

If you were to draw a diagonal line down the state of Illinois from Chicago to St. Louis, the halfway point would be somewhere in Logan County. The county seat is Lincoln, which prides itself on being the only place named for the Great Emancipator before he became President. Until the elm blight reduced it in a few months to nakedness, it was a pretty late-Victorian and turn-of-the-century town of twelve thousand inhabitants. It had coal mines but no factories of any size. “Downtown” was, and still is, the courthouse square and stores that after a block or two in every direction give way to grass and houses. Which in turn give way to dark-green or yellowing fields that stretch all the way to the edge of the sky.

From “Billie Dyer”
by William Maxwell
All the Days and Nights

On the Intimate Edge: Thoughts on William Maxwell
By Marilyn J. Hollman

Memory and its complications permeate the fiction of Illinois writer William Maxwell – born in Lincoln, IL, located between Normal and Springfield, in 1908, died in New York City in 2000.

But I cannot remember how I came to first read William Maxwell - - I believe it was his novel *Time Will Darken It* which I bought for a quarter from the discard shelf in my own childhood library in Dumont, IA, fifteen or more years ago. The book fascinated me and led me to find more of his novels and to begin championing him. Part of the attraction was the sheer easeful beauty of the prose, but more of it, I think, was my recognition of people and places and behaviors reminiscent of my own childhood, many of them behaviors – like my grandmother’s slipping a tortoise hairpin into her braid more firmly, or “souvenirs” which hadn’t registered or that I had forgotten – the deep ruts of

country lanes and still August air over cornfields during the Sunday drive out to see the crops. Two generations removed from Maxwell, novelist Donna Tartt (*The Secret History*) also discovered a shared childhood with Maxwell's – she recalls the wide lawns, the shady streets, the visit to the cemetery on Sunday afternoons of her small Mississippi city. Another thread of their connection: the Illinois Central Railroad.

I suspect another pull was the child of his landscapes and my own remembered experience, that of one who is somehow on the sidelines although not precisely excluded. Ab in *Time Will Darken It* perks her small ears on a conversation between mother and father, irritated when her uncle's stronger voice across the room covers their conversation. The consummate literary insider, Maxwell remained a vulnerable, curious outsider on the watch for betrayal and intimacy. At some point later in his life, much honored and loved, Maxwell told writer Charles Baxter, "After I left Illinois, I was always a tourist, wherever I was."

Then, too, Maxwell and I share the journey from small, rural setting, to major state university, to a more urban life. However, there the comparison ends, because William Maxwell became inhabitant, even authority, in the world of letters. More important, perhaps, was his gift for friendship. The poet Edward Hirsch, himself from Illinois, says of him, "He seems never to have resisted a generous impulse.

Maxwell attended the University of Illinois, then Harvard for an M.A., returned to teach at the U of Illinois, but by the mid-Thirties he published his first novel and began his 40 yearlong "second" job as Fiction editor for the *New Yorker*. Arguably, in the latter job, he influenced American fiction in the 20th century more than anyone. John Updike, John Cheever, J.D. Salinger, Eudora Welty, and Sylvia Ashton Warner are on the list of writers he worked with - - they speak, and spoke, highly of his skills but equally of his tact and his desire to forward the interests of the work. He was generous with their worlds as he is with the one he creates for us. But, no one reports he minced words about a piece of writing in the interests of a false kindness.

"Billie Dyer," (its introduction heads this essay) is a late story, 1989, and it shows us that Maxwell never left behind the place and people of his first 14 years. However, this story also highlights the continuing reflection and sensitivity he brought to the life and moral landscape of Lincoln, IL

Billie Dyer, Dr. William Dyer, a prominent physician, was a real person, son of Harriet, one of the African American women who worked for Maxwell's family. In two stories, this and one other about Dr. Dyer's mother, the Maxwell narrator (pretty clearly the author) demonstrates how time and change enlarge understanding and enrich the human spirit, even one already so in tune and generous as his. In those two stories the reader sees Harriet and daughter

Thelma with his mother, anew. Maxwell explained, "I tried . . . to see my mother as an adult would have. Allowing her to be less than perfect"

Of all the things to like about this opening paragraph to "Billie Dyer," not the least is its movement – from the theoretical "If you were to" thro' time and space "all the way to the edge of the sky." I like to say you tumble thro' time and space, but if so, it's a pretty controlled tumble. There's a lot of Illinois between its two largest urban "centers," which are, after all, on the edge themselves. This is something it's easy, for those of us cozy in Chicago or its suburbs, to forget.

In this story, of all stories, he introduces Mr. Lincoln * and identifies him as the Great Emancipator, nudging us into the story of the late 20th c. and a Lincoln, IL that belatedly recognizes one of her heroic sons, Dr. Dyer. Next we see the non-beautiful elm "blight" and "nakedness." In one sense, the characters, especially the children, in Maxwell's novels are always "naked" in the confiding, intimacy we access to their observations, fantasies, shortcomings and dreams. Here's a passage from *They Come Like Swallows*.

