

The Library of America interviews Christopher Carduff about William Maxwell

PART TWO

In connection with the publication in September 2008 of [*William Maxwell: Later Novels & Stories*](#), edited by Christopher Carduff, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter. (To read the earlier interview with Carduff, visit the LOA Web site page for [*Early Novels and Stories*](#).)

Sign up for the free monthly e-Newsletter at www.loa.org.

*Earlier this year, The Library of America published [*Early Novels and Stories*](#), the first volume of Maxwell's fiction that you edited. Nearly a thousand pages, it featured four of his six novels and nine of his short stories, and ended with work he wrote at 47. You've now followed up with another thousand-page volume, *Later Novels and Stories*. This volume features his last two novels, *The Château* and *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, 18 stories, and some 40 of the fairy tales that Maxwell called "improvisations." Is it fair to say that the short story became his favorite form of expression during this period?*

Although he wrote several superb short stories in the period 1960 to 1990, the story was never Maxwell's favorite form. Maxwell would have preferred to write more novels than he was able to during the second half of his working life. Remember that he had already published two novels before he began writing short fiction in the 1930s, and he published five novels before he ever collected his stories in a volume. For him the novel was the brass ring, the thing that a writer of imaginative prose should reach for, but for many reasons during these years it eluded his grasp.

He was always a painstaking writer, a perfectionist. *The Château*, his longest and most subtle novel, was 12 years in the making. From 1948 to 1960, he worked on it at the exclusion of other projects, and while doing so often got

Carduff on Maxwell (II)

bogged down and doubted his ability to bring off his intended effects; indeed, at one point he thought he'd reached the limit and must give up writing novels altogether. But at last the breakthrough came, all the pieces fell into place, and the book was published in 1961. His first novel with a new and enthusiastic publisher, it became a *New York Times* bestseller and a finalist for the National Book Award.

The decades following *The Château* were full of distractions from novel-writing, some of them sought-after and most of them happy. He was helping his wife raise two daughters, born in 1954 and 1956. He was coming into his own as an editor at *The New Yorker*, which in the 1950s, under its second editor-in-chief, William Shawn, was transformed into something more daring and inclusive and, for Maxwell, congenial than it had been under Harold Ross. He was acquiring and editing stories and memoirs by Eudora Welty, Vladimir Nabokov, Mavis Gallant, Frank O'Connor, Shirley Hazzard, Harold Brodkey, John Cheever, John Updike, Daniel Fuchs, Maeve Brennan, Larry Woiwode, and dozens of others, and having a lovely time doing it.

In addition, Shawn urged him to contribute short stories, fairy tales, and book reviews to the magazine. In other words, during this period life handed him the opportunity to write well-paid shorter prose for a welcoming, encouraging editor, and Maxwell took it—but at the expense of writing novels. He would return to novel-writing one last time, but only after his children had grown and he'd retired from *The New Yorker*—that is, after 1976. Many readers consider the result, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, his masterpiece.

What he achieves in So Long, See You Tomorrow is quite stunning. In the space of little more than a hundred pages, he interweaves a pair of different but complementary narratives: a first-person account of his mother's death in the flu epidemic of 1918 and its impact on his life, and the partly imagined story of a contemporaneous murder and suicide and its impact on a boyhood friend. Writing about the novel in 1980, Walter Sullivan observed that "it is so soundly conceived and so brilliantly executed—I know of no narrative which has a structure quite like the one Maxwell employs—that theme cannot be separated from method." How would you describe Maxwell's narrative method in this book?

This novel is an artistic tour de force that calls little attention to its technical daring because it is narrated in the most quiet, precise, plainspoken manner by an "I" that, from the very first sentence, one trusts as the relaxed and true voice of the author, William Maxwell. The narrator tells us first about his

Carduff on Maxwell (II)

own loss—that of his mother, when he was ten years old—and how this deprivation has been a psychic wound that nothing, not time or psychoanalysis or the satisfactions of adult life, can ever heal. He then tells the complementary story of his boyhood friend Cletus Smith, whose father, cuckolded by a man who is both his neighbor and his best friend, took that man’s life and then his own. The narrator’s own story and the story of his boyhood friend become, in the end, one story: a story about how a life can be changed in an instant through loss, and how the deprived must struggle against becoming “stuck in time” through grief and shock and silence. It’s a story about the moral obligation to be kind, and about the need for grace: the need to forgive life, to trust it, and to be, in Maxwell’s remarkable word, “undestroyed” by what is not your doing.

