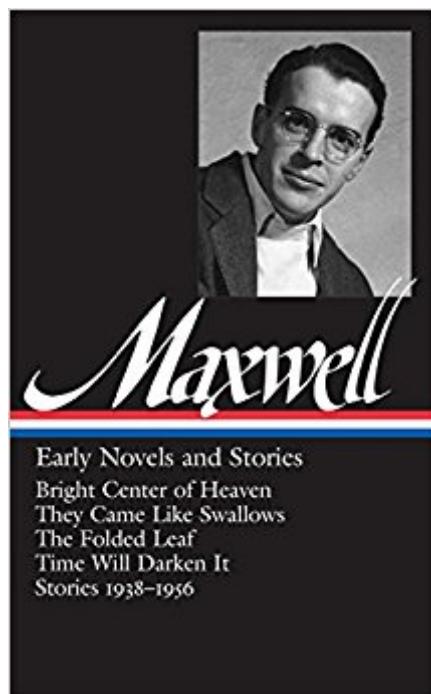


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William Maxwell: Early Novels And Stories



Synopsis

Christopher Carduff, editor In 1934, at age 26, William Maxwell left small-town Illinois for New York City, convinced that life and literature were elsewhere. "I had no idea then," he later wrote, "that three-quarters of the material I would need for the rest of my writing life was already at my disposal. My father and mother. My brothers. The look of things. The Natural History of home . . . All there, waiting for me to learn my trade and recognize instinctively what would make a story." With his second book, "They Came Like Swallows" (1937), Maxwell found his signature subject matter—the fragility of human happiness—as well as his voice, a quiet, cadenced Midwestern voice that John Updike has called one of the wisest and kindest in American fiction. Set against the background of the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, this short novel presents the loving character of Elizabeth Morison, a devoted wife and mother, through the eyes of those whom she is fated to leave decades before her time. Edmund Wilson described "The Folded Leaf" (1945) as "a quite unconventional study of adolescent relationships—between two boys, with a girl in the offing—in Chicago and in a Middle Western college: very much lived and very much seen." He praised this "drama of the immature" for the compassion Maxwell brings to his male protagonists, whose intensely felt, unarticulated bond is beyond their inchoate ability to understand. "Time Will Darken It" (1948) is a drama of the mature: a good man's struggle to keep duty before desire and his family's needs before his own. It paints a portrait of Draperville, Illinois, in 1912, a proud and isolated community governed by gossip, where an ambitious young woman must not overreach the limits society has placed on her sex, and an older, married gentleman must not encourage her should she dare. Together with these major works, this Library of America edition of Maxwell's early fiction collects his lighthearted first novel, "Bright Center of Heaven" (1934), out of print for nearly 70 years, and nine masterly short stories. It concludes with "The Writer as Illusionist" (1955), Maxwell's fullest statement on the art of fiction as he practiced it.

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Customer Reviews

"I went back and reread the novels I had read before, together with "Time Will Darken It" and all the short stories I could find. And I thought: So this is how it should be done. I thought: If only I could go back and write again every single thing I have written." -Alice Munro

Christopher Carduff is Books Editor of The Wall Street Journal and a former consulting editor at the Library of America. He is the editor of John Updike's posthumous collections Higher Gossip: Essays and Criticism, Always Looking: Essays on Art, Selected Poems, and Collected Stories.

When someone asks me who or what I'm reading these days my response is usually William Maxwell. The next question is "Who?" I then go on to tell them about a writer who has entered my life like a whirlwind, and I tell them about this author. Perhaps I am the one who has not caught up with 20th century fiction and yet I have read a plethora of writers in that era. My only excuse is that Maxwell lived from 1908 to 2000 and during his life time his actual fictional output was six novels (one of them a short one) and a number of short stories. What then was he doing in the meantime? Well, he was an editor of the New Yorker Magazine for one thing. Enough said there. He wrote when he could but you will often find stretches of nine or ten years between new novels. This does not help an eager fan base, but that's the way it was. I could go on for pages about this man, but I will just say this: if you like action- packed stories then he is not the author for you. But if you want a story where the characters grow and grow and grow upon you as if they were living right in your home, then give him a try. But be patient, for his complete delineation of character is not found until the end (and even then there is so much to be reconsidered and reread). Here's hoping.

William Maxwell's writing is very sensitive and subtle. You don't want to hurry through his work. I really savored the keen observations he makes about human nature, and the dynamics in families and relationships. I also enjoyed his descriptions of the settings, giving the reader a rich flavor of small town Midwestern life and values in the early 20th century, before the changes brought on by

the automobile. He has a very distinct style that has been a pleasure to discover. I bought the volume of his later works at the same time, and spent the summer reading them. I'm almost finished, and wish there were more, but I know I'll want to re-read his work.

Difficult to find material all in one place. I got this one and the later novels and stories. All the Maxwell I'll ever need in two beautiful books.

A master story teller, his early works are less complex and polished than his later work.

The first book of Maxwell's I read, in my late teens, was "So Long, See You Tomorrow" [in the second volume of this series, "Later Novels"]. It was so great, so moving, that I couldn't imagine at that time ever reading anything else by this author. Fortunately I went exploring eventually. "The Folded Leaf" and "Time Will Darken It" [in this volume] should be on any reader's shelf or in their mind. I recommend this volume of Maxwell's early novels and stories as well as the second volume of his later works. Money well spent on an American writer whose work will genuinely enrich your life.

Wonderful book !!!

The late William Maxwell (1908-2000) served for forty years as an editor at 'The New Yorker' magazine. An Illinois-boarn realist whose literary works provided his readers with 'windows' into small-town midwestern family life of the 1910 and 1920s, Maxwell's own mastery of American prose style was (and remains) unsurpassed by any of his contemporary including Eudora Welty, J. D. Slainger, John Updike, and Alice Munro (all of whom he was a first reader of their fiction in his professional capacity with 'The New Yorker'). Now his four early novels (Bright Centory of Heaven; They Came Like Swallows; The Folded Leaf; and Time Will Darken It) have been collected under one cover, along with nine of his early short stories, and his essay 'The Writer as Illusionist' which he wrote in 1955. "William Maxwell: Early Novels And Stories" is a valued and very strongly recommended addition to community, college, and university American Literature reference collections and supplemental reading lists.

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