

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 62

JOHN CHEEVER

The first meeting with John Cheever took place in the spring of 1969, just after his novel *Bullet Park* was published. Normally, Cheever leaves the country when a new book is released, but this time he had not, and as a result many interviewers on the East Coast were making their way to Ossining, New York, where the master storyteller offered them the pleasures of a day in the country—but very little conversation about his book or the art of writing.

Cheever has a reputation for being a difficult interviewee. He does not pay attention to reviews, never rereads his books or stories once published, and is often vague about their details. He dislikes talking about his work (especially into “one of those machines”) because he prefers not to look where he has been, but where he’s going.

For the interview Cheever was wearing a faded blue shirt and khakis. Everything about him was casual and easy, as though we were already old friends. The Cheevers live in a house built in 1799, so a tour of buildings and grounds was obligatory. Soon we were settled in a sunny second-floor study where we discussed his dislike of window curtains, a highway construction near Ossining that he was trying to stop, traveling in Italy, a story he was drafting

about a man who lost his car keys at a nude theater performance, Hollywood, gardeners and cooks, cocktail parties, Greenwich Village in the thirties, television reception, and a number of other writers named John (especially John Updike, who is a friend).

Although Cheever talked freely about himself, he changed the subject when the conversation turned to his work. *Aren't you bored with all this talk? Would you like a drink? Perhaps lunch is ready, I'll just go downstairs and check. A walk in the woods, and maybe a swim afterwards? Or would you rather drive to town and see my office? Do you play backgammon? Do you watch much television?*

During the course of several visits we did in fact mostly eat, drink, walk, swim, play backgammon, or watch television. Cheever did not invite me to cut any wood with his chain saw, an activity to which he is rumored to be addicted. On the day of the last taping, we spent an afternoon watching the New York Mets win the World Series from the Baltimore Orioles, at the end of which the fans at Shea Stadium tore up plots of turf for souvenirs. "Isn't that amazing," he said repeatedly, referring both to the Mets and their fans.

Afterward we walked in the woods, and as we circled back to the house, Cheever said, "Go ahead and pack your gear, I'll be along in a minute to drive you to the station" . . . upon which he stepped out of his clothes and jumped with a loud splash into a pond, doubtless cleansing himself with his skinny-dip from one more interview.

—Annette Grant, 1976

INTERVIEWER

I was reading the confessions of a novelist on writing novels: "If you want to be true to reality, start lying about it." What do you think?

JOHN CHEEVER

Rubbish. For one thing the words “truth” and “reality” have no meaning at all unless they are fixed in a comprehensible frame of reference. There are no stubborn truths. As for lying, it seems to me that falsehood is a critical element in fiction. Part of the thrill of being told a story is the chance of being hoodwinked or taken. Nabokov is a master at this. The telling of lies is a sort of sleight of hand that displays our deepest feelings about life.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give an example of a preposterous lie that tells a great deal about life?

CHEEVER

Indeed. The vows of holy matrimony.

INTERVIEWER

What about verisimilitude and reality?

CHEEVER

Verisimilitude is, by my lights, a technique one exploits in order to assure the reader of the truthfulness of what he’s being told. If he truly believes he is standing on a rug, you can pull it out from under him. Of course, verisimilitude is also a lie. What I’ve always wanted of verisimilitude is probability, which is very much the way I live. This table seems real, the fruit basket belonged to my grandmother, but a madwoman could come in the door any moment.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about parting with books when you finish them?

CHEEVER

I usually have a sense of clinical fatigue after finishing a book. When my first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, was finished, I was

very happy about it. We left for Europe and remained there, so I didn't see the reviews and wouldn't know of Maxwell Geismar's disapproval for nearly ten years. *The Wapshot Scandal* was very different. I never much liked the book, and when it was done I was in a bad way. I wanted to burn the book. I'd wake up in the night and I would hear Hemingway's voice—I've never actually heard Hemingway's voice, but it was conspicuously his—saying, "This is the small agony. The great agony comes later." I'd get up and sit on the edge of the bathtub and chain-smoke until three or four in the morning. I once swore to the dark powers outside the window that I would never, *never* again try to be better than Irving Wallace.

