

The Library of America interviews Christopher Carduff about William Maxwell

In connection with the publication in January 2008 of *William Maxwell: Early Novels & Stories*, edited by Christopher Carduff, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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Born in 1908, William Maxwell lived to the age of 91, and was still publishing in his 80s, which explains how The Library of America can publish a volume called Early Novels and Stories that includes pieces he wrote at 47. It includes four of his six novels and nine of his stories. How do these early works compare with those of Maxwell's later years? And does The Library of America plan to publish a second volume of his works?

Actually, Maxwell was publishing right into his 90s—he had fiction in *The New Yorker* and *DoubleTake* in his 90th year—and he began writing early: his first novel was published when he was 25. In the coming year the LOA, to honor both the centenary of his birth and his remarkable 65-year contribution to American writing, will publish a two-volume edition of his fiction, which will bring together all the novels and 27 of his best short stories. The second volume, *Later Novels and Stories*—due out in the fall of 2008—will also include a generous selection of Maxwell's "improvisations," or literary fairy tales, most of which he wrote as Christmas and birthday gifts to his wife throughout their 45 years together.

The early fiction is of a piece with, yet quite distinct from, the later work. In *Early Novels and Stories* we see Maxwell discovering his signature subject matter—the fragility of happiness, dramatized against the details of small-town Midwestern family life in the early 20th century. But instead of approaching this material directly, in the form of first-person memoir, he here writes always in the third person, fictionalizing himself and his family and his hometown and sometimes—in *The Folded Leaf* and *Time Will Darken It* especially—experimenting with an omniscient narrator who is a kind of social anthropologist commenting on the action. Almost all of Maxwell's fiction is autobiographical, but

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compared to the late fiction, with its first-person narrator named “William Maxwell” who is also an actor in the stories he tells, the early work is all at one remove. But early and late Maxwell, like, say, early and late Beethoven, is all one thing, and in its characters, situations, and obsessions, its variations on certain idiosyncratic themes, it’s recognizably the work of a single great artist. In other words, it’s an *oeuvre*—which, to use John Updike’s definition, means the result of “a continuous task carried forward variously [and] a plenitude of gifts exploited knowingly.”

Maxwell’s family moved from Lincoln, Illinois, to Chicago when he was 14. Yet throughout his career Maxwell seemed able to draw on an inexhaustibly rich storehouse of memories from his Lincoln boyhood. In his acclaimed second novel, They Came Like Swallows, which fictionalizes the story of his mother’s death from Spanish influenza in 1918, Maxwell re-creates not only the point of view of an eight-year-old child in 1918 but also the perspectives of his 13-year-old brother and of the grieving father. Is it fair to associate Maxwell’s uncanny power of recall with the psychic wound of his mother’s early death?

The death of Maxwell’s mother when he was 10 years old was the defining event of his early life. He was very much his mother’s child, and she his protector and ally in a masculine world that didn’t favor sensitive, book-loving, shy little boys. When she was gone he was left to cope not only with her absence but also with a cruelly teasing, older brother and a distant, wounded father. As bad or worse for Maxwell was the fact that his father, determined to break with his past, sold the house that Maxwell had grown up in and moved the family into a charmless, semi-furnished, temporary home. At 10, through no doing of his own, Maxwell was exiled from his childhood, from the house he had loved, and left defenseless against the world. As a result, he obsessively retreated into memory. He idealized his mother and his early home life, closed his eyes to the present, and created a hyper-detailed, many-storied past in his head. In a very real sense the world stopped for him in the winter of 1918, and almost all of his best writing is a moving, literary attempt to re-create and preserve that world.

They Came Like Swallows is my favorite of Maxwell’s novels. *The Folded Leaf* and *So Long, See You Tomorrow* are the greater works of art, more ambitious and accomplished in every way, but *Swallows* has my heart, perhaps because of the immediacy of the emotions, and not just those of young Bunny, the Maxwell character, but also of his brother and father. To read the novel is to relive with Maxwell that terrible winter of 1918 and to weep not just for but also *with* that family that has its heart torn out of it.

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Maxwell's early novels show the influence of writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce and an interest in some of the techniques of modernism. His first novel, Bright Center of Heaven, recounts one summer day at a Wisconsin artists' colony through the frequently shifting interior monologues of twelve different colonists. They Came Like Swallows tells one story from three different points of view. How successful are these experiments and when did Maxwell come into his own voice?

