

Cheever, Updike, and the Making of the American 'Suburban' Soul

In the public imagination, in the United States at least, the memory of the relationship between the two Johns--Cheever and Updike--was largely epitomized by their joint appearance on the *Dick Cavett Show* in late 1981, where they engaged in good natured bantering and mutual admiration. Closer examination of their performances reveals several discrepancies that provide a useful starting point for reassessing the two writers' nearly three decade-long relationship. While the details of this relationship have already been mined by Cheever's and Updike's critics and especially their biographers--Adam Begley (Updike) and Scott Donaldson and Blake Bailey (Cheever)--those details have never been assembled to create a single, coherent picture over the full length of time the two knew each other as friends, colleagues and rivals. However, there is more in play here than the authors' relationship, narrowly, which is to say, bio-bibliographically considered, as we can understand by looking at 'Friends from Philadelphia' (1954), which is not only Updike's first *New Yorker* story, but the story he wrote as a response--indeed, a riposte--to Cheever's 'O Youth and Beauty!', published in the same magazine one year before. At stake, as a brief look back at Cheever's own first published story, 'Expelled' (in the *New Republic* when he was just 18), are competing rather than overlapping versions, from two 'quintessential *New Yorker*' writers, of non-urban, non-agrarian postwar America as both fictional place and socio-cultural phenomenon.