It wasn't so bad after *Bullet Park*, where I'd done precisely what I wanted: a cast of three characters, a simple and resonant prose style, and a scene where a man saves his beloved son from death by fire. The manuscript was received enthusiastically everywhere, but when Benjamin DeMott dumped on it in the *Times*, everybody picked up their marbles and ran home. I ruined my left leg in a skiing accident and ended up so broke that I took out working papers for my youngest son. It was simply a question of journalistic bad luck and an overestimation of my powers. However, when you finish a book, whatever its reception, there is some dislodgment of the imagination. I wouldn't say derangement. But finishing a novel, assuming it's something you want to do and that you take very seriously, is invariably something of a psychological shock.

INTERVIEWER

How long does it take the psychological shock to wear off? Is there any treatment?

CHEEVER

I don't quite know what you mean by treatment. To diminish shock I throw high dice, get sauced, go to Egypt, scythe a field, screw. Dive into a cold pool.

INTERVIEWER

Do characters take on identities of their own? Do they ever become so unmanageable that you have to drop them from the work?

CHEEVER

The legend that characters run away from their authors—taking up drugs, having sex operations, and becoming president—implies that the writer is a fool with no knowledge or mastery of his craft. This is absurd. Of course, any estimable exercise of the imagination draws upon such a complex richness of memory that it truly enjoys the expansiveness—the surprising turns, the response to light and darkness—of any living thing. But the idea of authors running around helplessly behind their cretinous inventions is contemptible.

INTERVIEWER

Must the novelist remain the critic as well?

CHEEVER

I don't have any critical vocabulary and very little critical acumen, and this is, I think, one of the reasons I'm always evasive with interviewers. My critical grasp of literature is largely at a practical level. I use what I love, and this can be anything. Cavalcanti, Dante, Frost, anybody. My library is terribly disordered and disorganized; I tear out what I want. I don't think that a writer has any responsibility to view literature as a continuous process. I believe that very little of literature is immortal. I've known books in my lifetime to serve beautifully, and then to lose their usefulness, perhaps briefly.

INTERVIEWER

How do you "use" these books . . . and what is it that makes them lose their "usefulness"?

CHEEVER

My sense of “using” a book is the excitement of finding myself at the receiving end of our most intimate and acute means of communication. These infatuations are sometimes passing.

INTERVIEWER

Assuming a lack of critical vocabulary, how, then, without a long formal education, do you explain your considerable learning?

CHEEVER

I am not erudite. I do not regret this lack of discipline, but I do admire erudition in my colleagues. Of course, I am not uninformed. That can be accounted for by the fact that I was raised in the tag end of cultural New England. Everybody in the family was painting and writing and singing and especially reading, which was a fairly common and accepted means of communication in New England at the turn of the decade. My mother claimed to have read *Middlemarch* thirteen times; I daresay she didn't. It would take a lifetime.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't there someone in *The Wapshot Chronicle* who has done it?

CHEEVER

Yes, Honora . . . or I don't remember who it is . . . claims to have read it thirteen times. My mother used to leave *Middlemarch* out in the garden and it got rained on. Most of it is in the novel; it's true.

INTERVIEWER

One almost has a feeling of eavesdropping on your family in that book.

CHEEVER

The *Chronicle* was not published (and this was a consideration) until after my mother's death. An aunt (who does not appear in the book) said, "I would never speak to him again if I didn't know him to be a split personality."

INTERVIEWER

Do friends or family often think they appear in your books?

CHEEVER

Only (and I think everyone feels this way) in a discreditable sense. If you put anyone in with a hearing aid, then they assume that you have described them . . . although the character may be from another country and in an altogether different role. If you put people in as infirm or clumsy or in some way imperfect, then they readily associate. But if you put them in as beauties, they never associate. People are always ready to accuse rather than to celebrate themselves, especially people who read fiction. I don't know what the association is. I've had instances when a woman will cross a large social floor and say, "Why did you write that story about me?" And I try to figure out what story I've written. Well, ten stories back apparently I mentioned someone with red eyes; she noticed that she had bloodshot eyes that day and so she assumed that I'd nailed her.

