

## William Maxwell and Choices in Handling Time

by Robert S. Boone

In poking through a plate full of fiction, it's tempting to pass over how time is handled, because there are so many other juicy morsels to savor. Why sip on something that seems shapeless, when we can digest characters, taste the setting, nibble at the plot, and devour the theme? At best, we can spoon up a puny portion of time. But why bother? Even though an author must include time in the recipe, do we have to sample it to see how fiction writing works?

Probably so, especially if the author happens to be William Maxwell, one of America's most respected fiction writers. Maxwell shows us the decisions a writer must make with time—Should I follow chronological order? Should I slow down? Speed up? Which tense should I use?—and the impact these choices can make upon the entire work. By considering his use of time in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, we can expand our understanding of the

writer's craft to include something that is rarely discussed.

But first, if you don't know it already, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, published in 1980, is considered a minor classic. Like *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this short novel speaks clearly and unpretentiously to young readers. It has a convincing plot, intriguing characters, and a riveting subject—murder.

### Murder Most Foul—but Not in Time Order

**M**urder! While the harmless title does not suggest it, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* is about a murder in the small town of Lincoln, Illinois, in the 1920s. When the novel is over, you know who pulled the trigger, who felt the bullet, and how the relatives were affected. But don't expect the book to start at the earliest time mentioned in the story and end at the latest. While many things happen in the story before the murder,

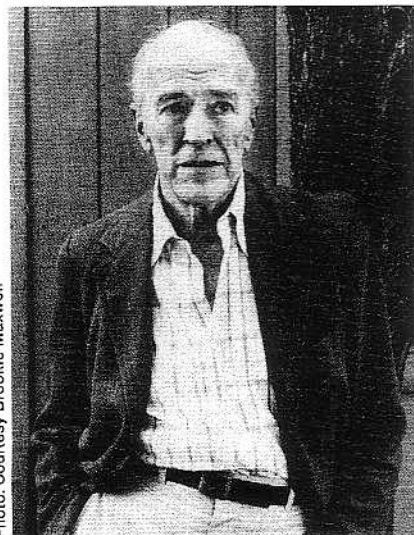


Photo: Courtesy Brookie Maxwell

we read about the murder itself in the second paragraph:

One winter morning shortly before daybreak, three men loading gravel there [a gravel pit] heard what sounded like a pistol shot. Or, they agreed, it could have been a car backfiring. Within a few seconds it had grown light. No one came to the pit through the field that lay alongside it, and they didn't see

grandfather's clock and on into the library, and from the library into the living room. Or he would walk from the library into the dining room and then into the living room by another doorway, and back to the front hall. Because he didn't say anything, I didn't either.

Maxwell can join together separate pieces of time because he is telling the story through a character, one who thinks a lot about the past. The narrator's mind focuses on recurrent events, decides what significant characteristic the events share, and then gives us a specific, *particularized* version of them.

### The Immediacy of Present Tense

If flashbacks, flashforwards, simple time order, and composite time are not enough, Maxwell demonstrates another technique in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*: he switches to the present tense when the narrator relates events he did not actually experience. Because he was only marginally involved with the Smiths and Wilsons, he did not witness the particular moments leading to the murder. But he can imagine what must have gone on. And what he imagines he shares for a very important reason: he wants to figure out why he hurt Cletus.

Except through the intervention of chance, the one possibility of my making some connection with him seems to lie not in the present but in the past—in my trying to reconstruct the testimony that he was never called upon to give.

For example, the narrator imagines Cletus's life when the Wilsons and the Smiths were the fondest of friends. Notice the present tense, used as if the narrator is imagining a scene and describing it as he sees it in his mind:

It is not by accident that Cletus is often in the Wilsons' buggy when the two families

drive off to church together or to town to see the fireworks on the Fourth of July. They are his second family. If his mother sends him to the Wilsons' because she has suddenly discovered that she is out of vanilla or allspice, there is a good chance that Mrs. Wilson will cut a slice off a loaf of bread that has just come out of the oven and spread butter and jam on it and give it to him. He likes her apart from that, though; he likes her because she is always the same.

### Solving the Problem of Time

Even though in our daily lives we might urge ourselves to "save time," to "borrow time," to "make time," and not to "lose time," we know that time is not something we can do very much about. Time "marches on." But in their work, novelists such as

William Maxwell have a different relationship with time. Instead of letting it take over, a novelist can and must solve the problem of time, for whatever the fictional subject—love, heroism, fantasy, murder—the clock is always ticking. □

### Write Away

I. Select a significant event from your past. Narrate it first in time order. Then, using a flashback, describe the same event. What was happening in the middle? How did you get to the middle? What occurred from the middle until the end?