"Bunny drew his knees under him and looked out. The room was reflected in the window pane. He could see nothing until he pulled the curtain behind his head. Outside it was quite dark, as his mother said. Light from the Koenig's window fell across their walk, across the corner of their cistern. If he were in the garden now, with a flashlight, He could see insects crawling through the cold grass The curtain slipped back in place. Once more he could see nothing but the reflections of the room. The night outside (and all that was in it) was shut away from him like those marvelous circus animals in wagons from which the sides had not been removed." (p. 49)

These children - - you can think of them as one - - are simultaneously intensely interior, self conscious in all senses of the words, and intensely curious and focused outward. Most readers, I suspect, will see "Bunny" as a stand in for William Maxwell. Another writer said of him - - no child like the ones in his books could become anything else BUT a writer. In his introduction to a collection of literary studies, *The Outermost Dream*, Maxwell writes of himself, "I can never get enough of knowing about other people's lives. It is why, when I open the morning's newspaper, I turn first to the obituary page, hoping for more than the end of the story."

In novel after novel, we meet this interesting, alert child who turns to his mother, as "though she's the sun." Then she dies. Maxwell was ten when his mother died suddenly in the influenza epidemic just after WW I. Because this loss occurs in novels throughout his writing career, I'm tempted to say that Maxwell never really "got over it." Of course that implies that some people DO "get over it," which is naïve. An adult version of that child comes to understand in one story that "my father really was a good father," and, in an earlier novel - - I'm

tempted to say “version” - - there is narration, without interpretation, of the tearing grief of the husband who paces relentlessly thro’ the house after the fateful phone call, over and over again, hand firmly on the shoulder of the ten year old son.

Understanding the older brother may have come harder. But, a short story published in 1965 lets us in on a meeting of brothers in a Chicago hotel for dinner. The younger is a painter in New York, newly married to a beautiful young woman (Maxwell’s wife Emily was both a painter and exceptionally beautiful), the elder, a successful businessman still back home in “Lincoln.” I feel uncomfortable as I read that story - - as though I’m not supposed to be here after all! - - and at the end, the younger brother, who I’ve been “behind” all the way, looks down and sees his brother’s gloved, artificial hand. I gulped. Maxwell’s older brother lost his leg above the knee when William was just a baby.

Reading these books and stories as I did - - whenever and however I felt like it - - makes me think that randomness can be a virtue. By the time I read that Chicago story - - “A Game of Chess” - - I knew quite a bit about the fictional world and the, supposedly, “real” world of this Lincoln born and bred family. When I, too, “saw” that gloved hand, my gulp was for Bunny, and I remembered him cowering under the covers the morning after his mother died, hearing the thud of brother Robert’s wooden leg on the floor as he adjusted its straps. It was also a gulp for the older brother whose own losses as well as his energy and carelessness, I had come to take for granted.

The thump of the wooden leg on the floor emphasizes Maxwell’s lack of sentimentality even when the subject matter is so delicate and intimate and often so everyday - - the inky fingers of Limey, protagonist of *The Folded Leaf*, as he listens to his U of Illinois professor talk about Shelley or the green and white chintz in the bedroom that Harold occupies in *The Chateau*, a novel “starring” a young American couple, newly married, mostly set in 1948 post-war France. We also get observations like these from *Time Will Darken It*.

“The sounds of an evening party breaking up are nearly always the same and nearly always beautiful.” I admire the different resonances of the two “nearly’s.”

And: “Of the literary arts, the one most practiced in Draperville was history. It was informal, and there was no reason to write it down since nothing was ever forgotten. The child born too soon after marriage . . . whenever his mother’s name was mentioned, it was inexorably followed by some smiling reference to the date of his birth.”

Those last lines come from one of the many set-pieces throughout Maxwell's novels and stories. They are part of a longer ladies-who-lunch narrative, and it comes as close to being savage as I think Maxwell ever comes. These women playing cards with their hats on, eating cheese and pimento sandwiches with tomato aspic, show little mercy; they know enough never to be absent. Yet, there is some tenderness when the reader winces at the tight pumps squeezed onto swollen feet. Another novelist of the Midwest, Sinclair Lewis, gives us the savageness in *Main Street*, but not any of the tenderness. Garrison Keillor perhaps comes closest to Maxwell's delicate balance of savagery and tenderness, but Keillor tends to go for the laugh. Maxwell knows to let it come, if it will.