INTERVIEWER

They feel indignant, that you have no right to their lives?

CHEEVER

It would be nicer if they thought of the creative aspect of writing. I don't like to see people who feel that they've been maligned when this was not anyone's intention. Of course, some young writers try to be libelous. And some old writers, too. Libel is, of course, a vast source of energy. But these are not the pure energies of fiction, but

simply the libelousness of a child. The sort of thing one gets in freshman themes. Libel is not one of my energies.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think narcissism is a necessary quality of fiction?

CHEEVER

That's an interesting question. By narcissism we mean, of course, clinical self-love, an embittered girl, the wrath of Nemesis, and the rest of eternity as a leggy plant. Who wants that? We do love ourselves from time to time; no more, I think, than most men.

INTERVIEWER

What about megalomania?

CHEEVER

I think writers are inclined to be intensely egocentric. Good writers are often excellent at a hundred other things, but writing promises a greater latitude for the ego. My dear friend Yevtushenko has, I claim, an ego that can crack crystal at a distance of twenty feet; but I know a crooked investment banker who can do better.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that your inner screen of imagination, the way you project characters, is in any way influenced by film?

CHEEVER

Writers of my generation and those who were raised with films have become sophisticated about these vastly different mediums and know what is best for the camera and best for the writer. One learns to skip the crowd scene, the portentous door, the banal irony of zooming into the beauty's crow's-feet. The difference in these crafts is, I think, clearly understood, and as a result no good film comes from an adaptation of a good novel. I would love to

Sovereign
Government
The 1800s
7 The coming
Lovers
Elizabeth
Betsy, alone

The main entrance to Falconer--the only entrance for convicts, their visitors and the staff--was crowned by an escutcheon representing Liberty, Justice and, between the two, the power of legislation. Liberty wore a mob-cap and carried a pike. Legislation was the federal eagle, armed with hunting arrows. Justice was conventional; blinded, vaguely erotic in her clinging robes and armed with a headsman's sword. The bas-relief was bronze but black these days--as black as unpolished anthracite or onyx. How many hundreds had passed under this--this last souvenir they would see of man's struggle for coherence. Hundreds, one guessed, thousands, millions was close. Above the escutcheon was a declension of the place-names: Falconer Jail 1871, Falconer Reformatory, Falconer Federal Penitentiary, Falconer State Prison, Falconer Correctional Facility and the last, which had never caught on: Daybreak House. Now cons were inmates, the assholes were officers and the warden was a superintendent. Fame is chancey, God knows but Falconer--with it's limited accommodations for two thousand miscreants was as famous as Old Bailey. Gone was the water-torture, the striped suits, the lack-stepkthe balls and chains and there was a soft-ball field where the gallows had stood but at the time of which I'm writing leg-irons were still used in Auburn. You could tell the men from Auburn by the noise they made.

write an original screenplay if I found a sympathetic director. Years ago René Clair was going to film some of my stories, but as soon as the front office heard about this, they took away all the money.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of working in Hollywood?

CHEEVER

Southern California always smells very much like a summer night . . . which to me means the end of sailing, the end of games, but it isn't that at all. It simply doesn't correspond to my experience. I'm very much concerned with trees . . . with the nativity of trees, and when you find yourself in a place where all the trees are transplanted and have no history, I find it disconcerting.

I went to Hollywood to make money. It's very simple. The people are friendly and the food is good, but I've never been happy there, perhaps because I only went there to pick up a check. I do have the deepest respect for a dozen or so directors whose affairs are centered there and who, in spite of the overwhelming problems of financing films, continue to turn out brilliant and original films. But my principal feeling about Hollywood is suicide. If I could get out of bed and into the shower, I was all right. Since I never paid the bills, I'd reach for the phone and order the most elaborate breakfast I could think of, and then I'd try to make it to the shower before I hanged myself. This is no reflection on Hollywood, but it's just that I seemed to have a suicide complex there. I don't like the freeways, for one thing. Also, the pools are too hot . . . 85 degrees, and when I was last there, in late January, in the stores they were selling yarmulkes for dogs—my God! I went to a dinner and across the room a woman lost her balance and fell down. Her husband shouted over to her, “When I told you to bring your crutches, you wouldn't listen to me.” That line couldn't be better!

