

William Maxwell: Reflecting his own small-town experience

By John Hallwas

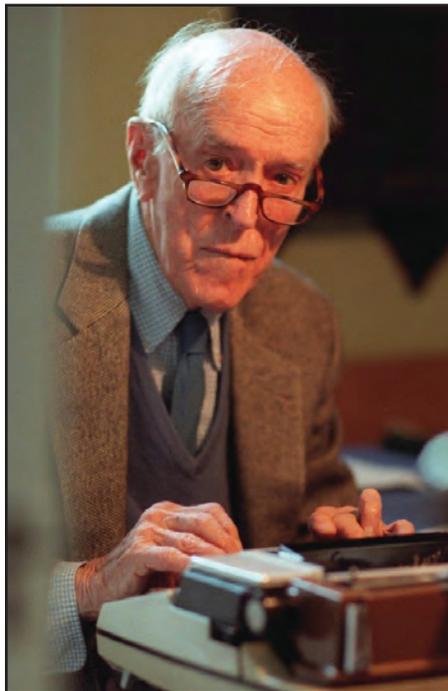
One twentieth-century Illinois author who is underappreciated, especially by readers in his home state, is William Maxwell. He wrote half a dozen acclaimed novels, many short stories and essays, a couple of children's books, and a combination memoir and family history. All are well written, but he spent most of his career in New York, where he was the well-known fiction editor of *The New Yorker* magazine from 1936 to 1975. (In that post, he often assisted famous figures like Vladimir Nabokov, J. D. Salinger, John Updike, and Eudora Welty.) So, he was not much of a presence in Illinois.

But Maxwell was born and raised here, and he based some of his works—including his greatest achievement—on his family and small-town experience in our state.

His home town was Lincoln, the Logan County seat, located between Springfield and Peoria, where he was born on August 16, 1908. After his mother died in the 1918 flu epidemic, he was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Bloomington, but when his father married again and moved to Chicago, young William joined him there. He

attended Senn High School and then studied at the University of Illinois, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1930. He earned a master's degree from Harvard in 1931, and then he taught English for two years at the University of Illinois, before leaving for New York to pursue his writing career.

Maxwell's first novel, *Bright Center of Heaven*, published in 1934, reflects a day at a rural art colony in Wisconsin, and it was based on a summer Maxwell had spent working at such a place, near Portage, after his junior year in



William Maxwell

photo courtesy NPF

high school. While that book did not have a noted impact, his second novel, *They Came Like Swallows*, was very well received and earned the Friends of American Writers Award for 1937.

The latter is autobiographically based and reflects the great tragedy of the author's boyhood: the experience of his family in 1918, when his mother suddenly passed away.

It has three sections. The first one depicts a small-town family through the eyes of a boy named Bunny Morison—who is based on Maxwell himself as a child. Of course, there are keen insights into the boy, who adores his mother and resents his insensitive father. In the second part, the focus is on Robert Morison, a crippled thirteen-year-old who is based

on the author's older brother, Edward, who had lost one leg in an accident. And the last of the sections is based on their father, James Morison. Of course, he reflects the character of Maxwell's father, who had no real understanding of his sons.

Elizabeth Morison, inspired by

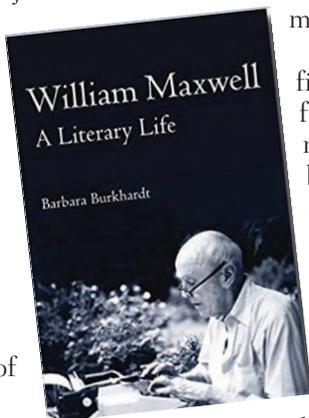
Blossom Maxwell, is a wife and mother who understands and appreciates her husband and the two boys. She is a crucial figure for all three of them—and her death from the flu has a terrible impact. Her husband and two sons essentially remain silent about their great sense of loss, while they strive to cope. As Maxwell said, late in his life, concerning the tragedy that inspired the novel, "It happened too suddenly, with no warning, and none [of us] could believe it or bear it." And as a result, "the beautiful, imaginative, protected world of my childhood [was] swept away."

But he effectively reconstructs the inner life of children by depicting the two boys in that novel. As the author's biographer, Barbara Burkhardt, says in *William Maxwell: A Literary Life* (2005), to read *They Came Like Swallows* is "to recall unexpectedly how a child's mind works, to recover its concerns, dark uncertainties, and vibrant imagination."