The book, which is a novel framed by a memoir, and which moves freely but distinctly between the factual and the speculative, between memory and invention, between a limited first-person point of view and an omniscient third-person point of view, is a gorgeously complex structure built with tremendous skill. The novelist Charles Baxter calls it “an unobtrusively perfect example of literary art of the highest humility and generosity.” I can’t improve on that praise.

This volume opens with a curious and charming creation. The Château recounts the adventures of a Midwestern couple touring France just three years after the end of World War II. Very little happens in its 350 pages yet you come away with terrifically memorable portraits of a range of French characters, from the patronne of the Loire château where the couple are paying guests, to her sullen son-in-law, to the addled elderly widow who adopts them. Yet most puzzling are the last 40 pages, a kind of epilogue in which Maxwell creates a dialogue between the writer and a reader that coyly addresses questions the novel does not resolve. If this is an experiment, it doesn’t seem to be about storytelling. What was Maxwell trying to do here? Do you think it succeeds?

Yes, I think it succeeds. And for my part, I think the epilogue is *all* about storytelling. It’s about literature contrasted to life, about the satisfactions and expectations of reading a novel contrasted to the uncertainties and bewilderments of day-to-day existence.

In writing *The Château*, Maxwell was determined to record his impressions of postwar France with absolute fidelity. He wanted to get France down on paper precisely as he experienced it on the long-deferred honeymoon that he and his wife took there in July–October 1948. He wrote the novel in the third

Carduff on Maxwell (II)

person, and he limited the narrator's point of view to that of a fortyish Midwesterner named Harold Rhodes, a fictional stand-in for himself. Harold, like Maxwell, sees everything subjectively, and is frustrated that he cannot know how others see him, what others think about him, what others think about *anything*. Everybody he encounters is a mystery: the patronne, her son-in-law, the old woman, the luggage handlers at the train station—even, on some days, his wife. His frustration and bewilderment are meant to be universal, a kind of emblem of the human predicament. Life, like France, is a foreign country, and difficult to negotiate. It is impossible to communicate your desires to others, impossible to know others' desires and motivations, and yet, at the same time, everything in life seems to be straining to communicate with you, to make itself understood. And every so often, despite the difficulties, you are rewarded unexpectedly by moments of perfect understanding, moments as sweet as they are rare.

The Château is, by design, an “unsatisfactory” novel; there are too many loose ends to it, the point of view is too limiting, it is too much like life. And that is why it needs an epilogue, in which an ideal reader asks the novelist questions, asks him to revisit certain scenes from a broader point of view, demands that he make Harold's incomplete story a “satisfactory” one.

Do you remember how the epilogue ends? With the weary patronne of the château going to bed with a book, a work of art that distracts her from the demands of life. The patronne “puts what happens [in the book] between her and all silences, all creaking noises, all failures, all searching for answers that cannot be found.” She seeks relief from the chaos and shortcomings of life through the order and satisfactions of art. She seeks the sort of resolutions and meanings that elude her in living day to day.

That, it seems to me, is what *The Château* is about: the mystery of life, the consolations of art.

Maxwell published the short story collection Billie Dyer and Other Stories a decade after So Long, See You Tomorrow. In these stories he returns to his hometown, Lincoln, Illinois, and in some cases revisits characters who appear in the novel. Was he accomplishing things here that he wasn't able to do in the novel?

The seven stories that make up *Billie Dyer* were Maxwell's chief literary project after *So Long*. The two books can be seen as companion volumes, each an attempt by the author to recapture his vanished childhood, to tell first-

Carduff on Maxwell (II)

person stories that fix the past to paper forever and that honor, through a unique kind of literary portraiture, “everyday” persons who touched Maxwell’s early life. Each is also a meditation on adulthood and old age, on experience and compassion, as contrasted with youth and innocence, with that time in one’s life when “the apple that Eve prevailed upon Adam to eat [was] as yet an abstraction, and therefore to all intents and purposes still on the tree.” That is to say, each is an uncannily successful attempt to re-create scenes from boyhood—the details and emotions and snatches of conversation are so vivid they seem as though they were just seen, felt, and heard—but also to understand those scenes through the lens of 70 years of personal experience.