INTERVIEWER

What about another community—the academic? It provides so much of the critical work . . . with such an excessive necessity to categorize and label.

CHEEVER

The vast academic world exists like everything else, on what it can produce that will secure an income. So we have papers on fiction, but they come out of what is largely an industry. In no way does it help those who write fiction or those who love to read fiction. The whole business is a subsidiary undertaking, like extracting useful chemicals from smoke. Did I tell you about the review of *Bullet Park* in *Ramparts*? It said I missed greatness by having left St. Boltoph's. Had I stayed, as Faulkner did in Oxford, I would have probably been as great as Faulkner. But I made the mistake of leaving this place, which, of course, never existed at all. It was so odd to be told to go back to a place that was a complete fiction.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose they meant Quincy.

CHEEVER

Yes, which it wasn't. But I was very sad when I read it. I understood what they were trying to say. It's like being told to go back to a tree that one spent fourteen years living in.

INTERVIEWER

Who are the people that you imagine or hope read your books?

CHEEVER

All sorts of pleasant and intelligent people read the books and write thoughtful letters about them. I don't know who they are, but they are marvelous and seem to live quite independently of the prejudices of advertising, journalism, and the cranky academic

world. Think of the books that have enjoyed independent lives. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. *Under the Volcano*. *Henderson the Rain King*. A splendid book like *Humboldt's Gift* was received with confusion and dismay, but hundreds of thousands of people went out and bought hardcover copies. The room where I work has a window looking into a wood, and I like to think that these earnest, lovable, and mysterious readers are in there.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think contemporary writing is becoming more specialized, more autobiographical?

CHEEVER

It may be. Autobiography and letters may be more interesting than fiction, but still, I'll stick with the novel. The novel is an acute means of communication from which all kinds of people get responses that you don't get from letters or journals.

INTERVIEWER

Did you start writing as a child?

CHEEVER

I used to tell stories. I went to a permissive school called Thayerland. I loved to tell stories, and if everybody did their arithmetic—it was a very small school, probably not more than eighteen or nineteen students—then the teacher would promise that I would tell a story. I told serials. This was very shrewd of me, because I knew that if I didn't finish the story by the end of the period, which was an hour, then everyone would ask to hear the end during the next period.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you?

CHEEVER

Well, I'm inclined to lie about my age, but I suppose it was when I was eight or nine.

INTERVIEWER

You could think of a story to spin out for an hour at that age?

CHEEVER

Oh, yes. I could then. And I still do.

INTERVIEWER

What comes first, the plot?

CHEEVER

I don't work with plots. I work with intuition, apprehension, dreams, concepts. Characters and events come simultaneously to me. Plot implies narrative and a lot of crap. It is a calculated attempt to hold the reader's interest at the sacrifice of moral conviction. Of course, one doesn't want to be boring . . . one needs an element of suspense. But a good narrative is a rudimentary structure, rather like a kidney.

INTERVIEWER

Have you always been a writer, or have you had other jobs?

CHEEVER

I drove a newspaper truck once. I liked it very much, especially during the World Series, when the Quincy paper would carry the box scores and full accounts. No one had radios, or television—which is not to say that the town was lit with candles, but they used to wait for the news; it made me feel good to be the one delivering the good news. Also, I spent four years in the army. I was seventeen when I sold my first story, "Expelled," to *The New Republic*. *The New Yorker* started taking my stuff when I was twenty-two. I was supported by *The New Yorker* for years and

years. It has been a very pleasant association. I sent in twelve or fourteen stories a year. At the start I lived in a squalid slum room on Hudson Street with a broken windowpane. I had a job at MGM with Paul Goodman, doing synopses. Jim Farrell, too. We had to boil down just about every book published into either a three-, five-, or twelve-page précis for which you got something like five dollars. You did your own typing. And, oh, carbons.

INTERVIEWER

What was it like writing stories for *The New Yorker* in those days? Who was the fiction editor?

