

John Cheever: A Profile

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In my 1966 senior year at Brown, learning that popular novelist John Cheever would be on campus, I telephoned his daughter Susan for advice on how to get an interview. She was a senior at Pembroke, the women's college. "Call him at his hotel," she advised.

Mention John Cheever's name to an editor of the *New Republic* and he would probably say, "Oh yes, he sold us some reminiscences of his prep school life when he was sixteen." Mention the name to an editor of the *New Yorker* and he should say, "We published his first piece when he was nineteen; since then we've bought over one-hundred of his stories." And any bibliophile can tell you that Cheever won the 1958 National Book Award for the *Wapshot Chronicle*.

John Cheever. Now barely past 50, has made it. He is of that minority of gifted writers; he and success are one. It is expected, then, that the writer should have much to say about the contemporary literary scene.

Picture him in his sixth-floor Sheraton room. He has apologized because the maid has not yet made the bed. He offers you a Marlboro. Now he pours himself a drink and rests his loafers on a chair. He speaks of life and literature, which to him must be inseparable.

When Cheever leaves Providence he will go back to work on his new novel at his "house in the country with the long driveway." His eyes squint when he smiles; and he smiles when he tells you about his three children, two dogs and large house.

With literature, he is more serious. "I am responsible to myself," he says, when he talks about his writing habits. "A writer must have a fairly close discipline." Cheever almost always does his work in the morning and afternoon.

You may ask him what the writer writes about. "He must make some sense of his life, and preserve a vision of life, of a man's life. The writer must believe that he is giving, not taking, and the reader must feel that he is giving. And fiction is a sense of celebration too."

Cheever is not ignorant of what his coevals are doing, for he is of the belief that literature depends on mutual construction. "We all make contributions," he insists, "we're all building something."

He speaks admirably of the works of "Ralph" (Ellison), Updike, Malamud, Bellow, and John Hawkes. He thinks *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Is "great," but he criticizes James Baldwin for being "a bad novelist though a brilliant polemicist."

For young writers, Cheever has some inspiring advice: “For God’s sake, stop!” For those who have some talent, he would be more encouraging, he tells you. And though imitation of a fine writer is not all bad, Cheever implores the aspiring writer to try to “write something that nobody has done before,” and to “have a sense of maximum adventure.”

Good writers, Cheever is sure, “are way out—they’re in places no one has been before.”

With all this enthusiasm for literature, Cheever is not so optimistic as to expect the idyllic atmosphere that is so often portrayed in his latest work, *The Wapshot Scandal*. He thinks it is an absurd practice of publishers to put the names of an author’s previous works on the flyleaf of a book. If the author is any good, the reader will know his works. And the *New York Times Book Review* is often unfair. Cheever calls the front of the *Review* the “parlor,” and the back “the kitchen.” Any book reviewed in the kitchen, such as Hawkes’ *Second Skin*, is at a disadvantage, he believes.

It is only natural that he should be cognizant of the good and the bad of the writing world. If you asked Cheever what it is he’s searching for, what it is he’s getting at, in his works, he’ll tell you quickly enough, “It’s to refresh our sense of good and evil.”