

# Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Alan Mahar

## No. 7: Building Tension with John Cheever

John Cheever was a distinguished American short story writer, whose work appeared regularly in the 40s, 50s and 60s in the weekly magazine *The New Yorker*, which nurtured so many great short story writers, including John Updike, and a few of the authors in our Master Class series, James Thurber and Alice Munro.

Cheever wrote about the darker sides of suburban respectability. He became known as the Chekhov of the American suburbs, the poet of the commuter belt. His stories transform many apparently dull suburban lives into dramas of angst, alcohol, betrayal, despair, deception and yearning for love. They are alive with carefully observed social detail, but they build tension throughout the length of a story and deliver the emotional release only at the end.

In an interview Cheever said: 'Of course, one doesn't want to be boring. One needs an element of suspense. The first principle of aesthetics is either interest or suspense.' Woe betide the story writer who loses the reader's interest by being boring – by not supplying carefully judged interest or suspense. Cheever provides interest through his acute social observation; and he provides suspense by putting his characters through a series of challenges, increasing in intensity through the length of the story.

One of his most famous stories 'The Reunion' starts innocently enough. A boy whose mother and father had been divorced three years before is on his way home from

university and offers to meet his estranged father at Grand Central Station in New York between trains. The father wants to show his son a good time in the hour and a half they have together, while the boy wishes 'we could be photographed. I wanted some record of our having been together'. So dad takes him to a series of restaurants and orders cocktails for the pair of them. We soon realise the father is rather overbearing in his treatment of waiters: 'Garçon! Cameriere! You! Could we have a little service here!' This doesn't go down well with the staff. The boy is silent. They move to another restaurant, where the boy's age is queried. They take themselves to an English restaurant where father insults them differently: 'I want two Beefeater Gibsons, and make it snappy!' And lastly to an Italian restaurant where he speaks in Italian, but the waiter affects not to understand. 'You understand Italian, and you know damn well you do'. Finally, he gives up with this restaurant too: 'Well the hell with you. Vada all'inferno.'

You can see that the situation gets worse each time. The tension for the reader – and for the boy who mostly remains silent, but we know how he feels – is ratcheted up a little more with each incident. Near the end of this very short story the boy reminds him he has to catch his train. So father tries to buy a newspaper for him. A moment of kindness, we think? Alas, no. 'Is it asking too much for you to sell me one of your disgusting specimens of yellow journalism?' He just can't resist 'wanting to get a rise' out of waiters and sales assistants. The boy speaks up: 'I have to go, daddy. Goodbye, Daddy.' Then he turns to catch his train', and the story ends shockingly, but logically, with 'And that was the last time I saw my father.'

The other famous story which illustrates this technique is 'The Swimmer', best known as the 1966 film starring Burt Lancaster. A middle-aged swimmer at a suburban pool party, drinking a little too much, breaks away and decides to make his way home, eight miles to the south – by swimming in all the outdoor pools. 'Neddy Merrill sat by the green water, one hand in it, one around a glass of gin.' The route is disjointed and requires some walking, but mostly entails swimming across the pools of his former friends. 'First there were the Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands and the Crosscops. He would cross Ditmar Street to the Bunkers and come after a short portage, to the Levys, the Welchers, and the public pool in Lancaster. Then there were the Hallorans, the Sachses, the Biswangers, Shirley Adams, the Gilmartins, and the

Clydes'. Then home. At each one there is a small incident. He is seen; he joins a couple who walk about naked; he crashes a party; a pool is empty; a house is deserted; he is insulted and accused; he upsets the lifeguards at the public pool; and near the end he is confronted by his mistress's new lover. When he finally arrives at his own house, it is locked and deserted. Suddenly exhausted, 'he began to cry'.

The end of his swim is the end of the story. The forward movement has stopped and come to its natural end. Each different episode in the sequence of swims adds to our gradual knowledge of the character of Ned Merrill. When we get to the end we understand the truth and delusion of the swimmer. He has lost money, lost his house, lost his family. He has been in denial – ignored the words of his 'friends' – about the truth of his loss all along. Cheever builds the tension gradually. Each episode adds to the tension. Each episode has interest. Nothing allows us to relax the gradual growing awareness of what Ned Merrill is doing. We only understand at the emotional end that he is ignoring the devastating truth about himself.

Tension is built gradually in 'The Swimmer' and in 'The Reunion'. The truth of the ending is withheld because the reader is so caught up in the incidents as they unfold, quickly and economically. Cheever also said: 'A good narrative is a rudimentary structure.' He meant that tension builds from an innocent beginning stage by stage, little by little, each episode adding more interest and suspense right up to an emotional ending. It's good advice for all short story writers.

*Alan Mahar is the author of two novels, Flight Patterns (Gollancz, 1999) and After the Man Before (Methuen, 2002). His short stories and book reviews have appeared in, among others, Critical Quarterly, New Statesman, Literary Review and Times Literary Supplement. He founded Tindal Street Fiction Group in 1982 and is currently Publishing Director of Tindal Street Press.*