CHEEVER

Wolcott Gibbs was the fiction editor very briefly, and then Gus Lobrano. I knew him very well; he was a fishing companion. And, of course, Harold Ross, who was difficult but I loved him. He asked preposterous queries on a manuscript—everyone's written about that—something like thirty-six queries on a story. The author always thought it outrageous, a violation of taste, but Ross really didn't care. He liked to show his hand, to shake the writer up. Occasionally he was brilliant. In "The Enormous Radio" he made two changes. A diamond is found on the bathroom floor after a party. The man says, "Sell it, we can use a few dollars." Ross had changed "dollars" to "bucks," which was absolutely perfect. Brilliant. Then I had "the radio came softly" and Ross penciled in another "softly." "The radio came softly, softly." He was absolutely right. But then there were twenty-nine other suggestions like, "This story has gone on for twenty-four hours and no one has eaten anything. There's no mention of a meal." A typical example of this sort of thing was Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," about the stoning ritual. He hated the story; he started turning vicious. He said there was no town in Vermont where there were rocks of that sort. He nagged and nagged and nagged. It was not surprising. Ross used to scare the hell out of me. I would go in for lunch. I never knew Ross was coming, until he'd bring in an

eggcup. I'd sit with my back pressed against my chair. I was really afraid. He was a scratcher and a nose picker, and the sort of man who could get his underwear up so there was a strip of it showing between his trousers and his shirt. He used to hop at me, sort of jump about in his chair. It was a creative, destructive relationship from which I learned a great deal, and I miss him.

INTERVIEWER

You met a lot of writers during that time, didn't you?

CHEEVER

It was all terribly important to me, since I had been brought up in a small town. I was in doubt that I could make something of myself as a writer until I met two people who were very important to me: one was Gaston Lachaise and the other was E. E. Cummings. Cummings I loved, and I love his memory. He did a wonderful imitation of a wood-burning locomotive going from Tiflis to Minsk. He could hear a pin falling in soft dirt at the distance of three miles. Do you remember the story of Cummings's death? It was September, hot, and Cummings was cutting kindling in the back of his house in New Hampshire. He was sixty-six or -seven or something like that. Marion, his wife, leaned out the window and asked, "Cummings, isn't it frightfully hot to be chopping wood?" He said, "I'm going to stop now, but I'm going to sharpen the ax before I put it up, dear." Those were the last words he spoke. At his funeral Marianne Moore gave the eulogy. Marion Cummings had enormous eyes. You could make a place in a book with them. She smoked cigarettes as though they were heavy, and she wore a dark dress with a cigarette hole in it.

INTERVIEWER

And Lachaise?

CHEEVER

I'm not sure what to say about him. I thought him an outstanding artist and I found him a contented man. He used to go to the Metropolitan—where he was not represented—and embrace the statues he loved.

INTERVIEWER

Did Cummings have any advice for you as a writer?

CHEEVER

Cummings was never paternal. But the cant of his head, his wind-in-the-chimney voice, his courtesy to boobs, and the vastness of his love for Marion were all advisory.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever written poetry?

CHEEVER

No. It seems to me that the discipline is very different . . . another language, another continent from that of fiction. In some cases short stories are more highly disciplined than a lot of the poetry that we have. Yet the disciplines are as different as shooting a twelve-gauge shotgun and swimming.

INTERVIEWER

Have magazines asked you to write journalism for them?

CHEEVER

I was asked to do an interview with Sophia Loren by the *Saturday Evening Post*. I did. I got to kiss her. I've had other offers but nothing as good.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there's a trend for novelists to write journalism, as Norman Mailer does?

CHEEVER

I don't like your question. Fiction must compete with first-rate reporting. If you cannot write a story that is equal to a factual account of battle in the streets or demonstrations, then you can't write a story. You might as well give up. In many cases, fiction hasn't competed successfully. These days the field of fiction is littered with tales about the sensibilities of a child coming of age on a chicken farm, or a whore who strips her profession of its glamour. The *Times* has never been so full of rubbish in its recent book ads. Still, the use of the word "death" or "invalidism" about fiction diminishes as it does with anything else.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel drawn to experiment in fiction, to move toward bizarre things?

