

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 293

Volume 293

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter

PROJECT EDITOR



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

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Ann Beattie

1947-

American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Beattie's career through 2007. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 8, 13, 18, 40, 63, and 146.

INTRODUCTION

Beattie's work is widely recognized for its psychologically nuanced characters and insight into the human condition as it existed in the 1970s. Influenced by modernist poetics and reacting to the decline of post-modernism, Beattie's writing reflects the sense of aimlessness and lack of purpose that characterizes modern life while employing a distant, sometimes cold, deadpan style. Her themes are reminiscent of those of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and J. D. Salinger, and she has been compared stylistically to Hemingway and Raymond Carver.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Beattie was born September 8, 1947, in Washington, D.C., to Charlotte Crosby and James A. Beattie, a grants-management specialist for the federal government. She grew up in a middle-class suburban neighborhood and performed poorly in elementary school but earned a bachelor's degree from American University in 1969 and a master's degree from the University of Connecticut in 1972. She published both her first novel and her first book of short stories in 1976. Beattie has a son with her first husband, David Gates, whom she married in 1973. After their divorce, she married artist Lincoln Perry, with whom she has collaborated on various projects. Beattie has received a Guggenheim Fellowship (1977) and an American Academy Award (1980) among other accolades and has been a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters since 1983. She currently occupies the Edgar Allan Poe Chair of the Department of English and Creative Writing at the University of Virginia.

MAJOR WORKS

Beattie's first novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (1976), received a warm response from readers and critics. A love story that expertly depicts the "Me Decade"

mentality of the 1970s, *Chilly Scenes of Winter* presents Charles and his love interest, Laura, who is married to Jim. Laura represents Charles's ideal domestic fantasy: Through her, he can lose himself entirely and escape into what he sees as a perfect life which demands nothing from him. Charles's relationship with his own family, however, is less idyllic. His mother, Clara, claims she is dying, but Charles believes she is using illness to manipulate him and to live as an existentially free person; the similarity to his own escapist aspirations is lost on him. Clara's husband, Pete, is disliked by his stepchildren—Charles and his sister Susan—and Charles harbors increasingly hostile feelings toward Pete as Clara's health deteriorates. The relationships in this novel present a negative portrayal of marriage congruent with themes of self-absorption that have typified this era for many.

The short story collection *Distortions* (1976) echoes some of the themes and subject matter of *Chilly Scenes of Winter*. The pursuit of happiness is a central motif in the collection, and it proves almost always unattainable. The first story in the collection, "Dwarf House," contrasts the miserable existences of several characters with the relatively contented lives of a group of dwarfs who live together. Due to their marginalization, Beattie implies, the dwarfs are not obligated to observe societal standards of happiness and are therefore free to create their own. Among them is James, the son of a self-pitying mother who bemoans her son's disability and insists that his choice to live in the dwarf house is unhealthy escapism. James's non-dwarf brother, meanwhile, wallows in ennui despite his life of relative ease. The story ends with the wedding of James and another dwarf, whose obviously genuine joy challenges James's mother and brother to reflect on their conceptualizations of happiness. The theme of discontent in *Distortions* continues with the story "The Parking Lot," in which Jim and his wife have agreed to alternate the years in which they work. In the year the story takes place, Jim's wife, who is never named, has taken an office job, which allows her to escape the banal, mundane existence of her married life. The office represents for her a vast, blank void, unchanging, where she can avoid the life she has resigned herself to. She begins an affair with a man from her office, meeting him in the parking lot after work before their trysts. While aware that she will eventually be caught, she is, like many Beattie characters, irresistibly at-

tracted to the freedom the relationship affords her. Beattie's fourth novel, *Picturing Will* (1989), revisits the author's themes of marriage and intimate relationships but reveals a shift in narrative voice from cold distance to a closer but more disdainful view of her characters. Will, the title character, is a five-year-old boy whose father abandoned the family shortly after he was born and whose mother, Jody, became a wedding photographer to support them. Jody remarries and Mel, Will's stepfather, gives up his vocation to care for Will while Jody pursues her new career. The novel questions the factors by which parenting is defined and assessed.