II. Describe something you have never seen as you imagine it *might* happen, just as Maxwell lets his narrator invent a reasonable version of something he never experienced. What occurs in the huddle at a football game?

## A Writer's Bookshelf: William Maxwell's Favorites

*William Maxwell was recently asked what books he recommends as "must reads" for aspiring writers. Rejecting the idea of "must reads," Maxwell nevertheless provided the following list of books that he has "read, with rapture."*

Elizabeth Bowen, *The House in Paris*

Willa Cather, *The Professor's House; A Lost Lady; My Mortal Enemy*

Colette, *My Mother's House; Sido; Cheri; The End of Cheri*

Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo; Chance; The End of the Tether; Heart of Darkness; Victory; The Secret Agent; The Shadow Line; The Arrow of Gold*

Isak Dinesen, *Seven Gothic Tales*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

Shirley Hazzard, *The Evening of the Holiday*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Conclusive Evidence; Laughter in the Dark; The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina; War and Peace; The Death of Ivan Ilyitch; Master and Man*

Ivan Turgenev, *A Sportsman's Notebook*

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

What goes on in the teachers' room? What do Prince Charles and Lady Di discuss at breakfast?

III. Can you create a composite moment from your past? Consider something that has happened to you repeatedly, something that made a strong impression

on you. First generalize to determine what the separate moments share. Then recreate them as a specific memory of the past. Make sure that your reader can visualize what you are creating.

IV. Analyze the author's handling of time in *your* all-time

favorite work of fiction: Is the book strictly chronological? If the book is not chronological, how does the author move time around? Are there any composite moments? Does the author ever slow down to follow the clock?

## A Conversation with William Maxwell

*Contributing writer Beth Levine recently interviewed William Maxwell in New York. Writing! presents excerpts from that conversation.*

**Beth Levine:** *What prompted you to become a writer? Did you always want to be one? Did you write while you were young?*

**William Maxwell:** I once heard Saul Bellow say that a writer is a reader who is moved to emulation.

I didn't mean to be a writer as I was growing up, but rather an artist.

I wrote a little in high school and then more in college—poetry, mostly. After college, a friend who was doing book reviews for the book section of the *New York Herald Tribune*, a newspaper that no longer exists, insinuated me into reviewing also. And one thing and another led to my trying to write a novel.

*What authors have influenced you the most?*

**Maxwell:** I think Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster, but about influences one cannot be sure. They sometimes take place in the unconscious. I have also been influenced by reading so much poetry, W.B. Yeats and Elinor Wylie particularly. And I had a friend, Robert Fitzgerald, who was an authentic poet, and who taught me to distinguish between literature and literary entertainment.

*Your novels have an almost factile sense of place. What do you draw on to create this atmosphere?*

**Maxwell:** I rely on my memory of places and desire to reconstruct them in words, so that characters who exist only in my mind can have real streets to walk around in.

*Do you research? What are you looking for when you do?*

**Maxwell:** If I am writing about the kind of life I do not know firsthand, I try first to learn about it and then to imagine it.

*Your language is known for its short, tight quality. Is this something you consciously strive for?*

**Maxwell:** I do consciously strive not to use five or six words when two or three will do the trick. I like prose fiction that moves rather than dawdles or comes to a complete halt.

*You often write about the past—ways of life and eras long gone. Why is that?*

**Maxwell:** The past is our inherited and accumulated wealth; it shows us familiar, recognizable patterns of human behavior. The past is something we have had a chance to reflect on and sometimes, with luck, understand.

*You were an editor at the New Yorker for forty years, and you have also been an English teacher and author. What effect has each*

*career had on the others? Did being an editor make you a better writer? Did being a writer make you a better teacher?*

**Maxwell:** I think being an editor made me a better writer in that the work that passed over my desk was usually of a high quality, and in studying it to see if everything was in order, I learned to appreciate what was there before me. When I was a teacher, I had not yet done any writing—any prose, that is. I only wrote poetry. Perhaps it made me able to pass on some of my own enthusiasm to my students.

*What are your writing habits?*

**Maxwell:** I write a rough draft all the way through, if possible, and then revise and revise and revise until I can't think of any further way to improve it. Sometimes a sentence will be in nine or ten different places before I find the right one for it and it locks into place. Even if it occurs in an otherwise dead paragraph, when I have written what seems to me a good sentence I save it, and search for the right place for it.

*What advice do you have for a young writer?*

**Maxwell:** Read, read. □