CHEEVER

Fiction *is* experimentation; when it ceases to be that, it ceases to be fiction. One never puts down a sentence without the feeling that it has never been put down before in such a way, and that perhaps even the substance of the sentence has never been felt. Every sentence is an innovation.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that you belong to any particular tradition in American letters?

CHEEVER

No. As a matter of fact, I can't think of any American writers who could be classified as part of a tradition. You certainly can't put Updike, Mailer, Ellison, or Styron in a tradition. The individuality of the writer has never been as intense as it is in the United States.

INTERVIEWER

Well, would you think of yourself as a realistic writer?

CHEEVER

We have to agree on what we mean before we can talk about such definitions. Documentary novels, such as those of Dreiser, Zola, Dos Passos—even though I don't like them—can, I think, be classified as realistic. Jim Farrell was another documentary novelist; in a way, Scott Fitzgerald was, though to think of him that way diminishes what he could do best . . . which was to try to give a sense of what a very particular world was like.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think Fitzgerald was conscious of documenting?

CHEEVER

I've written something on Fitzgerald, and I've read all the biographies and critical works, and wept freely at the end of each one—cried like a baby—it is such a sad story. All the estimates of him bring in his descriptions of the '29 crash, the excessive prosperity, the clothes, the music, and by doing so, his work is described as being heavily dated . . . sort of period pieces. This all greatly diminishes Fitzgerald at his best. One always knows reading Fitzgerald what time it is, precisely where you are, the kind of country. No writer has ever been so true in placing the scene. But I feel that this isn't pseudohistory, but his sense of being alive. All great men are scrupulously true to their times.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your works will be similarly dated?

CHEEVER

Oh, I don't anticipate that my work will be read. That isn't the sort of thing that concerns me. I might be forgotten tomorrow; it wouldn't disconcert me in the least.

INTERVIEWER

But a great number of your stories defy dating; they could take place anytime and almost anywhere.

CHEEVER

That, of course, has been my intention. The ones that you can pinpoint in an era are apt to be the worst. The bomb-shelter story (“The Brigadier and the Golf Widow”) is about a level of basic anxiety, and the bomb shelter, which places the story at a very particular time, is just a metaphor . . . that’s what I intended anyhow.

INTERVIEWER

It was a sad story.

CHEEVER

Everyone keeps saying that about my stories, “Oh, they’re so sad.” My agent, Candida Donadio, called me about a new story and said, “Oh, what a beautiful story, it’s so sad.” I said, “All right, so I’m a sad man.” The sad thing about “The Brigadier and the Golf Widow” is the woman standing looking at the bomb shelter in the end of the story and then being sent away by a maid. Did you know that *The New Yorker* tried to take that out? They thought the story was much more effective without my ending. When I went in to look at page proofs, I thought there was a page missing. I asked where the end of the story was. Some girl said, “Mr. Shawn thinks it’s better this way.” I went into a very deep slow burn, took the train home, drank a lot of gin, and got one of the editors on the telephone. I was by then loud, abusive, and obscene. He was entertaining Elizabeth Bowen and Eudora Welty. He kept asking if he couldn’t take this call in another place. Anyhow, I returned to New York in the morning. They had reset the whole magazine—poems, newsbreaks, cartoons—and replaced the scene.

INTERVIEWER

It's the classic story about what *The New Yorker* is rumored to do: "Remove the last paragraph and you've got a typical *New Yorker* ending." What is your definition of a good editor?

CHEEVER

My definition of a good editor is a man I think charming, who sends me large checks, praises my work, my physical beauty, and my sexual prowess, and who has a stranglehold on the publisher and the bank.

INTERVIEWER

What about the beginning of stories? Yours start off very quickly. It's striking.