To say that Maxwell took an interest in “some” of the techniques of modernism gets it exactly right. He wasn't a make-it-new man, he was a make-it-intimate-and-true-to-daily-experience man. When he was starting out, he borrowed from any writer who could help him toward that end. He admired and emulated the Joyce of “The Dead” but, as an artist and technician, had no use for the Joyce of *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*. He also had no use for Pound or Stein or Faulkner. He did love Virginia Woolf, but not for her “modernism.” He loved her for the same reasons that he loved Chekhov and Turgenev, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Elizabeth Bowen, and Bonnard and Vuillard: because she rendered, with great fidelity and artistry, the texture of middle-class family life, and the interactions, both large and small, between men, women, and children within a family. Maxwell wasn't so much a great modernist as he was a great domestic realist, perhaps the greatest American fiction has yet produced.

Bright Center of Heaven is an accomplished first novel, but it's not to be mistaken for anything more than apprentice work. Maxwell never reprinted it because, despite a number of well-imagined and highly entertaining scenes, its tone is inconsistent, its ending contrived, its style derivative; it's a kind of pastiche of Woolf, Elinor Wylie, Walter de la Mare, and all the other writers he especially admired at age 24. *They Came Like Swallows* is the breakout book—Maxwell coming into his own material, and his own voice, for the first time.

Maxwell's third novel, The Folded Leaf, a story about the bond between two quite different adolescent boys attending high school in Chicago and a state university in the 1920s, received glowing reviews and sold more than 200,000 copies, many more than any of his previous books. Edmund Wilson wrote, “This drama of the immature, with no background more glamorous than middle-class apartments and student fraternity houses, is both more moving and more absorbing than any of the romantic melodramas which have been stimulated by the war.” Do you think readers will respond the same way now? What will today's reader make of a passage like: “Lymie put his right hand inside the pocket of Spud's coat, a thing he often did when they were walking together. Spud's fingers interlaced with his.”

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The Folded Leaf is the story of two incomplete people, both of them boys becoming men, who, for a few years in their very young lives, complete each other. One of the boys, Spud Latham, is an amateur boxer: physical, inarticulate, impulsive, handsome; the other, Lymie Peters, is an artist in the making: bookish, passive, conscientious, what used to be called a 97-pound weakling. Their bond is born out of what Maxwell calls, in one of the book's part titles, "Partly Pride and Partly Envy": each loves the other for qualities he lacks, and is proud to be loved by him in return; but each also secretly envies the other and hates himself for his shortcomings and his needs. Their friendship—or, better said, their very real passion for each other—is doomed by this secret envy, this secret self-hatred, and, later, by Spud's rival passion for a girl.

It seems to me that, by bringing up those interlaced fingers, the question you're trying to ask is "Is *The Folded Leaf* a gay novel?" It is, I suppose, but only if you have a personal or political reason for calling it that. I've always thought it was a novel about first love, about the innocent and complete giving-over of one's self (and even one's own identity) to another, about living—for one intense and unrepeatable moment—by the pure feelings of the heart. First love, if felt deeply enough, can be a kind of madness, and except perhaps in *Romeo and Juliet* it's never been more compellingly dramatized than in *The Folded Leaf*.

I can't say what "today's readers" will "make" of Lymie and Spud. I can only hope that they would take them as Maxwell presents them to us: as two very young and very individual people moved by feelings that they don't understand and cannot articulate, either to themselves or to each other, and whose lives are enriched and, in Lymie's case, almost destroyed by these feelings.

In 1944, while he is writing The Folded Leaf, Maxwell begins a five-session-a-week therapy treatment with Theodor Reik, famed psychoanalyst and author of Listening with the Third Ear. As part of the therapy, Reik reads all of Maxwell's work, including his work in progress. What impact does this have on Maxwell's writing?

I would say that Maxwell's therapy had a passing and negative effect on his writing, but a permanent and very positive effect on his life.

Reik was a very well-read man, and himself a good writer. But he thought that both reading and writing should have therapeutic ends, that the reader should read for spiritual uplift and that the writer should write to work out personal problems to a positive end. He disapproved of the ending of *The Folded Leaf* as Maxwell originally wrote it, which left Lymie's love for Spud an unhealed wound, and perhaps a lasting one. He urged Maxwell to give the book a more positive ending, to make Lymie's break with his past definite and complete.

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Maxwell wrote the ending Reik prescribed, and published it in the first edition of the novel. When, in the late 1950s, he had the opportunity to rewrite the ending for a new edition of the book, he did so, putting things back the way he had them in the first place. This revised, definitive edition is the one reprinted in the LOA edition.