The novel *The Doctor's House* (2002) depicts the wife, son, and daughter of a tyrannical, unfaithful man whose harshness and unpredictability have shaped each family member differently. Daughter Nina, a young widow, attempts to live in solitude but remains attached to her brother, Andrew, who embarks on an effort to reconnect with old flames; meanwhile their alcoholic mother wonders why Nina and Andrew are so close to each other and so aloof with her. The father, as often happens in Beattie's fiction, is present in the story only through the reflections of the characters upon whom he is such a significant influence. Strained family relationships are also a theme of Beattie's collection *Follies* (2005), which contains nine short stories and a novella.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Beattie's early fiction has been lauded as heralding a break from the postmodernist poetics that dominated literature for decades. The world of literary fiction at the time was widely viewed as weary of the academic strictures of postmodernism and ready for a return to realism, and Beattie's writings are described as having provided it. Her early publications were well received by critics who were impressed with her unique voice and sharp insight into human motivations. However, some critics have expressed frustration at what they perceive as a repetitive inertia in Beattie's characters across several novels and short story collections. Reflecting on the impact of *Distortions* a decade after its publication, Christina Murphy argued against the complaint that Beattie's characters are all cut from the same cloth, observing that in some stories Beattie is "less a writer depicting a certain character type of the 'lost, counterculture wastrel' than she is a writer revealing deep insights into the nature of the human psyche and the human will."

A motif running through much of Beattie's work is that of miscommunication and the inability of couples and families to express themselves to each other.

Frequently, it has been noted, Beattie's characters become cut off from real experience and withdraw entirely in her books. This leaves room for endings that offer no resolution, and critics have been divided over whether Beattie, or any author, should be held responsible for supplying answers rather than merely describing problems and situations. However, Beattie has also been criticized by some for the conclusion of *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, which was perceived not as ambiguous but as overly upbeat when viewed in the context of the rest of the novel. In response Beattie observed that the end of any narrative is never the end of the story, and she leaves it to readers to imagine what happened next. *Picturing Will* fared somewhat poorly with critics, many of whom complained that too much attention was devoted to peripheral characters of little influence within the story, but the novel generated much discussion about the requisite qualities of a good parent.

Some reviewers of Beattie's recent works have expressed impatience for the author to move away from the tone and subjects that defined her early career. As Donna Rifkind opined in a review of *Follies*, Beattie's typically unsettled and melancholy characters, "once the pioneers of a directionless generation, are now at best supporting players in a drama whose mood has changed. The trademark passivity of Beattie's characters has given way to a new generation's urgency, passion, religious and political conviction, determination and certitude. Serving as a generation's voice has its limits: One day the action moves on."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Chilly Scenes of Winter* (novel) 1976
- Distortions* (short stories) 1976
- Secrets and Surprises* (short stories) 1978
- Falling in Place* (novel) 1980
- The Burning House* (short stories) 1982
- Love Always* (novel) 1985
- Where You'll Find Me, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1986
- Picturing Will* (novel) 1989
- What Was Mine* (short stories) 1991
- Another You* (novel) 1995
- My Life, Starring Dara Falcon* (novel) 1997
- Park City: New and Selected Stories* (short stories) 1998
- Perfect Recall: New Stories* (short stories) 2001
- The Doctor's House* (novel) 2002
- Follies: New Stories* (short stories) 2005
- Walks with Men* (novella) 2010

CRITICISM

Ann Beattie, Larry McCaffery, and Sinda Gregory
(interview date 27 January 1982)

SOURCE: Beattie, Ann, Larry McCaffery, and Sinda Gregory. "A Conversation with Ann Beattie." In *Conversations with Ann Beattie*, edited by Dawn Trouard, pp. 41-54. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

[In the following interview, conducted January 27, 1982, and originally published in the *Literary Review* in 1984, Beattie discusses her themes, her writing process, and critical reaction to her fiction.]

Since Ann Beattie's short stories first began appearing, in the mid 1970s, mainly in the *New Yorker*, she has quickly emerged as one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary American fiction. Her first two books, *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (a novel, 1976) and *Distortions* (stories, 1976), with their coolly dispassionate prose rhythms and their vivid portrayals of the disaffections, anguish, and boredom of middle America, were widely praised by reviewers. Her second story collection, *Secrets and Surprises* (1978), and her second novel, *Falling in Place* (1980), solidified her reputation and exhibited a growing maturity as a stylist. A third collection, *The Burning House*, was published by Random House in the fall of 1982.

Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery interviewed Ann Beattie in Los Angeles on January 27, 1982. Their questions and comments during the interview are identified SG and LM, respectively.