CHEEVER

Well, if you're trying as a storyteller to establish some rapport with your reader, you don't open by telling him that you have a headache and indigestion and that you picked up a gravelly rash at Jones Beach. One of the reasons is that advertising in magazines is much more common today than it was twenty to thirty years ago. In publishing in a magazine you are competing against girldle advertisements, travel advertisements, nakedness, cartoons, even poetry. The competition almost makes it hopeless. There's a stock beginning that I've always had in mind. Someone is coming back from a year in Italy on a Fulbright Scholarship. His trunk is opened in customs, and instead of his clothing and souvenirs, they find the mutilated body of an Italian seaman, everything there but the head. Another opening sentence I often think of is, "The first day I robbed Tiffany's it was raining." Of course, you can open a short story that way, but that's not how one should function with fiction. One is tempted because there has been a genuine loss of serenity, not only in the reading public, but in all our lives. Patience, perhaps, or even the ability to concentrate. At one point when television first came in no one was publishing an article that

couldn't be read during a commercial. But fiction is durable enough to survive all of this. I don't like the short story that starts out "I'm about to shoot myself" or "I'm about to shoot you." Or the Pirandello thing of "I'm going to shoot you or you are going to shoot me, or we are going to shoot someone, maybe each other." Or the erotic thing, either: "He started to undo his pants, but the zipper stuck . . . he got the can of three-in-one oil . . ." and on and on we go.

INTERVIEWER

Certainly your stories have a fast pace, they move along.

CHEEVER

The first principle of aesthetics is either interest or suspense. You can't expect to communicate with anyone if you're a bore.

INTERVIEWER

William Golding wrote that there are two kinds of novelists: One lets meaning develop with the characters or situations, and the other has an idea and looks for a myth to embody it. He's an example of the second kind. He thinks of Dickens as belonging to the first. Do you think you fit into either category?

CHEEVER

I don't know what Golding is talking about. Cocteau said that writing is a force of memory that is not understood. I agree with this. Raymond Chandler described it as a direct line to the subconscious. The books that you really love give the sense, when you first open them, of having been there. It is a creation, almost like a chamber in the memory. Places that one has never been to, things that one has never seen or heard, but their fitness is so sound that you've been there somehow.

INTERVIEWER

But certainly you use a lot of resonances from myths . . . for example, references to the Bible and Greek mythology.

CHEEVER

It's explained by the fact that I was brought up in southern Massachusetts, where it was thought that mythology was a subject that we should all grasp. It was very much a part of my education. The easiest way to parse the world is through mythology. There have been thousands of papers written along those lines—Leander is Poseidon and somebody is Ceres, and so forth. It seems to be a superficial parsing. But it makes a passable paper.

INTERVIEWER

Still, you want the resonance.

CHEEVER

The resonance, of course.

INTERVIEWER

How do you work? Do you put ideas down immediately, or do you walk around with them for a while, letting them incubate?

CHEEVER

I do both. What I love is when totally disparate facts come together. For example, I was sitting in a café reading a letter from home with the news that a neighboring housewife had taken the lead in a nude show. As I read I could hear an Englishwoman scolding her children: "If you don't do thus and so before Mummy counts to three" was her line. A leaf fell through the air, reminding me of winter and of the fact that my wife had left me and was in Rome. There was my story. I had an equivalently great time with the close of "Goodbye, My Brother" and "The Country Husband." Hemingway and Nabokov liked these. I had everything in there: a cat wearing a hat, some naked women coming out of

the sea, a dog with a shoe in his mouth, and a king in golden mail riding an elephant over some mountains.

INTERVIEWER

Or Ping-Pong in the rain?

CHEEVER

I don't remember what story that was.

INTERVIEWER

Sometimes you played Ping-Pong in the rain.

CHEEVER

I probably did.

INTERVIEWER

Do you save up such things?

CHEEVER

It isn't a question of saving up. It's a question of some sort of galvanic energy. It's also, of course, a question of making sense of one's experiences.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that fiction should give lessons?

CHEEVER

No. Fiction is meant to illuminate, to explode, to refresh. I don't think there's any consecutive moral philosophy in fiction beyond excellence. Acuteness of feeling and velocity have always seemed to me terribly important. People look for morals in fiction because there has always been a confusion between fiction and philosophy.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know when a story is right? Does it hit you right the first time, or are you critical as you go along?

CHEEVER

I think there is a certain heft in fiction. For example, my latest story isn't right. I have to do the ending over again. It's a question, I guess, of trying to get it to correspond to a vision. There is a shape, a proportion, and one knows when something that happens is wrong.

INTERVIEWER

By instinct?

