

The University of **North Carolina** Press

A Conversation with Tom Carlson

Author of *Hatteras Blues: A Story from the Edge of America*

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Q: What is *Hatteras Blues: A Story from the Edge of America* about?

A: The thumbnail answer is that *Hatteras Blues* is about the First Family of Fishing on the Outer Banks—the Foster clan—how they began the multimillion dollar sportfishing industry there and how little Hatteras Village became known as “The Gamefish Capital of the World.” That is the ballast—the bare bones of the narrative.

Q: You mention that “The story of the Foster family and the people of Hatteras Village is, in many ways, the story of us all.” How so?

A: The rags-to-riches story of a poor family succeeding through pluck and luck, a small town prospering through hard work, shared values, and a firm faith traceable back through Ben Franklin and the Mayflower Compact—*Hatteras Blues* is not simply a local color history—I believe it’s a thoroughly American parable we can all relate to.

Q: But you say too that *Hatteras Blues* is very much a story about loss

A: Yes, that is part of the American parable. Nothing stays still in our lives here. Cycle and loss are part of it. The same spirit of American Progress that helped the Fosters and Hatteras Village succeed is now consuming them. “Go fast” charter boats with all the space age amenities are beating the *Albatross* boats out to the fishing grounds now, and development is seriously threatening one of the last true fishing villages in North Carolina.

Q: Your book focuses on Hatteras Island and the North Carolina coast. Do you think it will be of interest beyond North Carolina and neighboring coastal states?

A: They say all politics is local. I think you can say the same for stories—especially true stories. They have to be located somewhere, of course. But if you’re good enough, you find the universal thread in the particular, the local, and in the end people respond to the familiar human drama of the narrative, no matter where it takes place.

Q: You taught creative nonfiction and American literature for thirty-two years at the University of Memphis. You’re now retired, and this is your first book for the general reader. How did you find your subject?

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A: Yes, this is my first book-length piece of nonfiction, but I've been publishing magazine pieces for years on subjects ranging from pet cemeteries and pigeon racing, to Romanian gypsies, Elvis impersonators, and the overnight train from Nairobi to Mombasa. If you open yourself to experience, your subject matter always finds you. In the case of *Hatteras Blues*, it began with a fifteen-year-old picture I had in my head of the original *Albatross* boat. I saw it in 1984 on a trip to the Outer Banks. It wouldn't go away. As a writer you learn to pay attention to such low-grade obsessions.

Q: Although you're not from the North Carolina Coast, you developed a fast camaraderie with the Foster family and other townspeople of Hatteras Village. How did you develop the necessary rapport with them to tell this story?

A: I grew up in a small resort/fishing town in New Jersey, sixty miles south of New York City. My parents had a little restaurant on the beach. The commercial and sportfishing captains came in all the time. As a boy, I served them coffee and donuts and never tired of listening to their stories.

Q: Your book came to the University of North Carolina Press "over the transom." Tell me about the process of finding a publisher for your book.

A: If you're willing to leave your baby on a doorstep, you should know who will find it. UNC Press was the first place I sent *Hatteras Blues*. UNC Press has a long and storied reputation. I reviewed their lists, read a number of their titles, and was amazed at the texts and the beautiful ways they were designed and presented. And then I was fortunate that the editor who opened the door was David Perry. A little homework, a little luck, a shrewd, open-minded first reader. . . .

Q: What is your writing schedule like?

A: No bus line could operate on my schedule—though I do most of my writing in the morning when my head is clearer. In the afternoons I organize notes, read, rewrite. The mornings are hardest, by far. It may seem sad, but sometimes a single polished paragraph will convince a grown man that he's done a good day's work.

Q: Do you have any advice for would-be writers?

A: Well, I was a writing teacher so they paid me to be full of ideas for would-be writers. The trouble is, I'm not sure any of the ideas are any good. The one mistake I've seen beginning writers make is that they want to write before they read. You've got to read a great deal before you write. When you write, you're participating in an ongoing conversation. You need to understand that conversation as intimately as you can.

Q: What kind of future do you see for the Outer Banks and its sportfishing industry?

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A: There will always be boats at Oregon Inlet, at Hatteras Village, over on Ocracoke. And there'll always be fish. But what is disappearing is a way of life, a culture, a system of values, a community, even an accent. You still can get these with the price of fishing charter on some boats and with a handful of captains, but it's getting more difficult as the industry turns corporate and impersonal.

Q: Did writing about bluewater sportfishing present any particular challenges? Or, what did you find most challenging when writing *Hatteras Blues*?

A: The hardest part of writing this book had nothing to do with the original subject matter. The Fosters opened their lives and their livelihood to me, and I listened as carefully as I could. The village opened its doors to me. I simply listened. The hardest part for me was the revelation I had in the middle of writing this book. It was very personal—my wife was dying as I was writing this book. It was something I struggled with very deeply. In the end, the Fosters and the townspeople, facing their losses, taught me how to grieve with some measure of dignity and grace. It was a great gift. And it became part of the book.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I'm finishing another piece of nonfiction—a memoir for want of a better label—tentatively titled *Penny Arcadia: Coming of Age at the Jersey Shore*. The challenge once again is to make an apparently ordinary life—mine—interesting and relevant. It would help, I suppose, if I were a celebrity or a serial killer, but I'm not. Alas.

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