I did nothing and said nothing" (p. 129). Why does Birkin allow the moment in the church with Alice Keach to pass? Why does she still haunt him so many years later? Why does she ask Birkin about hell?
12. Many years after leaving Oxgodby, Birkin's memories of his time there remain vivid, and he continues to feel fond affection for the people he knew there. Why, then, didn't he ever make any effort to stay in touch with any of them?