

Roger Caron: On to a new life

Part One
by Gilbert Bouchard

Roger Caron, novelist and lecturer, spoke last Tuesday in SUB Theatre. Caron is the second in a Students' Union sponsored speakers series.

Caron speaks through the Solicitor-General's office, as a cross-country spokesperson for the parole system, and privately through the Canadian Programming Service (CPS).

The CPS is a wholly-owned service of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS).

Caron, nicknamed "Mad Dog Caron" was interviewed by the Gateway in his hotel suite last Tuesday afternoon.

February, 1956: There were eight of us prisoners chained and seated on one side of the clattering passenger car- while across the aisle sat our ever-watchful guardians tapping their fingers nervously on the knees of their black, creased trousers - seven sheriffs all anxious to get the four-hour train trip over and done with. I was uncomfortably aware of how out of place I must have appeared in this clutch of battered and worldly men with my boyish features and tinted cheeks. Sinking even deeper into my seat I turned my thoughts back to the courtroom and the reaction of the news media to my sentence-a total of twenty five years for my three day crime spree.

They chastised the judged and decried a system of justice that had no better alternative for rehabilitating a youth of seventeen than to toss him in a concrete pit full of perverts, drug addicts, murderers, and hard core criminals, expecting him to come out reformed. One banner headline read, "Graduated from the reformatory to the Big House with honours." Names of several infamous Canadian criminals were churned up and they questioned whether the system was going to mutate me into a copy of one of them. One tabloid ended its commentary on an ominous note, "when the boy becomes a man and is released from the pen, who wants to be the cop to meet him in a dark alleyway with a gun in his hand?" However, the photograph that accompanied the articles showed the face of a boy, not a mad dog.

Roger Caron likes coffee, lots of it. Mind you, he doesn't like his coffee strong. He likes his coffee light enough so that "you can see the sides of the mug".

But he does like coffee. In fact, he told me how a few mornings earlier he'd drunk 6 cups "till his motor turned over".

Later that night Caron, author of the autobiographical novel *Go-boy* (Governor General award winner in 1978), and convict for 24 years told 400 students in SUB theatre how he traded his rations of bread in solitary confinement for extra rations of coffee. Coffee so bad that "If it didn't kill you in the first six months, you'd live to be 1000. It cured everything."

So we sat there, him drinking coffee, and me trying to come up with questions.

Caron was smaller than I expected. I mean, I'd seen shots of him in magazines and newspapers and from those pictures I'd imagined him to be a veritable hulk of a man.

But as it turns out he's about an inch shorter than me (five foot nine). Mind you he's built like a rock, compact and muscular. Not the overdone, steroid cases that grace the like of Mr. Universe but a well-defined, athletic build.

His voice was also a surprise. Not that I exactly knew what I expected, but it was softer and less assertive than I would have guessed. Caron has that story-teller type voice.

Another thing that struck me was the almost self-conscious neatness. Caron has an aura of orderliness about him. The coins and papers on the dresser were neatly piled and lined up and the rest of his hotel room showed absolutely no signs of human habitations.

Caron himself admits to being the eternal bachelor, and likes cleaning up and doing dishes. All the signs of a man with a life in order.

Sitting there across from him, in his running shoes, polo shirt and jeans, you'd think that Caron would be a retired hockey player, or maybe a particularly fit executive in casual clothes - until you see his arms.

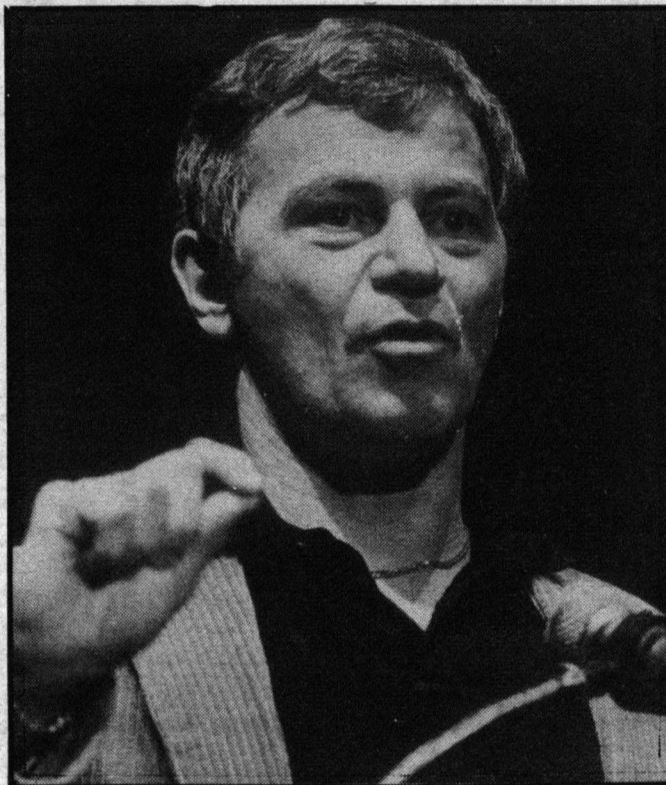
His arms have huge scars running along their length - arms ripped apart vaulting fences, torn apart in chases, and mauled by prison guard dogs. The arms belong to the most-escaped Canadian convict - thirteen attempted, six successful.

