THE LETTERS OF JOHN CHEEVER by Benjamin Cheever

In the best of his fiction, John Cheever re-created the suburban experience in America as no writer has before or since.

The men of Shady Hill, St. Botolphs and Bullet Park are ordinary residents of patrician attitude whose lack of wherewithal sadly limits their social-climbing ambitions. They are impulsive adulterers who bathe in mortifyingly cold water, heavy drinkers who soberly carve the Thanksgiving turkey for an All-American family, men who ache to be good but are betrayed by moral flaws.

Cheever explored such conflicted existences with precision and a felicity of expression that made the essential lightness of his fictional beings not merely bearable but amusing. Graceful and lapidary are operative words for John Cheever's prose.

The letters in this volume, selected and edited by his son, generally reflect the cheerful and urbane Cheever persona that dominated his books. The later ones especially are distinguished by a burnished easiness of phrase and a sly humor that on occasion turns unkind. But the correspondence also plumbs darkness and betrays an ineffable sadness that the author in real life sought to keep under wraps.

"I have always been the lover--never the beloved," Cheever complained to a friend a few years before he died of cancer in 1982. The beloveds were many for this long-married father of three, and included men as well as women. For Cheever, these entanglements were always connected with the need for love. "Unseemly close," Cheever elsewhere characterized the undocumented relationship with his older brother than may have been the crucial one in his life.

The editor reminds us that his father's homosexual episodes were superseded by a lusty heterosexual life, and Cheever's homophobic outbursts seem to support that view. Actress Hope Lange, with whom Cheever had a protracted love affair, recalls him in these pages as having been the most ardent of lovers.

Following his sister Susan's troubled 1984 memoir of their father, Benjamin Cheever endeavors in this account to explicate his father's complex character more thoroughly. Perhaps too much so. In lengthy notes that precede rather than follow the letters in the conventional fashion, Benjamin pinpoints virtually every epistolary reference. The memoir he constructs as apposite to the

correspondence has the unswerving authority of primary witness and bravely documents a child's love for a difficult parent. But the editor also leads the reader shamelessly, not trusting the material at hand to speak for itself.

The early letters are notable for fluency of expression and a corresponding superficiality of subject. Much high-blown talk of work-in-progress and local geography fills the pages as the young Cheever communicates with such senior literary correspondents as Malcolm Cowley, Josephine Herbst, e. e. cumings and Elizabeth Ames, executive director of Yaddo, the artist colony where Cheever spent many of his summers.

It takes service during World War II to focus the young writer's descriptive abilities on more substantial subjects. But even here, Cheever comes across as being along only for the ride. He is apolitical to a remarkable degree and strangely equable about the drudgery of army life. Petty details engage him, not the larger social picture.Writing to his wife, he observes: "I dream continually about the day when the war will be over. It's always in the country somewhere, always in the east where there is grass and where there are elm trees, and you're always wearing a sweater."

Once discharged, he toils for subsistence wages as a free-lance writer of stories, principally for The New Yorker, with whom he has begun a lifelong professional affiliation. Years later, after his first novel is finally published and he can afford to do so, John Cheever--in what comes across as an act of pure will--transforms himself into the country husband he has so beautifully brought to life in his fiction--complete with Westchester Country home, picture-perfect family and loyal dog, the death of whom produces this bittersweet reminiscence:

"Some years ago I went to a psychiatrist who told me I was obsessed [sic] with my mother. When I told him that I like to swim he said: Mother. When I told him that I like the rain he said: Mother. When I told him that I drank too much he said: Mother. This was all rubbish but sitting here with Cassie one evening I saw her raise her head exactly as Mother used to and give me a pained, sweet, fleeting smile that was unnerving."

Central to Cheever's life was his alcoholism, the fact of which he denied to himself for a long time. Writing to Josephine Herbst as late as 1968, he is still evasive about his drinking: "There is a terrible sameness to the euphoria of alcohol and the euphoria of metaphor--the sense that the imagination is boundless--and I

sometimes substitute or extend one with the other."

Just five years later, after disastrous teaching stints at Iowa and Boston University that were dominated by alcoholic binges, a gravely ill Cheever is taken to Smithers Clinic in Manhattan to dry out. Though initially resistant to the treatment ("half the time I know why I'm here, half the time I don't", he never drank again.

The sexual ambiguity that divided him was opposed more obliquely. In 1976, a few years before his death, Cheever's transcendentally confessional novel, "Falconer," was published to popular and critical acclaim. Readers did not fully pick up on its autobiographical aspects, and Cheever equivocated in interviews when asked about the book's homosexual elements.

Ultimately, as these letters attest when one scratches their veneer, John Cheever's life was characterized by an unending search for goodness that he never despaired of finding. Writing to an unnamed young man with whom he had been physically intimate, Cheever tellingly notes: It seems from adolescence that we must learn to love one another.

Anything less it seemed, would wreak some basic damage to my spiritual balance." This problem appears in all the books and stories."

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