

Bailey, Blake - *Cheever: A Life*

After spending several months reading Cheever's fiction (four of five novels, the journals, and a number of stories), I came to this tome somewhat prepared. I've never been drawn to a writer as much as I've been drawn to Cheever. Several reasons seem to come to the fore. Cheever was not really wanted by his parents. I was wanted (outwardly) by mine, but their actions (particularly my father's) did not always speak in such a manner. I'll never write as eloquently as Cheever, but I do identify with his having no use for linear structure in a novel. He has taught me that almost any structure I can justify (to myself, mostly, as long as it can be executed) can be used. His work is worth emulating—as young or novice writers often do. I've just never felt attached to anyone, not even those I admire as much as Fitzgerald or Hemingway (or T.C. Boyle or Richard Ford or Tobias Wolff), as much as I've felt drawn to Cheever. No subject matter is too mundane if the approach, the tone, and/or POV (and let's not forget voice) are appropriate. In my late blooming career, he has bolstered my courage to forge ahead.

In all, I think Cheever has been undervalued by American Letters, but time will tell. At some point in the future, a young professor may begin teaching him (for there is much to learn from his mastery), thus spawning a "renaissance" of Cheever's work—it may be happening as we speak. His work still reads "fresh," and I believe it always will. Now, to read that fifth novel and the rest of his stories (the crown jewels of his oeuvre).

Baldwin, James - *Another Country*

I was so terribly impressed. I bought this book (used) years ago, and it had sat on my shelf until K read it and recommended it.

Divided into three parts: **Book I.** Rufus. One thinks Rufus is the central character until he is killed. Great view of NY jazz scene as Rufus is talented sax player gone wrong. **II.** Eric and Yves are lovers in Paris. Such a great move. Eric is from the South and is acquainted with Rufus and his sister Ida, as well as Cass and Richard (novelist with a big new book coming out). Eric is about to break into his NY/CA acting career when he returns to NY sans Yves. **III.** Cass leaves Richard and has an affair with Eric. Eric also has an affair with Vivaldo (Rufus's friend from Book I). The last scene is Yves flying into NYC (great aerial description) to begin the life with Eric in 1950s New York City—as lovers.

The "other" country referred to in the title could be this "world" of 1950s cats. Funny how many words Baldwin uses that are still used today: "funky," "dude" and others. Funny how many have faded (cats), but it's all right. Those words are markers, letting one know where s/he is. Lovely prose, not florid but nearly so and even if it were, one wouldn't care. Great command of the language allows a writer to do what s/he wills to do. Great command of the language allows Baldwin to create another country we neither want to visit, nor one that we want to miss.

Best American Short Stories 2008 (Salmon Rushdie, ed.)

[See book for notes. A real sea change seems to take place with the 2007 edition, when the series editor changes from Katrina Kenison to Heidi Pitlor including the selection of more commercial writers like Stephen King and Rushdie to be guest editors. Overall, one sees a preponderance of the same journals represented—*New Yorker* et. al.—but many of the stories just don't seem to be of the same caliber as before. Am I wrong? Someone please tell me I'm wrong. I loved King's "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption," so maybe I'm wrong.]

Bishop, Margaret - *Single Scene Short Stories*

Cheever, John - *Bullet Park*

Famed satirization of American suburbia. It is still fresh though it is forty years old. The end is satisfying because one is led to believe that Hammer intends to murder Eliot Nailles. When he arrives at a party, Tony Nailles, Eliot's 17 year-old son, is parking cars as he is wont to do. Hammer arrives extremely drunk and inveigles Tony to enter the car, whacks him over the head, and takes him to Christ Church to murder him. No explanation is offered as to why he takes Tony instead of the intended Eliot except for the sot's drunkenness. One believes the kid is surely going to die, but due to very believable circumstances, Eliot is able to break into Christ Church and literally save his son from dying in a funeral pyre. Hammer is sent to an insane asylum. It is a satisfying end. Good wins over evil, but not by contrived manner, deus ex machina. It is totally real and unsentimental.

Cheever, John - *Falconer*

As I've now read four of Cheever's five novels, I see he sets up situation after situation of comparing/contrasting brothers. And usually one has a great hatred for the other. Also read "Good-Bye, My Brother," by chance while reading *Falconer*. Both hated brothers meet with violence at the hands of younger brother. In "Good-bye" the younger brother is injured but escapes unscathed. In *Falconer* the younger brother goes to prison for murdering his brother. In the journals Cheever speaks of his brother, but one doesn't get the sense of hatred that the fiction fulfills. Some great prose. End seems a bit pat, perhaps tame.

However, I find that I like Cheever's endings. All the unimportant issues (whodunit stuff) fall away, and all that remains is what is important to the story he has told. I try to emulate that in my work, but for me it is something new. One has to have a satisfying ending, but it need not be neat and orderly to be satisfactory or satisfying, either one.

In *Falconer* Cheever has lost his disdain for the "homosexual," the "queer." However, he sets up a situation in which men often participate in homosexual behavior because of the absence of women—not out in the world where such a character would be attacked. [In Blake's biography, we learn that Cheever was quite jealous

of his brother when younger, but later he showed great affection for his brother.]

Cheever, John - *Journals*

Of all the journals I've read—Isherwood's, Plath's, Orton's, Rorem's et. al.—this may be the most moving. This man was what writing is all about—forty years of putting his ass in a chair and writing every day. He wrote of his daily life in scenes often as if it were fiction. I must now read his fiction, all of it, to see how it lays side by side with his journal. He wrote while drunk; he even wrote as he lay dying of cancer in the same workman-like manner and yet with extreme honesty and beauty until his last breath.