The portraits really are extraordinary. They include a study of Maxwell’s father, a good man but a man of his period, who took charge of his children but took little pleasure in them, who did not know how to express his love and concern for young William, his strange, introspective, book-and-art-loving son. There is also a portrait of Hap, Maxwell’s extroverted, fearlessly competitive brother, whose leg was amputated at age five after the family doctor, a drug addict, incompetently set a broken bone and gangrene set in. And there is hapless Uncle Ted, his mother’s brother, who lurched from one get-rich-quick scheme to another and, when all that failed, forged checks on the accounts of various family members.

But the best things in the book are the title story, a full-dress portrait of Billie Dyer, the son of the Maxwells’ furnace man, who left Lincoln to become first a soldier and then a distinguished surgeon, and “The Front and the Back Parts of the House,” the story of the Maxwells’ former housekeeper, who never forgave Maxwell for caricaturing her life in certain scenes of his novel *Time Will Darken It*. Both stories are extremely sensitive and unsentimental studies of the roles that race and class played in the Lincoln of his youth. They are also, perhaps, a mature artist’s atonement for a youthful act of artistic irresponsibility: the glib treatment he gave “the Negro Question” in his first novel, *Bright Center of Heaven*, published when he was 26.

The two stories that bookend Over by the River and Other Stories, the collection he published in 1977—the title story and “The Thistles in Sweden”—are quintessential New York City stories and are as compelling as anything he wrote about Lincoln. Both are about couples: “Thistles” about a young couple’s life as they move in and out of a fourth-floor Murray Hill walkup in the 1950s, “River” about the family life of an older

Carduff on Maxwell (II)

couple living in a doorman building on the Upper East Side. But Maxwell's writing has changed: the action jumps around in short paragraphs, detail crashes upon detail. Does his style change when he writes about New York or is this his later style?

I'm glad that you single out these two stories. I think they're his finest, indeed two of the finest stories of the 20th century.

"Over by the River" was ten years in the writing, 1964–74, and it reads like a short domestic novel from which everything inessential has been stripped—a little like Evan Connell's *Mrs. Bridge* might read if Mrs. Bridge were born and raised, not as a Republican in Kansas City, but as a liberal on the Upper East Side. It takes the form of a series of short scenes of upper-middle-class life, a mosaic of moments whose cumulative effect—the picture of one family's vulnerability to the chaos of New York in the 1960s—is unforgettable. It is one of Maxwell's very rare attempts to get at the texture of the contemporary urban scene—the world of bag ladies and broken windows, tabloid headlines and cries of help in the night. It's about a man who is trying to hold on to an illusion of family happiness, physical safety, and social cohesion in a world that threatens that illusion at every turn.

"The Thistles in Sweden" is my single favorite work by Maxwell, and is a story that only he could have written. Like *The Château*, it has nothing like a plot; instead it communicates, through the most exquisite series of images, incidents, descriptions, and gorgeous sentences, the mystery of life and the narrator's love for his wife. I have read this story many times trying to pinpoint the source of its strange power, and it always eludes me. I think that, in the end, it's one of those rare stories that have the power and effect of a great painting—an oversized canvas by Bonnard or Vuillard, perhaps, one that captures forever the light on that checked tablecloth on that particular sun-drenched July afternoon, the lovers picking at their bowls of gooseberries, the sandalwood-colored walls aglow with a kind of human warmth, and there, in the upper left corner, the black kitten asleep on the gleaming white mantelpiece. It's a work of art that defies analysis; all you can do is stand back and admire it.

There is a third New York story in *Later Novels and Stories*, a beauty called "The Lily-White Boys," in which an elderly couple, returning to their apartment after a Christmas party, find it burglarized and, amid the wreckage and remorse, experience a moment of grace. I wish he'd written more such stories, held up the mirror more often to contemporary American experience—but then, I'm a greedy reader.

Carduff on Maxwell (II)

The 40 improvisations may be unfamiliar to Maxwell readers. Some of them appeared in All the Days and Nights, others in The Old Man at the Railroad Crossing, but five or six late ones are collected here for the first time. You mention in your notes that they were written, mainly, as gifts for his wife, then collected and published in groups of two or three, usually in The New Yorker. They are all short, most only three or four pages, but they seem as carefully crafted as any of his other work, much like meticulous miniatures. I particularly like “All the days and nights” and “The sound of waves.” Is “improvisations” a proper name for these? Do you have a favorite?