In his 24 years in Canada's penitentiaries Caron received over 2400 stitches. He was knifed, gouged, and repeatedly beaten up.

"I was one of the 10 per cent you are never supposed to release - criminal psychopath - the kind you throw the key away."

But he was released. A release that even Caron himself hasn't really come to grips with.

"I don't permit myself a social life. I'm a hard-core loner. I never go to parties, to bars, or even to restaurants." He's afraid of breaking down - of getting angry - of getting into a fight.



Roger Caron.

He's gone for up to five days without opening his apartment door, afraid to go out because he doesn't want to "let the Canadian public down." The longer he's out, the more paranoid he becomes, the more afraid he is of going back.

Then there are the dreams and the nightmares: Caron just recently dislocated his jaw in his sleep, and a little while back he dislocated his shoulder. It's gotten to the point where Caron doesn't like falling asleep. Sometimes he waits until five o'clock in the morning before "hitting the sack."

What Caron lacks in social life, he makes up in sports. Caron plays racquetball, tennis, football, baseball; he skates, bicycles, fishes, skydives, flies planes, weightlifts - everything you can think of.

"If I've had any revenge on the system, it's been my health. I spent 24 years getting rid of my frustrations on sports. It kept a lid on my volcano."

Caron is more than just active. He's downright hyperactive - so much so that he has a cordless phone in his apartment so he can pace about while talking.

This hyperactivity is what got Caron in trouble in the first place.

Caron was born in 1938, "when Hitler was invading Poland, and everybody was paranoid. Our family had three strikes against us. We were a family of 15, poor, and we lived 50 feet on the wrong side of the tracks."

He describes his family as very French, and very Catholic. Caron himself speaks with a slight French accent, mangling the occasional "Th".

"Both my parents were raised on farms, with only a

very basic education (grade five) and were very old fashioned. They didn't know much about child psychology, and were very religious. I had religion shoved down my throat."

"I was very hyperactive as a child, but in those days they didn't know much about that. They said I had the demon in me, and the only way to exorcise that demon was to beat it out of me." Caron was a product of the Catholic school system and was regularly beaten by the strict and sometimes merciless brothers and nuns. "This made my hyperactivity worse. I had no attention span in school."

There was no doubt about it, I was the truant officer's favourite fugitive and a prize catch on those rare occasions when he was lucky enough to corner me. My school was Saint John Bosco and most of our lessons were in French, taught by women teachers. If a man's help was needed, the old principal would press the panic button, to summon Father Lebrun from the Rectory next door. If it was me acting up, he'd box my ears, and then hold me while the principal beat my hands with a leather strap.

"The only thing I remember for the first 16 years was running, running, running, escaping school, escaping home, escaping everything." He never stood still as a child. Does this explain why he became Canada's number one escapee?

Beaten at school by the nuns and brothers, then beaten at home by his father and brothers, he "was the black sheep" - the burden.

I hated school with such a passion that it was like entering a cell each time I dragged myself to a desk. In those days outside of school I hardly ever walked: I ran. So I kept skipping school to go fishing or hunting where I felt at peace with myself. By then I had acquired a rod and reel and a full tackle box, plus a secret fishing spot, which is where I went when I skipped school.

"From my day one till I was 16 everybody predicted my future, school teachers, neighbours, priests, parents, cops, all said that I'd end up in prison. I had no input other than what they told me. I had no education, no TV, and I spent my youth hunting and fishing. And with all this self destructive energy, all this unharnessed energy I took their advice. With all this energy pushing me I decided to become the baddest."

At sixteen he broke into a sporting goods store and was arrested and banished to one of the most notorious reformatories in the world - itself a school in crime.

Vaguely I heard the order to toss me into solitary confinement for ten days' punishment on bread on water.

The way to the cooler was deep into the bowels of the large prison where everything was constructed from huge blocks of stone, just like in a medieval castle. This particular hole had long ago been condemned by grand juries and put out of official use, except for prisoners whose offence was attacking a guard. There was not even any electricity down there, just dust, decay, and cobwebs.

I don't recall my journey down there at all clearly, mostly because I was feeling sick and the last stretch was navigated by flashlight. I remember winding stone steps, a worn old door with a small barred window, a sort of windowless tunnel in which the light briefly illuminated three heavy doors with large bolts and locks. One of these doors swung open on squeaky hinges and I was thrown into an abysmal inky darkness - a cavity which turned out to be my solitary cell.

Unable to straighten up fully because of the pain, I inched along the concrete floor searching for the slop bucket I knew had to be there somewhere. When I located it and removed the lid the powerful lime stench almost ate my eyes out, but not even that could prevent me from vomiting my guts out into the bucket. Afterwards, because there was no bed, I crawled into a corner of the damp cell and hugging my half-naked body I wept.

Portions of text in italics reprinted from Roger Caron's novel *Go-boy*, published by McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1978.

continued Thursday



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The Gateway Speaker's Series: This week at 4:00 PM in Room 282 SUB, we present:

William Thorsell
Assistant editor
Edmonton Journal
Thursday, April 5

Everyone welcome!