Cheever, John - *The Wapshot Chronicle*

I became aware of some of his journal material in this novel but greatly transformed. A very disciplined yet creative writer he seems to be. I believe he uses Mary (his wife) as a model for one of the son's wives (Melissa)—almost off her nut, absolutely no pleasing her (according to Cheever's POV). Captures New England eccentricities. Like the structure of wandering, chapter by chapter, from one character to another. Found myself "lost" at times until I found a bit of a character to hold onto.

Cheever, John - *The Wapshot Scandal*

Probably enjoyed this novel more than *Chronicle*. Loved the chapter of Honora Wapshot as she flees the country for tax evasion by taking a ship to Italy. It could stand alone as a gem of a short story. Yet he "fits" it neatly into the novel's narrative, if "fit" is the correct word. Honora later returns to the U.S. to die.

DeLillo, Don - *White Noise*

P recommended that I read this book, but I can't now remember why . . . she just seemed appalled to know that I *hadn't*. First half lulls the reader into believing this is a "normal" setting. In the second half, a toxic event takes place, displacing people from the small college town for several days. The imaginable feelings occur during this period. Then they return home. The central character discovers he may die prematurely because he was exposed longer than the others. His wife had been taking a strange drug to reduce her sense of hopelessness. It didn't work. To obtain access to the drug she would sleep with a man. The central character hooks him up with a plan (repeated several times) but of course the plan fails. Shoots the man. The man grabs a gun and shoots central character in wrist. Climax. End: little boy (Wilder) takes his tricycle willy nilly across six lanes of a highway without getting hit. He winds up on the other side in a creek. He is saved by a bystander. Wonderfully symbolic, symbols that rise organically from the polluted and nonpolluted land, polluted and nonpolluted people. Diction is crisp. The children don't speak like normal children, largely because what they say is symbolic, n'est-ce pas? It took me to a place I probably would not go (even to read about) without a recommendation. Thanks, P.

Eugenides, Jeffrey, ed. - *My Mistress's Sparrow is Dead: Great love stories, from Chekov to Munro*

The best. Some great love stories, some great stories period. Eugenides's taste is impeccable.

Nabokov - "Spring in Fialta" He makes more of English in one sentence than most native writers make in a page or two.

Saunders, George - "Jon" Great! A Saunders story I get. Love the idiolect of the narrator. A satire of "the future."

Brodkey, Harold - "Innocence" Unbelievable control. To make a woman's orgasm last page after page . . . unbelievable (in a great way).

Munro, Alice - "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" My third reading. A master. The last exchange between man and woman is a killer.

[Commented on most stories at the end of each. See book for others.]

Kaufman, Bel - *Up the Down Staircase*

Read novel upon D's recommendation. As a non-traditional novel, it has its drawbacks. Using school policy and memos does emphasize the dehumanizing aspects of the New York City public schools. Duh. It does make the human strands of the novel stand out more. But there exist some limitations that traditional dialogue can add (a certain tension is missing). The letters and memos that Syl writes lack the immediacy of dialogue. Also, we never see a response from "Ellen," only as they are filtered through Syl's letters. So much of the action takes place between memos, between school days, between the bell schedule, and then they are referred to or explained in the next chapter. The climax seems to occur when Syl caresses Ferone's face, and he runs away. The denouement seems quite light and contrived. There is an unsatisfactory resolution with Ferone. Even if she is shunned more outwardly (as opposed to some sort of saccharine resolution) by Ferone, that would seem preferable to his flakey disappearance (though as h.s. kids we are all good at doing that sort of thing).

Moehringer, J.R. - *The Tender Bar*

A memoir that A recommended that I read, and I'm glad I did. The bar is named Dickens at first, then Publicans in later years; it is sort of a metaphysical father for the writer for thirty years of his life. The writer shares with the reader the men who've guided him through life (either by positive or negative example) to raise him. His biological father is entirely ineffectual, entirely uncaring, a drunk—something JR doesn't realize until years later when his father threatens to attack him and kill him (in a drunken rage). Later, JR quits drinking himself and begins to

write this book. Style is like reportage, but he makes great literary connections and brings me to tears at a number of places, particularly at the end in the epilogue when a young man whose father was killed in the twin towers suggests they meet at an old bar. Do you remember where the old Publicans used to be?" (413). What an ending.

However, the most engrossing section of the book, the most vital section, may be JR's years at Yale and his love for Sidney. After he graduates, the narrative cools down. It's not always as engaging. Yet . . . Moehringer did maintain my attention, so perhaps it doesn't matter.

Moore, Lorrie - *Gate at the Stairs*

Not that good. [This is the first e-book I've downloaded using the Kindle app on my iPhone. I'm not too sure that this format had a little to do with not enjoying Moore's book as much as I normally would. It's rather disconcerting to read a book a hundred words (one screen) at a time. It's like flipping through your grocery lists for the last ten years in a little spiral and still not knowing what to buy.]

Randolph, Vance, ed. - *Pissing in the Snow: And Other Ozark Folktales*

[K recommended this for me after seeing that many of the stories came from or near Eureka Springs, Arkansas—where I had a two-month residency at the Writers' Colony at Dairy Hollow.] A great tribute to the oral tradition as most of these stories have been passed down from generation to generation, often with a birth from an earlier civilization (Irish, etc.)

Taylor, Elizabeth - *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont*

Actually not as well-developed character-wise as the film. The relationship between Mrs. P and Ludo seems much warmer in the film. Is it only because of the splendid performances of Jane Plowright and Rupert Friend?

Walbert, Kate - *A Short History of Women*

Another disappointing e-read. Wonder if it isn't the format? Reading in 100 word chunks is like reading an entire book in a picture book format. I kept wanting to refer to the family tree chart and it wasn't that easy to "flip" back to the beginning. [Dippy me, I discovered that it really is fairly easy. I just wanted to grouse at the time.]