

Interview with Carol SeCoy, author of *The Bag Lady War: A Novel*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Carol Leonard SeCoy, who is here to talk about her new novel "The Bag Lady War."

Carol grew up in Oregon, enjoying the closeness and clamor of a family of nine children, and met her husband, Jack, on a blind date at the University of Oregon. They lived in Southern California for many years, where Jack and three other partners were lumber brokers. Carol was very active in the community while raising their family of five daughters. When the last child went off to college, Carol became the SAT Coordinator for the Stanley H. Kaplan Educational Center in Orange County. Carol and Jack have been married for 57 years and have eight grandchildren, of whom they are very proud.

Carol and Jack have traveled extensively, sometimes with a hiking group and other times with friends or on tour. When not traveling or hiking or with family, they are usually at the gym, in class at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, or Carol is writing. After Jack's retirement they moved back to Ashland, Oregon, where Carol is a volunteer for the Tudor Guild of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Tyler: Welcome, Carol. I must say the idea behind "The Bag Lady War" is one of the most original I have come across in some time. I'm sure you can explain it better than I can, so to begin, will you tell us what happens in the novel's opening scene?

Carol: In the opening scene, Josie is roughed-up and robbed by young gang members near her home. She and her friend, Mabel, have both been widowed by street criminals, and this is the last straw. Faced with living behind locks and bars to be safe in their homes, and being prey to just such shenanigans when they step outside, they feel utterly defeated. They are barely making it on their tiny incomes, and worry about their future. If only they could live in a safe retirement community where all their needs would be met...

Tyler: What do Josie and Mabel decide to do about the situation?

Carol: They hear Senator Bart Farley on TV, haranguing for the use of Social Security funds to build more prisons, his idea of war on crime. The women panic, knowing they will be in deep financial trouble if their small pensions are reduced any further. In a flash of brilliance they realize that if they have to live behind locks and bars anyway, they may as well live in the safety of prison, where there is also free food, clothing, and medical care. Besides, they would then be in the company of younger women instead of eventually being shunted off to a depressing, state-sponsored nursing home, where everyone is old and ill and "just waiting for the last bell to ring." To the urging of John F. Kennedy's famous words, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country," they learn to use a gun and set out to wage their own war on crime. Feeling like one of George H. Bush's "Thousand Points of Light" and not wanting to be a burden to the government, they plan to remove enough criminals—and their cost and nuisance—to offset the cost of their own incarceration.

Tyler: Carol, will you tell us a little about the tone of the book—to what extent is this situation of two elderly women taking the law into their own hands satire and to what degree is it serious?

Carol: Considering that everything serious the women do is written in satire, that's a hard one. One of my book clubs applauded my characters for being pro-active! Most of the book is simply entertaining, but a serious message is often just below the surface.

Tyler: Where did you get the idea for Senator Farley and his ideas to cut Social Security to fund prisons?

Carol: My story probably began in the '60's, when President Lyndon Johnson quietly transferred the cash-cow Social Security Fund into the General Fund to make the national debt appear smaller and to give Congress more money to work with. Following his lead, every administration since has tinkered with the Social Security Fund, stretching it to cover many other programs. Who would have dreamed such a thing could happen? Workers who entrusted the government with their retirement money would one day discover the fund had been used for other purposes, and they, the folks who counted on that little pension, could be left out on a limb. If you do the math, you would find that, left alone, the fund would have continued to produce indefinitely. So, here we have Senator Farley with his hand out, stumping for more Social Security money. Of course, only in satire could it be so blatant!

Tyler: While the novel is satire, what is the point you want to make about the elderly and social security?

Carol: Most people don't know about the corruption of the Social Security Fund. While it was never intended to be enough to live on, but only an augmentation of other savings, our seniors have grown to depend on it in this time of increasing inflation. The sad thing is that the nation has been led to believe that it is our seniors who are to blame for the shrinking Social Security Fund, and they take the heat for living too long and bankrupting the system.

Tyler: Do Josie and Mabel have much success in killing criminals, and how, at their advanced ages, are they able to carry the killings off?

Carol: Josie and Mabel quickly discover that old folks are seldom noticed, which gives them great latitude of movement. And with only one exception, their victims always approach them first to rob them. So it's really more of a point-and-shoot maneuver.

Tyler: What kind of response have you received from elderly readers? Do they feel the situation you describe reflects an understanding of the difficulties the elderly face?

Carol: Goodness, yes. It's been most gratifying to have such a great response from my readers, elderly and no-so-elderly. There has been a flurry of book club reviews, and I've received a stack of heartening notes and emails. The Ashland Community Theater made a successful play reading from the first chapter of "*The Bag Lady War*," and I've been interviewed on local radio, newspaper and TV (to be on Youtube late this fall) and have had several speaking engagements, with more lined up. The book apparently hits close to home for many—there is always a waiting list to check it out at our local library and at the library in Mountain Meadows, a large retirement community in Ashland. The most commonly-heard comment has been, "This ought to be a movie!"

Tyler: Carol, if it were a movie, have you given any thought to whom would play your two main characters?