On the other hand, in his role as analyst, Reik helped Maxwell get over his sorrowful past, to overcome emotional paralysis, and to reach out to others. He helped him find the courage to court the young woman who would become his wife of 45 years. During those sessions on Reik's couch, Maxwell would later say, "the whole first part of my life fell away, and I had the feeling of starting again."

Time Will Darken It is unusual in being less autobiographical than the previous three novels, although it is still set in Illinois and draws on some of Maxwell's family history in telling the story of how gossip can poison interpersonal relationships in a small town. Does this make it more successful as a work of fiction or is Maxwell drifting away from what makes his writing strong?

I love the loose-limbed, improvisatory feel of *Time Will Darken It*. With this book Maxwell was moving beyond personal history and trying to write a kind of social history of the small town he grew up in. It has the largest and most varied cast of any of his books, and it's painted on a big canvas: it's like a Midwestern Brueghel, or one of those Chinese scrolls with hundreds of figures, people high and low, young and old, at work and at play. At the dinner party that opens the story, you get a cross section of the entire town of Draperville, Illinois, circa 1912. Our hosts are the Kings, a young lawyer, his wife, and their four-year-old daughter; the guests of honor are visiting relatives from Mississippi, including vivacious, twentyish cousin Nora; other guests include spinster neighbors and the ancient raconteur Mr. Ellis; and of course there is Rachel, the Kings' black cook, and her sullen daughter. Throughout the book you get little scenes and set pieces focusing on each of them, or on little knots of them in surprising combinations. You also get love, death, birth, misfortune, misunderstanding, the four seasons and the seven ages of man. And floating above it all, you get the gossips—the recording devils of Draperville, as it were—letting no whiff of scandal escape their busy, hypersensitive nostrils.

John Updike and Eudora Welty were especially appreciative readers of this novel. They loved it because it showed Maxwell, that most autobiographical of authors, at his storytelling best, as the maker of a toy theater full of imagined people that he animated not only delightfully but also believably—and, ultimately, movingly.

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Why didn't Maxwell write more often in this mode? Maybe because *Time Will Darken It* was a commercial failure, poorly supported by its publisher, and not nearly so widely reviewed as it deserved to be. What's more, Maxwell, contemplating a sequel, wrote a couple of related Draperville short stories that, because they were set in the Midwest, Harold Ross didn't want for *The New Yorker*, and that also were rejected by *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*. After *Time Will Darken It*, Maxwell was artistically stymied: his earlier books were out of print, his most recent book a box-office flop, the stories he wanted to write unsellable. He briefly considered giving up writing altogether. It would be twelve years between *Time Will Darken It* and his next novel, the almost wholly autobiographical *The Château*.

All of Maxwell's novels from this period deal with the rural Midwest. Other writers have worked this same territory: Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Sinclair Lewis among them. How is Maxwell's fiction different from or similar to theirs?

I think that most of the early-20th-century writers who came out of the Midwest, and most of the New York and Boston publishers who brought out their books, were only too happy to condescend to the place, to dismiss it as a flat, bland, materialistic wasteland dotted with Protestant churches, feed stores, and white-clapboard houses inside which nothing of any human import could possibly happen. Anderson's and Masters' stock in trade was the sad, twisted, stunted "grotesque," the Midwestern man or woman spiritually deformed by geographical and social circumstances. And Sinclair Lewis—at heart a satirist—said that he remembered growing up in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, "with the same masochistic pleasure that one has in sucking an aching tooth."

Maxwell was nothing like these writers. His biographer Barbara Burkhardt has observed that, unlike them, Maxwell didn't leave his native small town willingly, in bitterness, as an adult. Instead he was exiled from it at an early age—expelled like Adam from the Garden—and therefore remembered it as a Paradise lost. There is something to this, surely.

But I think mainly it comes down to God-given temperament. Maxwell wasn't a bitter man, and wasn't a satirist: he had only love and gratitude for the world that made him. He once said, "I believe in Sherwood Anderson, but I also believe in what I remember," which was a small town in Illinois, circa 1912–20, "small enough and sufficiently isolated enough for the people who lived there to have not only a marked individuality but also a stature that still seems to me slightly larger than life-sized." I think Maxwell, in reaction against Spoon River and

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Winesburg and Zenith, wanted to bring fiction-readers the good and surprising news that one could be born, raised, and buried in a town like Lincoln, Illinois, and yet be happy and fulfilled and receptive to the best that life has to offer.