[SG]: In your interview in the *New York Times Book Review*, you respond to the comment made by Joyce Maynard that you are primarily a chronicler of the sixties counterculture by saying, "It's certainly true that the people I write about are essentially my age, and so they were a certain age in the sixties and had certain common experiences and tend to listen to the same kind of music and get stoned and wear the same kind of clothes, but what I've always hoped for is that somebody will then start talking more about the meat and bones of what I'm writing about." The "meat and bones" that you refer to seems to me to involve the difficulties involved in people understanding each other—the difficulty of saying what we feel, of making ourselves clear, of having the courage or honesty to say what we mean. Would you agree that this issue of the breakdown of communication is one of the meat-and-bones areas you're referring to?

[Beattie]: Yes, my fiction often has to do with that. A direct result of this breakdown of communication is the breakdown of relationships. I don't think the

people in my stories are representative, by the way—that's really off the point of what you just asked me, but it's behind Maynard's comment, and behind what a lot of people have said about my work. I'd say that the people in my fiction reflect some of my own personal problems and concerns, perhaps to an exaggerated degree, but I don't mean them to be taken as representative of the culture. So that's part one of the answer. As to part two, what you're saying sounds perfectly insightful to me—I'd agree that these breakdowns do have a lot to do with my work—but even this, I think, tends to generalize a great deal. I mean if I were to ask you to be specific and cite to me what the common denominator is between two different stories of mine, I wonder what it would be?

[SG]: I'd probably say that a lot of your stories that differ in many respects still seem to focus on relationships in the process of breaking down.

Okay, I can see what you mean, but often the people in my stories are unstable in some way even before the relationship—their problems often predate the relationship we see, or there's no reason to think the breakdown is a consequence of the relationship itself.

[LM]: In quite a few of your stories you seem to imply that one of the reasons that people's relationships break down is because they can't express themselves. You don't always explain why they are unable to talk to each other, but often your stories have scenes with characters who are totally cut off from each other or who misunderstand each other.

[SG]: A good example of this is the scene in *Falling in Place* where the whole family is sitting around while John has taken them out for a Chinese dinner: at one line each one of them makes a gesture of generosity towards the others that is misconstrued and rejected, so they draw back; in that scene it seems impossible for anyone to express what they want to express.

Yes, I'll have to agree that these kinds of scenes do appear in my work, in one form or another. But this is not something I'm doing deliberately. Personally, of course, I believe that many people have a lot of trouble communicating, but I'm afraid this sounds so banal that I hate to dwell on it because it's hardly something I originated. When I was working on that scene Sinda just mentioned, for instance, I was mainly thinking of the literary effects—the tension it creates—and not the general issue involved. I guess I feel that if you're mainly interested in showing people not communicating you ought to be at least as interesting as Harold Pinter.

[LM]: You know, what I really tend to notice in your fiction is not so much the issues you raise but the specific people you place into your stories. What interests you about your characters?

I'm often interested in my characters because they can't break away from the situation they find themselves in. If they can't communicate to begin with, you'd think more of them would fly off than they do. Part of this interest is a reflection of my own experiences with people. I find it very hard to envy most of the couples I know. I can't imagine exchanging places with those that are together, even those that are happy, because it seems to me they have made so many compromises to be together. So I'm very interested in the fact that there are these personalities who have compromised in so many ways. On the other hand, there are so many people who are together because of all the obvious reasons: they don't want to be lonely or they are in the habit of being together, or this whole Beckettian thing—I can't stay and I can't go. This tug interests me more than the fact that they're not communicating—I want to find out why they're staying and not going.

[LM]: *A lot of your characters are very self-conscious individuals—self-conscious about their roles, about the clichés they use to express themselves, about just about everything. Sinda and I notice this same sense of self-consciousness in ourselves and with the people we associate with—maybe it has to do with education or the kinds of people we have as friends—but we notice that this tends to intrude into relationships. It almost seems as if the more self-aware you become, this self-awareness gets to the way of spontaneity or whatever it is that is “natural” in relationships.*

Yes, I know just what you mean. This kind of intellectualizing or self-consciousness just allows you to hide from yourself forever. People can easily fall into the trap of thinking that to label something is to explain it.

[SG]: *It's the same thing with the irony your characters often seem to have—it's a kind of defense mechanism. . . .*

Yeah, all these artifices assist in helping people delude themselves.