Carol: At the time I started "*The Bag Lady War*" I had Sada Thompson, one of my sons-in-law's aunt, in mind for Mabel. She would have been wonderful. However, by the time I finished the book, Sada had retired. And Estelle Getty would have been a great Josie. Sadly, she's gone now. But I can see Olympia Dukakis as a spirited Mil.

Tyler: I understand you did some research about prisons while writing "*The Bag Lady War*." Will you tell us about the research? What did you find most interesting? Is there an elderly woman population in prisons?

Carol: I owe a big debt of gratitude to the staff of the California Institution for Women at Corona. I was shown around and given every bit of information I asked for—and then some—in ensuing correspondence. Corona is the smallest and newest of the women's prisons, and is referred to as "The Campus" because it is laid out that way. It hardly looks like a prison. I am proud to say that one of my most encouraging reviews for "*The Bag Lady War*" came from the Associate Warden. As to an elderly population in prison, it was very low at the time of my visit, but I understand it is rapidly growing. Just weeks ago a couple in Spokane, Washington, robbed a bank so the wife could get medical care in prison. I think the word is out!

I was very impressed with the thrust of the prison's operation. Many of the residents are getting, maybe for the first time in their lives, a sense of constructive discipline and cooperation.

Tyler: Wow, Carol. I'm surprised and yet not surprised that the elderly would commit a crime to go to prison so they get health care. Do you know anything about the statistics of the elderly who really are in rather desperate situations?

Carol: Fortunately, many of our desperate elderly can live with family. But statistics show that poverty among elderly women living alone is higher in the United States than in many other rich countries. California alone estimates that 43.2% of its elderly would have been considered living below the poverty level without Social Security. With Social Security, that rate is reduced to 12.5%. What a big statistical difference a few hundred dollars can make!

Tyler: Besides using your novel to be an advocate for the elderly, what are some of the other social issues you raise in your novel?

Carol: Assisted suicide was a big one. Handled tenderly, it seemed to make a lot of sense to my readers. The release from mental institutions of the mentally ill was another one. Again, not many people know that it was the ACLU, in the 80's, who forced the issue. They interpreted the law forbidding incarceration against one's will UNLESS A CRIME HAS BEEN COMMITTED to include the mentally ill, and threatened massive lawsuits if they were not freed from their institutions—if it could not be proved they had committed a crime. Unable to care for themselves, many settled in on the streets and fell prey to drugs, resorting to crime to get along. And there we see them today, living a tough life and often making life tough for others, especially the weak and elderly.

Tyler: Carol, besides feeling entertained, what response do you hope from readers?

Carol: I would just like them to think. To look around and observe how their country is running, to wonder whether this is the best we can do. Who knows—one of them might do something about getting us back on track.

Tyler: Carol, do you have any more novels you are currently working on?

Carol: Yes, I am working on "Lightly Dusted Crow," another satire, but this time on domestic violence. I hope for its release sometime next summer. Then I want to finish a book I started many years ago about my Hopi Indian Godfather. Such a special man, with a very special story. This will not be satire!

Tyler: Carol, what would you say motivates your ideas, and why do you choose to use satire rather than a more serious form of writing to illustrate your points?

Carol: It seems our nation has taken a wide turn from its intended course. Our founding fathers set the standard, pledging their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to create the greatest democracy on earth, and citizens once strived to fulfill their dream. Children once looked to their parents and other adults for guidance, rather than to rock stars and street people. And no one sang of killing and raping. Watching our nation unravel has been painful.

Why satire? Because no one wants to be preached to. No one wants to read a diatribe on the nation's ills. But satire, spiced with irony and pathos, and sweetened with a large dose of humor, pulls the reader into the story. If the reader can identify with the characters enough to care what happens to them, he will suspend reason and accept (well, almost!) the writer's points of view, as preposterous as his solution may be to a grave situation.

Tyler: Do you have a favorite scene that you think is particularly humorous, or would you quote a paragraph or two for us so we can get a sense of your writing style?

Carol: The scene takes place in the judge's chamber, after the women's trial and before their sentencing. The judge is talking to the detectives and sheriff he called in for counsel.

"Folks," he said, "those three old ladies have us in a no-win situation, and we can't do a damn thing about it. They're going to get just what they wanted. And we'd better pray it doesn't start a trend!"
He snorted at the irony of it.
"Women and their logic. God help us all! Any of you remember *Arsenic and Old Lace*?" he asked as they

turned to go. “Some other kindly old women on a mission to kill misfits. They belonged in the loony bin, but these three know exactly what they’re doing. And damned if that little bitty one doesn’t remind me of my grandma. A perfect lady, but back her into a corner and look out! Oh boy,” he said wearily, “Grandma would have loved this!”

Tyler: Thank you, Carol, for the interview today. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website or where online they may find additional information about “The Bag Lady War?”

Carol: Thank you, Tyler. My website is www.carolsecoy.com. There you can find updates on “Lightly Dusted Crow,” read some of my poetry, and keep up with “The Bag Lady War” events. You will also find reader reviews on barnesandnoble.com and amazon.com. Do check in!

Tyler: Thank you, Carol, for the interview. “The Bag Lady War” is quite a story. I wish you much success with it.

[Listen to interview on Inside Scoop Live](#)

[Read Review of The Bag Lady War](#)