Maxwell joined the staff of The New Yorker in 1936 and edited short fiction there for nearly 40 years. He worked with John O'Hara, John Cheever, Frank O'Connor, J. D. Salinger, and Vladimir Nabokov, and brought Eudora Welty, Mavis Gallant, Harold Brodkey, and many other writers to the magazine. In light of his editorial role, is it fair to consider Maxwell a chief arbiter of what was, and what was not, "a New Yorker story"? And were his own short stories, most of which first appeared in the magazine, quintessential examples of the type?

Was there ever such a thing as "a *New Yorker* story"? Certainly there was under the magazine's first editor, Harold Ross, and Maxwell often chafed against the definition, both as writer and as editor. Ross wanted cosmopolitan stories, set in New York, Hollywood, London, and Paris—which meant Maxwell could not acquire (for example) Welty's Southern stories, and couldn't publish his own Midwestern fiction either. Ross also wanted to keep fiction light, topical, short, and dialogue-driven. At any rate, out of the more than two-dozen short stories Maxwell published during the 1930s and '40s, I chose only five for inclusion in *Early Novels and Stories*. All of these are autobiographical stories written when Maxwell was a bachelor living in New York, and all concern a young man with his nose pressed up to the window of adult life, unable to connect with others and get on with growing up. In short, they dramatize Maxwell's own psychic and emotional struggle during these years, the struggle that Theodor Reik helped him to resolve. They are wonderful stories and an important part of Maxwell's achievement. And they are very unlike the stories I *didn't* collect, most of which were formula fiction written to Ross's prescription and published under Maxwell's sometimes-penname "Jonathan Harrington." Maxwell considered these stories good enough for *The New Yorker*, but not good enough to be published under his name, which speaks volumes about his ambivalence about the magazine during the years with Ross.

Everything changed for Maxwell in 1951 when William Shawn took the helm at *The New Yorker*. Shawn widened the editorial compass of the magazine, and in response Maxwell rededicated himself not only to editing but also to writing for it. Soon he was bringing in stories by Welty and Shirley Hazzard and Mavis Gallant and publishing not only more of his own short stories but also his fairy tales and book reviews. It is interesting to note that *Early Novels and Stories* collects pieces written mainly for book publication, whereas most of the contents

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of *Later Novels and Stories* appeared first in *The New Yorker*. Under Shawn the magazine became a most congenial home to Maxwell, in all his talents.

Was there such a thing as “a *New Yorker* story” under Shawn? Only if one could find a common thread running through Donald Barthelme, Max Frisch, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Ann Beattie, Jamaica Kincaid, Woody Allen, and William Maxwell. I suggest that the thread *is* there, and it’s called “literary excellence.” It certainly runs through all the young writers Maxwell was instrumental in developing under Shawn, including Maeve Brennan, Alfred Chester, Elizabeth Cullinan, Shirley Hazzard, John Updike, and Alec Wilkinson.

How did you become involved with the work of William Maxwell?

I read Maxwell’s story collection *Over by the River* when it came out in 1977: I bought it as a present for myself on my 21st birthday. Two years later *So Long, See You Tomorrow* appeared in *The New Yorker*, and it knocked me out. I thought that it was one of those perfect short novels, like *Washington Square* and *The Great Gatsby* and *A Lost Lady*, that will be read by Americans as long as books are read. I still do.

I read all of Maxwell’s books in my 20s, and have read most of them several times since. Finally, in 1996, when I became an editor in the Boston office of Houghton Mifflin, I devised a way to meet and work with him. I put together a book of stories by Maeve Brennan, stories about three very different Dublin families that Maxwell had encouraged her to write for *The New Yorker*. The book was called *The Springs of Affection*, and Maxwell wrote a memoir of Brennan as an introduction. After that, we corresponded regularly, and when I moved to Counterpoint Press we collaborated on a couple of other projects, including a volume of his correspondence with Sylvia Townsend Warner. Ours was a Boston–New York friendship, pursued through the mails and over infrequent lunches at the Century Club. When he died in the summer of 2000, it came as a terrible shock: I hadn’t known how sick he’d been in his final few months.

About two years after his death, his literary executor, Michael Steinman, asked me what one decisive thing the estate might do to guarantee Maxwell a readership in the future. I suggested publication in The Library of America, and Steinman asked me to write a proposal on the estate’s behalf. I’m deeply grateful to him, and to Maxwell’s daughters, Kate and Brookie, and to the LOA for trusting me to prepare this edition and for giving me the opportunity to honor his work this way. It has been, to use a phrase that Maxwell liked to use, a labor of love.