The “once-upon-a-time” tales that Maxwell called “improvisations” were exactly that. “I would sit with my head bent over the typewriter waiting to see what was going to come out of it,” he wrote in the foreword to *The Old Man at the Railroad Crossing*. “The first sentence was usually a surprise to me. From the first sentence everything else followed. A person I didn’t know anything about—a man who had no enemies, a girl who doesn’t know whether to listen to her heart or her mind, a woman who never draws breath except to complain, an old man afraid of falling—stepped from the wings and began to act out something I must not interrupt or interfere with, but only be a witness to: a life, with the fleeting illumination that anybody’s life offers, written in sand with a pointed stick and erased by the next high tide. . . . I have sometimes believed that [these tales were] the result of the initial waiting with an emptied mind—that this opened a door of some kind, and what emerged was an archaic survival, the professional storyteller who flourished in all the countries of the world before there were any printed books, [a man] half-blind, but having seen such wonders as will require all his talent to tell about, and the emotional participation of whoever stops to listen to him.”

Maxwell loved fairy tales. These improvisations are his contribution to the tradition of Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, Walter de la Mare and Andrew Lang, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Isak Dinesen. I admire them very much, but I do not love them as I do the longer fiction. They seem to be addressed to someone whose tastes are not mine, someone standing a little off to one side of me. My favorites? I, too, like “All the days and nights”; also the wise, sad, late one called “What you can’t hang on to,” a gentle protest against nostalgia, the collector’s impulse, and all of man’s vain attempts to divert the flow of time.

Carduff on Maxwell (II)

You've now edited two volumes of Maxwell's fiction covering some 65 years and almost 2,000 pages. To prepare the books, you read everything he ever published. What did you leave out, and what is collected here for the first time? Did you make any editorial discoveries?

I didn't make any "discoveries," but I did experience certain happy surprises while deciding how best to order the material.

I love the capaciousness of the Library of America format. To represent Maxwell in the series, the LOA granted me two volumes of a thousand pages each—the equivalent of about eight standard-sized trade books. I felt like a curator of paintings who's been granted eight high-ceilinged galleries in which to mount a career retrospective. I knew from the start that Maxwell's six novels would dominate the show, but how to hang the smaller canvases, the stories and improvisations?

I assembled as complete a bibliography as I could; no *catalogue raisonné* exists, so I had to start from scratch. I read all of Maxwell's early stories and, for the most part, understood why he didn't collect them: they simply aren't very good. When I ordered the "keepers" chronologically, I saw that the stories broke naturally into clusters, and that these clusters could be placed between the novels to both the novels' and stories' benefit.

I like the way the two volumes flow, with the novels in conversation with the stories. Some of the story-clusters hang together, and could stand alone as little books (the five stories about bachelors in volume one, for example); others are more miscellaneous, and contain satellites that revolve around the novels (two stories are sequels to *Time Will Darken It*, and one is a kind of post-script to *The Château*). These relationships between works can be seen plainly, for the first time, in the LOA volumes, where the novels and stories are at last exhibited side by side, in what is intended as a permanent installation.

The LOA edition brings together all the fiction that Maxwell kept in print, augmented by the handful of previously uncollected items that, in my judgment, can be read and reread with pleasure. It restores to circulation his first novel, *Bright Center of Heaven*, which, in his later years, he suppressed as mere apprentice work. (It is apprentice work, but it is also an accomplished and lively first novel, with many beautifully done comic scenes. It is essential reading for anyone who wishes to trace Maxwell's arc as a writer.) It also collects two early stories, "Homecoming" and "The Actual Thing," and two late ones, "Grape Bay (1941)" and "The Room Outside," that cannot be found elsewhere (except in the

Carduff on Maxwell (II)

New Yorker archives). And it gathers for the first time almost all the published improvisations, as well as a handful of essays that relate directly to the fiction.

In a sentence or two, can you sum up Maxwell's achievement and his place among the great 20th-century American fiction writers?

He is, I think, our greatest domestic realist, the writer who tells us most poignantly and unforgettably what it is to be son, brother, husband, father, and friend—a member of a family and a citizen of a small American town. He is the artist who gave us Lincoln, Illinois, c. 1910–20, an imperishable place whose elm trees and trolley cars and intimate interiors are as real to his readers as they were to the man himself. And he is a voice—a soft, cadenced, Midwestern voice, quite unlike any other in timbre—speaking quiet truths about the need for kindness, the persistence of memory, and the fragility of happiness.