

The Library of America interviews Blake Bailey about John Cheever

In connection with the publication in March 2009 of [*John Cheever: Collected Stories and Other Writings*](#) and [*John Cheever: Complete Novels*](#), edited by Blake Bailey, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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John Cheever published some 180 stories during his life and 75 were chosen for Collected Stories and Other Writings. What criteria did you use to decide which ones to include?

The only stories that Cheever himself wanted preserved for posterity were the 61 in *The Stories of John Cheever*, so I felt obliged to include that book *in toto*. But of course Cheever wrote a lot of superb, non-canonical (as he saw it) stories too, and it was simply a question of finding the best or at least most representative from his earlier work. “Expelled” was his first published story, written at age 18, and it’s perhaps the most prodigious debut of any major American writer. Then he passed through a kind of Hemingway phase, then a Chekhov phase, until he became the mature, *sui-generis* Cheever around 1946 or so—this before attaining an even greater virtuosity in the fifties and sixties. The mature Cheever wanted the public to think he’d sprung whole from the head of Zeus, whereas the 14 (mostly earlier) stories restored to print in the Library of America edition trace the arc of his evolution, and attest to his astonishing versatility. In short, I like to think these 75 stories constitute a *true* canon of Cheever’s short fiction. As for the essays at the end of the book, most have never been collected and are marvelous distillations of his personality.

Cheever’s first story appeared in The New Republic in 1930, and the latest included here, “Three Stories,” was published in 1973. The stories he wrote in the intervening years established him as one of the all-time masters of the short story. How would you describe what is distinctive about a John Cheever short story? Do you have any favorites?

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There is no quintessential John Cheever story. Shortly before his death, Saul Bellow wrote him as follows: “You were engaged, as a writer should be, in transforming yourself. When I read your collected stories I was moved to see the transformation taking place on the printed page.” Just so: he was always changing, *usually* (except during the worst years of his alcoholism) for the better. Each of Cheever’s greatest stories reflects some distinctive aspect of his sensibility. Touching on a few of the better-known: “The Enormous Radio” (1947) is an early experiment in surrealism, with a dose of Cotton Mather (we are all corrupt at heart); “Goodbye, My Brother” (1951) is straightforward realism but technically intricate, featuring a highly nuanced, unreliable narrator; “The Country Husband” (1954)—perhaps the best of the “Shady Hill” stories (that is, a masterpiece among masterpieces)—is a darkish satire about a suburban gentleman who falls in love with a teenage babysitter; “The Swimmer” (1963) reverts to the surrealism of Cheever’s earlier period, and is perhaps his greatest story. What all the stories have in common—I was about to say humor, but then I remembered “The Five-Forty-Eight,” for instance, which is dark as pitch. What the stories have in common is greatness.

Most of Cheever’s stories (121) appeared in The New Yorker, yet he seemed to continually challenge what characterized a New Yorker story. Your chronology notes several instances—“The Day the Pig Fell into the Well,” “The Geometry of Love,” “The Jewels of the Cabots”—when his editor, William Maxwell, either rejected or delayed publishing a story when he experimented with a new direction. How would you characterize Cheever’s attitude toward The New Yorker and how it affected the development of his style?

First of all, *The New Yorker* of the Harold Ross years (1925–1951) was a rather conservative magazine in many ways, at least in regard to its fiction: Ross didn’t like profanity in his pages (though he himself swore like a sailor, as Cheever notes in his preface to the *Stories*), and also he wanted fiction to be sort of light-hearted, witty, and *short*—“casuals,” as he called incidental pieces. Cheever was often witty but not always light-hearted (“Goddammit, Cheever, why do you write these [expletive] gloomy goddamn stories?” Ross admonished him), and the better he became, the less he liked being constrained by considerations of length, language, subject matter, or style. “The Day the Pig Fell into the Well,” for example, is a long story that conveys its meaning by implication, and is sort of humorously sad in a way reminiscent of Chekhov—in other words, too long and gloomy, as Ross would have it, so they didn’t publish it until Ross had been dead a few years. Later Cheever became a more experimental writer, and that was distasteful to William Maxwell, who was pretty con-

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servative in his own right. As Maxwell said, “[Cheever] was the first person I ever saw try to do this” (by “this” he means surrealism, black humor, intrusive narrators, etc.—all characteristic of Cheever’s later fiction) “and I just stood there with my mouth open. He tried things that people felt weren’t possible in fiction. It turned out that anything was possible in fiction.” So, in effect, Maxwell eventually admitted he was wrong to reject Cheever’s more experimental work, but by then Cheever was fed-up with *The New Yorker* and was giving his stories to *Playboy* and the like. Meanwhile *The New Yorker* had finally come around and begun to publish “post-realists” such as Donald Barthelme, which infuriated Cheever all the more.