[SG]: *—even though these artifices and intellectualizing are supposedly, on the surface, helping people develop insights about their behavior and that of others.*

These insights aren't very profound, though. If you notice, usually in my stories one person is insightful and the other person isn't. They end up in a tug-of-war when it becomes inconsequential whether they're insightful or not. In a story like “**Colorado**” Robert knows what the score is with Penelope, but so what? And she understands why they've ended up in Vermont and her understanding doesn't matter. Charles Manson

said there was a particular voice telling him to do something, and David Berkowitz said that it was a dog, Sam, up in the sky motivating him. Don't people always say that what motivates them is logical? What matters is that they're getting through life and they're unhappy and there's something missing. If I knew what it was that was missing, I'd write about it, I'd write for Hallmark cards. That would please a lot of my critics.

[LM]: *Yeah, I've noticed that some critics have complained that your stories don't offer “solutions” or resolutions to your characters' problems. How do you respond to this idea—championed recently by John Gardner—that writers need to supply answers and not simply describe problems or situations?*

I don't expect answers of anyone other than a medical doctor, so no, it wouldn't occur to me that writers should have to supply answers. I certainly don't feel that it's the obligation of any artist to supply answers.

[LM]: *What about your trying other fictional approaches? Are you ever tempted to try, say, a detective story, or an historical novel, or something like that?*

Falling in Place was meant to be an “historical novel.”

[LM]: *I can see that, but what about writing about historical periods other than our own? One reviewer said, half-jokingly I think, that no tune exists in your work before 1968. . . .*

No, I've never tried that type of work because that would require research and I fear libraries. No kidding, I don't know if I could do it or not, so, in brief, the answer is that I've not been tempted in that direction. I'm very much interested in writers who are tempted and do it. Mary Lee Settle is one of my favorite writers, and the research she undertakes to find out background is amazing: she gets herself in a rowboat and goes down the banks of a river in West Virginia to see the way it curves at a particular point; and then she studies topographical maps, circa 1890, to see if that bend was in the river at that time or not; then she flies to Boston to listen to a speech JFK gave in a particular town in West Virginia to see how this relates to her material. I'm fascinated with this approach, but it seems like Perry Mason stuff to me. Sleuthing and trying to keep all that in one's mind would be impossible for me. I hate writing novels to begin with because I can't remember what the character did five days ago; so I write everything quickly, including novels, which is why complexity fouls me up. If I can't remember in a fifteen-page story what one of my characters did on page five, I can take a few minutes and look it up and make sure

that the X who walked in on page five was a shit. But if I can't remember if this character is a shit or not and I have to take the time to go through chapters one through nineteen to find out what his off-the-wall comment was that showed he was a shit, then my train of thought is gone. So for me it would be just agonizing to try to go back and write from research and then imagine something, because at least with my own writing I have a touchstone in that I'm writing out of what happened yesterday. I could never assimilate things the way that Mary Lee Settle does and then get them down into a coherent form.

[SG]: *You just said that you work very quickly. What kinds of work habits do you have—have you always worked in spurts like this?*

No, at first when I found out there was something I could do—I was learning, teaching myself, mostly, how to write—I wrote a lot more than I do today. Those stories were more speculative and funnier than what I write now. I don't think I have as much to say today. Some of the things that interested me when I was starting out don't interest me as much now—or they interest me in a different way. I've always had what people call "writer's block," but it's never scared me because I never thought of it as that. My total output is pretty large and I can't be too frightened about deviating from work habits that have always never been a routine. So my work habits have been erratic.

[SG]: *What about the mundane details, like whether or not you work at a typewriter, or during the day, and things like that?*

I always work at a typewriter. I can make some revisions or do fine editing in longhand, but if I'm revising a whole page I always go back to the typewriter. When I lived in the country I usually worked at night, although this isn't true any longer. I find that I'm very lethargic during the day, and everything seems distracting and it's very hard to concentrate. Of course, now I do different kinds of work—when a revised script for PBS is due in forty-eight hours, what are you going to do? Explain that you don't start writing until after midnight? I get in there and start writing right after breakfast. I'm also very neurotic about my work habits. To this day I have my mother mail to me, from Washington DC, a special kind of typing paper—which isn't even particularly good typing paper—from People's Drugstore. It costs about \$1.29 a pack. I used to always work in my husband's clothes. He's not my husband any longer, but I still occasionally put on the essential plaid shirt.