Where does William Maxwell fit into our American canon? You've likely already thought of William Faulkner with his mythical Yoknapatawpha County where characters star, return as supporting actors, die. I also thought about John Updike who Maxwell first published and his obsession with the "Rabbit Angstrom" of small-city Pennsylvania. Among Maxwell's other writers, there is John Cheever and the Connecticut suburbs of martinis, swimming pools and adultery as well as J.D. Salinger whose characters rarely left the upper West Side and who also appear and reappear, find their own voices and then retreat - - or die. You may think of contemporary writers who fit in here - - Phillip Roth and his Zukerman, for example,

Maxwell also chronicles domestic life and the family - - the breakfast table conversation, the cluster of objects left on the mother's dressing table, the china on the tea table of an English professor's drawing room. Think of Tom Perotta, of Michael Cunningham, of Susan Minot and Sue Miller, of Richard Ford among current novelists. In this passage from the short story Maxwell's "The Man in the Moon" notice the details of family dinner, filtered through memory as in a magic lantern show.

"Not long ago, by some slippage of the mind, I was presented with a few moments out of my early childhood. My grandfather's house, so long lived in by strangers, is ours again. The dining-room table must have several leaves in it, for there are six or eight people sitting around it. My mother is not in the cemetery but right beside me. She is talking to Granny Blinn about . . . about? . . . I don't know what about. If I turn my head I will see my grandfather at the head of the table. The windows are there and look out on the side yard. The goldfish are swimming through their castle at the bottom of the fishbowl. The door to the back parlor is there. Over the sideboard there is a painting of a watermelon and grapes. No one stops me when I get down from my chair and go out to the kitchen and ask the hired girl for a slice of raw potato. I like the greenish taste. When I come back into the dining room I go and stand beside my uncle. He finishes what he is saying and then notices that I am looking with curiosity at his glass of beer. He holds it out to me, and I take a sip and when I make a face he laughs. His left hand is resting on the white damask tablecloth. He can move his fingers. The catastrophe hasn't happened. I

would have liked to linger there with them, but it was like trying to breathe underwater. I came up for air, and lose them.”

Then, there are earlier writers, some American, some not, who come to mind: Henry James escorting his American girls about Europe, Jane Austen playing whist in country houses and her successor Barbara Pym among her jumble sales and one room “bed-sits.” I add these to Maxwell’s own favorites, Chekhov and Tolstoy. Prince Andrei’s death attended Maxwell’s own last days as friends came to read *War and Peace* aloud when he became too frail to hold that big book. One regret about dying, he said, was that one couldn’t read Tolstoy again.

Of his reading, Maxwell wrote “. . . Because half my professional life was spent in being an editor and editors work close to the page, obsessed with whether or not the writer has said what he meant to say, when I read for my own enjoyment I cannot - - or mostly do not - - read authors whose way of writing doesn’t give me pleasure. But of course style is not in itself enough. *One wants blowing through it at all times the breath, the pure astonishment of life.*” (emphasis mine)

For this Illinois writer, and New York sophisticate, the breath and pure astonishment began and ended here in the center of the state, in the leafy streets and houses off the courthouse square, rippling, reflecting, reminding, refracting, relentless, “stretching all the way to the edge of the sky.”

* There are a number of stories about Mr. Lincoln and Lincoln, IL, including one in which he christened the town with watermelon juice. He visited on his lawyer’s circuit, and another “circuit,” Route, 66, brings folks to Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Maxwell’s landscapes.

Marilyn J. Hollman, mjms@ntsource.com, 630-717-0467

From “The Man in the Moon,” *All the Days and Nights*
by William Maxwell, 1984.

Imagine all the writing possibilities . . .

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house, so long lived in by strangers, is ours again. The dining-room table must have several leaves in it, for there are six or eight people sitting around it. My mother is not in the cemetery but right beside me. She is talking to Granny Blinn about . . . about? . . . I don't know what about. If I turn my head I will see my grandfather at the head of the table. The windows are there and look out on the side yard. The goldfish are swimming through their castle at the bottom of the fishbowl. The door to the back parlor is there. Over the sideboard there is a painting of a watermelon and grapes. No one stops me when I get down from my chair and go out to the kitchen and ask the hired girl for a slice of raw potato. I like the greenish taste. When I come back into the dining room I go and stand beside my uncle. He finishes what he is saying and then notices that I am looking with curiosity at his glass of beer. He holds it out to me, and I take a sip and when I make a face he laughs. His left hand is resting on the white damask tablecloth. He can move his fingers. The catastrophe hasn't happened. I would have liked to linger there with them, but it was like trying to breathe underwater. I came up for air, and lose them.

William Maxwell works to read with students:

“Billy Dyer,” *All the Days and Nights*. 1989.

So Long, See You Tomorrow. 1980.

“With Reference to an Incident at a Bridge,” *All the Days and Nights*. 1984.

The Folded Leaf. 1945.

Marilyn J. Hollman, Literacy Perspectives, mjms@ntsource.com