Collected Stories also includes seven selections of Cheever’s nonfiction, including the short essay “What Happened,” where he describes the background to the story, “Goodbye, My Brother,” and another piece, “Why I Write Short Stories.” Do these offer any illumination about Cheever’s craft? Can we trust him writing about his own work?

Good question! Cheever had a well-deserved reputation as a raconteur—that is to say, in his case, as a man given to “preposterous falsehoods” (his phrase) in the service of a good yarn. Which makes it all the more gratifying to learn just how truthful he could be about serious matters. In “What Happened” he describes how he spent a summer on Martha’s Vineyard feeling depressed and cynical about things, and afterward, reading over his journal from that summer in search of a story idea, he became so exasperated with his own gloom that he decided to create an alter ego—the “despicable brother” of the story, Tifty—by way of self-exorcism. When I read his journal I found that he’d accurately portrayed those entries in every particular, and indeed “What Happened” is a fascinating glimpse into his creative process. “Why I Write Short Stories,” on the other hand, is more of a *jeu d’esprit*: it was one of those “My Turn” essays in the front pages of *Newsweek*, written in 1978 around the time *The Stories of John Cheever* was published. It’s a fun piece, but basically it’s just Cheever flogging his book.

Complete Novels contains all five of Cheever’s published novels. The subject matter of the two Wapshot novels, The Wapshot Chronicle (1957) and The Wapshot Scandal (1964), seems closest to his stories, yet Cheever spent some 16 years writing the first. Why did the novel form give him so much trouble?

Where to begin? First of all, the short form was more congenial to Cheever in every way—it was simply the way he liked to work, as a matter of temperament, sensibility, you name it. He’d get a *donnée*—a radio that trans-

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mits the goings-on in other people's apartments; a man who goes home by swimming from one pool to another—and write about it in a quick burst of enthusiasm (usually), and then he was done and wanted to move on. In a novel, you have all *sorts* of *données*, all sorts of levels, and for many years that sort of thing seemed to flummox (and rather bore) Cheever. Also, in longer work, he felt he needed to write about something vitally *personal*—something that would sustain his interest over the long haul, lest he find himself “writing off the surface.” So his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, was conceived as an essentially autobiographical account of his family—a gift-shop-owning mother, an eccentric demoralized father, etc.—this at a time when both parents were still alive, and bear in mind that his mother didn't die until 1956, only a few months before Cheever finally finished the novel in a burst of inspiration (“liberation”?). Also, it was a matter of finding the right *voice* to match the material: for a long time he seemed to treat the *Wapshot* story in a melodramatic way—viewing his own early life as rather grim and tragic, as it was in raw form—until finally he saw fit to take a more Fieldingesque approach: zany, picaresque, sort of philosophic withal. I could go on and on about this . . .

While some critics hailed Cheever's move from short to long fiction, others were less enthusiastic. In reviewing *Bullet Park*, Benjamin DeMott wrote, “John Cheever's short stories are and will remain lovely birds—dense in inexplicables and beautifully trim. . . . But in the gluey atmosphere of *Bullet Park*, no birds sing.” Was Cheever trying to do something different in his novels than in his stories? Were they intentionally darker? How well does he succeed?

Were they intentionally darker? Basically they *got* darker as time went on: *The Wapshot Scandal* is much darker than its predecessor, and *Bullet Park* (1969) is darker than both, until *Falconer* (1977) goes to the darkest place of all—prison: hell—but ends with redemption (“Rejoice”); as for Cheever's last novel, *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* (1982), well, dark things happen, but it's mostly an idyll of sorts. To some extent, the novels simply trace the progress of Cheever's inner life—that is, his own deepening gloom, which ran more or less parallel to his alcoholism, until he got sober in 1975 and wrote about that (as well as certain other personal developments), allegorically, in *Falconer*.

