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JOHN CHEEVER IS DEAD AT 70

JOHN CHEEVER IS DEAD AT 70; NOVELIST WON PULITZER PRIZE

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI
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John Cheever, whose poised, elegant prose established him as one of America's finest storytellers, died yesterday at his home in Ossining, N.Y. He was 70 years old and had been afflicted with cancer for several months.

Long regarded by critics as a kind of American Chekhov, Mr. Cheever possessed the ability to find spiritual resonance in the seemingly inconsequential events of daily life.

In four novels, "The Wapshot Chronicle," "The Wapshot Scandal," "Bullet Park" and "Falconer," and more than 100 short stories, he chronicled both the delights and dissonances of contemporary life with beauty and compassion. Awarded Pulitzer Prize

It was an achievement recognized by a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, a National Book Critics Circle Award and the Edward MacDowell Medal. Last April he also received the National Medal for Literature, in recognition of his "distinguished and continuing contribution to American letters."

One of the few collections of short fiction ever to make The New York Times best-seller list, his collected stories published in 1978 established him as a writer with a popular audience as well. A new novella, "Oh What a Paradise It Seems," was published by Alfred A. Knopf last March.

His voice was the voice of a New England gentleman - generous, graceful, at times amused, and always preoccupied with the fundamental decencies of life.

"The constants that I look for," Mr. Cheever once wrote, "are a love of light and a determination to trace some moral chain of being."

Flooded in light - river light, morning light and late autumn light - his stories were also illuminated with a spiritual radiance. Indeed, for all his meditations on the sad, sometimes humorous inadequacies of modern America, Mr. Cheever was, at heart, a moralist, concerned with what he called "the enduring past" and the nostalgia created by memory and desire. Depicted a Certain Class

Over the years, Mr. Cheever's style became increasingly refined, his narrative more compressed, but it always retained its essential lyricism. His prose was lapidary in precision, sensuous and visual in effect.

He could describe the ironic - "It was one of those rainy late afternoons when the toy department of Woolworth's on Fifth Avenue is full of women who appear to have been taken in adultery and who are now shopping for a present to carry home to their youngest

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child"; shape the poetic - "The light was like a blow, and the air smelled as if many wonderful girls had just wandered across the lawn"; and conjure the surreal - "Then it is dark; it is night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains."

"He can take a watch chain," Ralph Ellison once said, "and tell you the whole man." Many of Mr. Cheever's descriptions had to do with a certain class of upper-middle-class people who lived in places such as the Upper East Side, certain New England hamlets and the suburbs of Connecticut and Westchester.

These characters talked a lot about lawn parties and boarding schools, commuter schedules and country-club socials. Their children went to dancing schools and horseback-riding lessons, and on the surface, everyone, as Mr. Cheever wrote in one of his stories, "seemed so very, very happy and so temperate in all their habits and so pleased with everything."

Focusing on his decorous style and his characters' privileged lives, critics tended at first to regard Mr. Cheever as an urbane, graceful "New Yorker writer" - perhaps the quintessential New Yorker writer, but a social realist somewhat like John O'Hara, nonetheless. His tableau, they said, was limited by place and social class; his range confined to what he knew from direct experience.

"The imaginative identification with the upper-middle class which allows him to depict their mores and dilemmas with such vivacity," wrote Robert Towers in The New York Review of Books, "entails a narrowness of social range and a sentimental snobbery which can get the best of him when his guard is down." Supernatural Events

As his novels "Bullet Park" and "Falconer" later made clear, though, Mr. Cheever's vision had always been considerably darker and deeper.

Cheever Country was defined not so much by how his characters lived as by what they remembered. Raised on "the boarding school virtues: courage, good sportsmanship, chastity, and honor," they usually tried to be decent, but more often than not, ended up succumbing to such suburban sins as alcoholism or adultery.

There was some kind of terrible missing link between what they had been brought up to expect and what they found in Shady Hill or Bullet Park, and they were afflicted by nostalgia, failures of will and a kind of spiritual fatigue.

In the short story titled "The Death of Justina," for instance, a man looks out his train window and wonders "Why, in this most prosperous, equitable, and accomplished world - where even the cleaning women practice Chopin preludes in their spare time - everyone should seem to be so disappointed."

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