

Robert Morace

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

ABSTRACT

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.

BIO

Robert Morace is Distinguished Professor of English at Daemen College in Amherst, New York. He is the author and editor of six books on contemporary fiction, as well as numerous essays on the same subject. He has previously taught in Warsaw (as a Senior Fulbright Lecturer, 1985-1987) and in Beijing (2010, 2012, 2015) and has lectured in India. He serves on the editorial boards of two journals, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction and Symbiosis: Studies in Transatlantic Literature and Culture and has been academic advisor on two recent volumes in the Contemporary Literary Criticism series. He is currently trying to complete a book-length study of a topic that changes faster than he can write about it: post-devolution Scottish fiction.