Some of Maxwell's other fine novels and stories, such as *Time Will Darken It* (1948) and "Billie Dyer" (1989), have autobiographical details, related to his experience in Lincoln, and he also depicts small-town life there as a facet of *Ancestors: A Family History* (1972), which is partly a memoir. No wonder the author once asserted, "My imagination's home is the dead center of the state of Illinois. . . ."

And fortunately, Maxwell's greatest novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, which appeared in 1980, and won the National Book Award, directly reflects his experience there also. It is based on a murder that occurred in Lincoln a century ago, early in 1921. The killing was widely reported in Illinois newspapers. In my town, for example, the *Macomb Journal* reported it in a January 21 article titled "Lincoln Farmer Killed in Barn: Mysteriously Shot While Milking Early Yesterday Morning."

The murder officially remained a mystery—although stories circulated that the dead man, Louis Martin, was



having “improper relations” with the wife of a neighboring farmer, Todd Denny. Later that day, Denny committed suicide, and his body was eventually discovered at a nearby gravel pit, so local people felt certain that he had committed the crime and simply did not want to face prosecution and punishment.

So Long, See You Tomorrow doesn’t just tell about a shocking small-town murder. It also reflects the relationship between two young boys. One is the son of the killer—whose fictionalized name is Cletus Smith—and the other is an unnamed friend of his, a character based on young William Maxwell. Prior to the murder, the boys not only interact at school but frequently play together and even participate in the same Boy Scout troop.

But the things that children sometimes have to endure are emphasized in the book, for the narrator looks back at the situation of his friend, Cletus—who never returned to the local school after the murder and was soon taken away from the village by his mother. In a sense, that boy was also a victim of the violence. As Maxwell ponders the ramifications of the murder, he also laments his own failure to respond effectively to his boyfriend’s crisis:

“I knew it was a most terrible thing that had happened to Cletus and that he would forever be singled out by it, but I didn’t try to put myself in his place, or even think that maybe I ought to find out where he lived . . . and go see him. It was as if his father had shot and killed him too.”

Beyond that separation, something else later occurred. After the Maxwell family moved to Chicago, when William was fifteen, he saw the Denny boy, whom he would later re-name as Cletus Smith, in a high school corridor—for the latter’s mother had moved to that area, with her son, after the murder. But quiet, introverted William didn’t speak to his former friend or attempt to re-engage with the tragically impacted youth. And that failure haunted Maxwell for the rest of his life. He felt guilty for not doing what he might have done to help the son of a murderer, who had been removed by his mother from the small town that had once been crucial to his identity.

In a way, Maxwell wrote *So Long,*



“The William Maxwell Boyhood Home” historical marker in Lincoln, Illinois.

Photo by William Furry

See You Tomorrow partly to explore what caused the break in their relationship—and to reflect on his own failure to rekindle their friendship, when the unexpected opportunity arose. His ultimate realization, of course, is that people are complex. They often don’t understand what they should realize about one another—or about themselves—but they do have important personal insights now and again.

Indeed, the greatest praise that Maxwell received as a writer was often for using his fact-based fiction to convey the complexity of ordinary people—and thus, emphasizing our need to better comprehend others. As he said in 1982, about his own awareness of small-town people, derived from his early experience in Illinois, “Lincoln is full of unwritten novels.”

Since his death on July 31, 2000, in New York, Maxwell has fortunately begun to receive more acclaim for his writing. Aside from the excellent Burkhardt biography, another insightful volume is *A William Maxwell Portrait: Memories and Appreciations* (2004).

Also, just recently, on August 29, a fine essay on Maxwell by A. O. Scott appeared as the cover story in *The New York Times Book Review*, which was part of a series titled “The Americans: Writers Who Show Us Who We Are.” As Scott points out, Maxwell was a kind of “fictional historian,” whose novels and short stories are “profoundly analytical, propelled by a spirit of inquiry more than by the mechanics of plot.”

For that reason, as well as his fact-based, lucid, and engaging prose style, public appreciation for the works of William Maxwell should continue to increase in our century. And readers with an interest in domestic life and small-town culture should especially become fascinated with his work. 

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