[SG]: *Are you a coffee-drinker while you work—or do you go more for the straight gin or dope method?*

Not coffee, but I find writing is surprisingly oral—when you're not talking you need something. But I never take drugs when I write and I never drink either. I have gotten really out of it to remember what something feels like, and then managed to crawl to the typewriter two days later. People will say to me, "Boy, you must have been really stoned to write that stoned scene in *Falling in Place*." They forget that writers have memories. When I wrote that scene I had probably had two aspirin and a glass of water. There's such an energy rush when you do it cold.

[LM]: *What seems to get you to sit down at the typewriter in the first place? Do you have a specific scene or character or sentence in mind?*

My stories always seem to begin with something very small, whether it be one or the other of those things you've just mentioned. If I were to say I usually begin with a character, that wouldn't mean that I would know the character's occupation or whether the character is happy or sad, or what the character's age was. I would know that the character is named "Joe," and, yes, sometimes the idea that the character's name is "Joe" has gotten me to the typewriter. More often it's really a physiological feeling that I should write something—this feeling doesn't always work out. Many times I'm wrong about it.

[LM]: *What do you mean by a "physiological feeling"?*

I don't know how to talk about this without sounding like Yeats saying that the "Voices" were driving him into a room and dictating to him, but it's almost like that, almost that crazy to me. Something in me has built up and this is a compulsion to go and write something at the typewriter. And, yes, it's not totally amorphous, there is something in the back of my mind: it's a name, it's a sentence, it's a sense of remembering what it is like to be in the dead of winter and wanting to go to the beach in the summer, some vague notion like that. It's never more than that. I've never in my life sat down and said to myself, "Now I will write something about somebody to whom such-and-such will happen."

[SG]: *What you're saying is very interesting because I think most people assume that because your characters are so particularized and real-seeming that they must be based on people you've actually known. Does this happen very often?*

I probably shouldn't answer that because, given the nature of most of my characters, it wouldn't be much to my advantage to admit it if I did. It's interesting to me, though, that there have been some instances when I thought I've come very close to capturing the es-

sence of somebody even though I've made some little change in their clothing or in the location of the story. These changes are made subconsciously, it's not something I do deliberately, but these changes are always enough to throw people off. That's what interesting to me—I don't think someone has ever said to me, "Hey, that's me," and been right.

[LM]: *That's never happened?*

Not even when I thought it was most obvious. On the other hand in places where a character I've created has nothing to do with anyone I know, people have insisted that a particular line is something they've said. I had a sentence in a story called "**Like Glass**" and I was showing it to a friend; the woman who's narrating the story says of her husband that when he talked about his dreams his dreams were never full of the usual things like symbols but were summaries of things that had happened. And the friend of mine who was reading the story stopped and said to me, "This isn't true of my dreams!" So there you have it.

[SG]: *You said somewhere that when you began **Falling in Place** that you had no idea of where it was heading, that you only knew you wanted it to be about children.*

That wasn't quite true. I knew the beginnings of the first sentence. "John Joel was high up in a tree . . ." and then it occurred to me that if somebody was up high in a tree, it would probably be a child, and if it were a child it was likely that there would have to be a family surrounding him. So then with that as an idea I proceeded to write the novel. I had seven weeks to go with this deadline at Random House. I understand that in the real world people don't come after you with whips that say "Random House" on the handles; but it still makes me very nervous to have deadlines because I don't like to have deadlines—and I've organized my life so that I don't have deadlines very often. But in this case I had this deadline that was making me very nervous, and I looked out my window and there was this wonderful peach tree out there. That's what started **Falling in Place**.

[LM]: *But despite being written in seven weeks under the pressures of these Random House whips, **Falling in Place** seems to me to have a much greater sense of structure or "plot" in the traditional sense than, say, **Chilly Scenes**—that is, it seems to be working towards that climax, the shooting of Mary by John Joel.*

I was so surprised when that shooting happened.

[LM]: *How far in advance had you realized that this is where the book was heading?*

Never. I was totally amazed to find the gun in the kid's hands. But then I remembered there had been that odd box which belonged to Parker's grandfather.

[SG]: *So you hadn't planted that box there with the gun in it?*

No, in fact, after the shooting happened I thought, "Oh, my God, we're only three weeks into the book and here Mary is dead on the ground—what am I going to do to resurrect her?" So I resurrected her. Really, I was very upset when that shooting happened.

