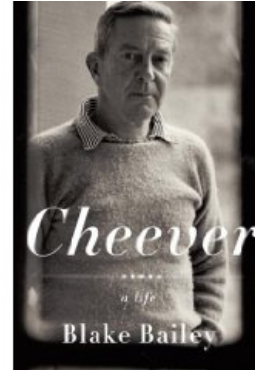


A Writer's Life, Not Pretty

Wednesday, April 29, 2009

John Cheever never gained the recognition he so desperately craved, even though he won many awards, including the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Born in 1912, Cheever got himself thrown out of prep school and soon set his sights on being a writer. His life had many twists and turns, but he eventually achieved literary success, preceding John Updike as the chronicler of American suburban life. Though a novelist, Cheever was best known to most Americans as a writer of short stories (a fact that caused him some embarrassment).



Cheever was also a man of great sadness and tremendous insecurities. In *Cheever: A Life*, biographer Blake Bailey provides a 700-page account of Cheever's life and work. What emerges from this biography is a portrait of a deeply troubled man whose consuming goal of literary recognition looks nothing less than pathetic. He was also a man tortured by his ambiguous sexuality and demons from his childhood and adolescence. Readers of Cheever's fiction will find the book fascinating and troubling. Christians will find in this biography ample reminder of the way that all art is compromised by sin, seen and unseen. *Cheever: A Life* also offers a portrait of the American literary establishment of the twentieth century.

An excerpt:

Cheever was at once the most reticent and candid of men. "Life is melancholy," he said, "which isn't allowed in New England." Mortality and bodily functions and so forth were not big topics of conversation in Cheever's childhood home, nor was anything else that adverted to human frailty or might lead to a quarrel: "Feel that refreshing breeze," his mother would say when the mood turned tense, or perhaps she'd call attention to the evening star. "If you are raised in this atmosphere," remarks the narrator of "Goodbye, My Brother;" "I think it is a trial of the spirit to reject its habits of guilt, self-denial, taciturnity, and penitence, and it seemed a trial of the spirit in which Lawrence [the narrator's brother] had succumbed." A part of Cheever had succumbed as well, while another part roared its defiance to the world. On sexual matters especially, Cheever was almost insistently forward. He would answer fan mail with ribald anecdotes of the most intimate nature, and rarely hesitated to discuss a mistress or some other indiscretion with his children.