Cheever's novels are episodic and fanciful—far less realistic than his stories, for the most part—but always entertaining and, yes, craftsmanlike after a fashion: he was more interested in thematic integrity than a well-made plot *per se*; the latter struck him as the province of second-raters, as something to be parodied. You quote Benjamin DeMott's review, which was a pretty ridiculous performance, really, though it certainly shook up Cheever for a while. “Except

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when tricked up in gothicism, fantasy or allegory,” DeMott wrote, a novel has to make sense in terms of cause and effect, whereas a short story “is a world of phenomena” where you can say any crazy thing and get away with it, especially if you’re Cheever. Therefore *Bullet Park* is a failure, according to DeMott, because it’s so bizarre and inexplicable. Well, *Bullet Park* is nothing if not gothical, fantastical, etcetera, so it should be *exempt* from DeMott’s main criticism, right? Two years after DeMott’s silly review, John Gardner wrote an essay about *Bullet Park* that also appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, basically declaring the novel a masterpiece. By then, alas, the damage had been done to Cheever’s career.

“Fiction is not crypto-autobiography,” Cheever famously said. Yet he certainly drew on his life for a good deal of his fiction. His mother’s death, for instance, was the basis for Honora Wapshot’s memorable death in The Wapshot Scandal. Since his own death in 1982, some of Cheever’s letters and journals have been published, plus a biography that his family disliked, and his daughter, Susan, has written memoirs such as Home Before Dark. These books revealed a great deal that was not known in Cheever’s lifetime about his troubled marriage and his many heterosexual and homosexual affairs. How much do revelations about Cheever’s life help us to understand and appreciate his fiction?

I don’t know that they help at all. If you’re interested in the psychology of the man—and, speaking as Cheever’s biographer, let me assure you it’s an endlessly fascinating subject—then revelations *per se* are interesting, and of course it’s always interesting to see how a great writer’s life informs his work. But I think we ought to “understand and appreciate” the work on its own terms.

The publication of these two volumes coincides with the publication of your new biography Cheever: A Life. What does Cheever’s writing mean to you and how did you first become involved with his work? Can you treat us to any previews of what discoveries we will find when we read your book?

Cheever is one of my two or three favorite writers, but when I was casting about for another book subject—this after finishing my biography of Richard Yates, *A Tragic Honesty*—I had this fixed idea that I had to be the *first* biographer of a given writer, and Scott Donaldson had already published a Cheever biography in 1988. So I was still dithering around for a subject, when Janet Maslin wrote a very nice review of my Yates book for the daily *New York Times*. Now, it so happens that Maslin is Cheever’s daughter-in-law, and meanwhile she’d pressed *A Tragic Honesty* on her husband, Ben, who wrote me a charming e-mail inviting me to appear on his book-chat show in Westchester.

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This I did, and we really hit it off. So afterward I was having dinner with Ben and Janet, and Ben made it clear, in so many words, that he'd welcome a new biography of his father.

As for "discoveries" awaiting the reader: well, you know, I had access to pretty much everything, including the whole 4,250-page journal, only a fraction of which has ever been published; also I interviewed a lot of people, some of whom told me things they'd never told anyone. Just in general, I think the reader will be struck by the awesome gulf between Cheever's public and private selves—*selves* very much plural in both cases.

Saul Bellow has described John Cheever as being "fabulously generous with other writers." Your chronology cites numerous instances of friendships Cheever developed with writers and artists over the years: E. E. Cummings, James T. Farrell, Walker Evans, Josephine Herbst, Frederick Exley, Allan Gurganus, T. C. Boyle. Did these relationships have any impact on his writing? What writers did influence him?

I've already mentioned Cheever's main influences—Hemingway and Chekhov and Fielding, and for good measure I'll throw in Fitzgerald and Kafka and just a pinch of John O'Hara. As for his relationships with other writers, they mainly served as a goad to work harder. "Writing is not a competitive sport" was one of Cheever's most oft-repeated pieties—this from one of the most competitive writers who ever lived. Saul Bellow and Updike, in particular, were stars in relation to whom Cheever measured his own place in the firmament.

Considering the volume of journals, letters, and stories not collected here, might there be another Library of America volume of John Cheever's writings?

Absolutely.