CHEEVER

I suppose that anyone who has written for as long as I have . . . It's probably what you'd call instinct. When a line falls wrong, it simply isn't right.

INTERVIEWER

You told me once you were interested in thinking up names for characters.

CHEEVER

That seems to me very important. I've written a story about men with a lot of names, all abstract, names with the fewest possible allusions: Pell, Weed, Hammer, and Nailles, of course, which was thought to be arch, but it wasn't meant to be at all . . .

INTERVIEWER

Hammer's house appears in "The Swimmer."

CHEEVER

That's true, it's quite a good story. It was a terribly difficult story to write.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

CHEEVER

Because I couldn't ever show my hand. Night was falling, the year was dying. It wasn't a question of technical problems, but one of imponderables. When he finds it's dark and cold, it has to have happened. And, by God, it did happen. I felt dark and cold for some time after I finished that story. As a matter of fact, it's one of the last stories I wrote for a long time, because then I started on *Bullet Park*. Sometimes the easiest-seeming stories to a reader are the hardest kind to write.

INTERVIEWER

How long does it take you to write such a story?

CHEEVER

Three days, three weeks, three months. I seldom read my own work. It seems to be a particularly offensive form of narcissism. It's like playing back tapes of your own conversation. It's like looking over your shoulder to see where you've run. That's why I've often used the image of the swimmer, the runner, the jumper. The point is to finish and go on to the next thing. I also feel, not as strongly as I used to, that if I looked over my shoulder I would die. I think frequently of Satchel Paige and his warning that you might see something gaining on you.

INTERVIEWER

Are there stories that you feel particularly good about when you are finished?

CHEEVER

Yes, there were about fifteen of them that were absolutely BANG! I loved them, I loved everybody—the buildings, the houses, wherever I was. It was a great sensation. Most of these were

stories written in the space of three days and which run to about thirty-five pages. I love them, but I can't read them; in many cases, I wouldn't love them any longer if I did.

INTERVIEWER

Recently you have talked bluntly about having a writer's block, which had never happened to you before. How do you feel about it now?

CHEEVER

Any memory of pain is deeply buried, and there is nothing more painful for a writer than an inability to work.

INTERVIEWER

Four years is a rather long haul on a novel, isn't it?

CHEEVER

It's about what it usually takes. There's a certain monotony in this way of life, which I can very easily change.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

CHEEVER

Because it doesn't seem to me the proper function of writing. If possible, it is to enlarge people. To give them their risk, if possible to give them their divinity, not to cut them down.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that you had diminished them too far in *Bullet Park*?

CHEEVER

No, I didn't feel that. But I believe that it was understood in those terms. I believe that Hammer and Nailles were thought to be social casualties, which isn't what I intended at all. And I thought

I made my intentions quite clear. But if you don't communicate, it's not anybody else's fault. Neither Hammer nor Nailles were meant to be either psychiatric or social metaphors; they were meant to be two men with their own risks. I think the book was misunderstood on those terms. But then I don't read reviews, so I don't really know what goes on.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know when the literary work is finished to your satisfaction?

CHEEVER

I have never completed anything in my life to my absolute and lasting satisfaction.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that you're putting a lot of yourself on the line when you are writing?

CHEEVER

Oh yes, oh yes! When I speak as a writer I speak with my own voice—quite as unique as my fingerprints—and I take the maximum risk at seeming profound or foolish.

INTERVIEWER

Does one get the feeling while sitting at the typewriter that one is godlike, or creating the whole show at once?

CHEEVER

No, I've never felt godlike. No, the sense is of one's total usefulness. We all have a power of control, it's part of our lives: we have it in love, in work that we love doing. It's a sense of ecstasy, as simple as that. The sense is that "this is my usefulness, and I can do it all the way through." It always leaves you feeling great. In short, you've made sense of your life.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that way during or after the event? Isn't work, well, work?

CHEEVER

I've had very little drudgery in my life. When I write a story that I really like, it's . . . why, wonderful. That is what I can do, and I love it while I'm doing it. I can feel that it's good. I'll say to Mary and the children, "All right, I'm off, leave me alone. I'll be through in three days."