[LM]: *But despite these kinds of surprises, wouldn't you agree that **Falling in Place** is a more "writerly novel" than **Chilly Scenes of Winter**—that it has a tighter structure and is governed by a more coherent set of images and metaphors?*

Sure. Remember **Falling in Place** was written several years after my first novel. I wrote **Chilly Scenes** in 1975, and it was all dialogue, basically; it was really more like a play than a novel. And that book was written in three weeks. I hope that I did know more about writing in the summer of 1979 than I did four years earlier. And, of course, things happen to you that also help create a focus for your work. I was living in Redding, Connecticut, when I wrote **Falling in Place**, and I had been living there about a year. While I was actually working on **Falling in Place** I didn't really realize how much of Redding had gotten into my head. Actually I guess I had grown very hostile to Redding and was very upset by being there, so in a way it was almost a relief to write something like **Falling in Place** and sort of purge myself of these feelings. We had had more than a year of very bad times and total isolation living in this wealthy commuter community that had nothing to do with us. And I was watching the people at the market and it was like when you're sick and have a fever and everything seems in sharper focus. I went around with that kind of fever for about a year, and then I had this deadline, so I wrote **Falling in Place**. I don't think that it follows that this is the way I always work—if you put me in Alaska for a year I'm not sure I'd write about igloos—but it did happen that way in Redding, Connecticut. There was so much more I had subconsciously stored away that I wanted to get out than there had been about anywhere else I've lived before.

[SG]: *I have a question about the structure of **Falling in Place**.*

Yeah, what is the structure of that book? I've been wondering about that myself.

[SG]: *Why did you have every other chapter take the form of those brief, italicized sections?*

You want to know the truth about those chapters? I started out that novel by writing chapters—I would write a chapter a day. But after I wrote the first

chapter—it was the opening chapter that’s there now—I realized that I had forgotten to put any background information in it, so I made notes to myself of what I had to go back and include in the first chapter. The second day I wrote a chapter and then thought, “Here’s what I left out of this one.” The third day I thought, “I wonder if anyone has ever written a whole book like this. I wonder if this isn’t too artsy?” Then I thought, “Who cares?” Eventually I went back and made these lists a little more articulate and they became the italicized chapters. If I were teaching this book, I could imagine myself making any number of pretentious guesses about why the book is structured this way, but in point of fact the book is structured this way because I left in these notes and comments to myself. Another thing I should mention is that I’ll do anything to trick myself into thinking that I’m not writing a novel—it’s easier if I just think in terms of chapter one, chapter two, chapter three—I can deal with that. So I thought of the italics at the end of Chapter One in *Falling in Place* as being a kind of coda. And of course the chapters in that book don’t all function in the same way: some of them repeat what you already know, some of them tell you what you know is an absolute lie, some of them tell you what to anticipate later on. I think Random House was a little baffled and wondered, “What do we call these?”

[LM]: *One of the things I like about your fiction is precisely the thing that some critics seem most troubled with—that is, your work often seems to recreate a sense of modern life’s aimlessness, its lack of coherency and resolution. Is this a conscious strategy on your part—a desire to suggest life’s formlessness, that life isn’t shaped like most well-made stories and novels suggest—or does, this sense emerge mainly as a function of your writing habits? In other words, does this “aimlessness” result from your view of the world or mainly from the fact that you don’t know where your works are headed?*

There are at least two honest answers to that question. One is to repeat what I’ve said before that I’ve never known beforehand what I’m setting out to write, so that even when I write the ending to a piece it’s only at that point that I know how it ends. I do agree how you characterize my endings—the sense of them is “aimless,” but the language used to create this sense isn’t. I imagine, though, that subconsciously this is aesthetically what I believe in. . . .

[LM]: *You mean that you can’t wrap things up neatly with a nice climax and denouement?*

Not the people and situations that I’m writing about. I don’t hate books in which this happens; in fact, I rather admire them. One of my favorite books is non-fiction,

Blood and Money by Thomas Thompson. The last page is so apocalyptic and satisfying. If I could do anything like that—see things with such an overview—I would wrap things up neatly. But it’s not the way my mind works; it would seem inappropriate to what I’ve done, and I’ve never been able to overhaul a story. In fact, stories often get thrown away in the last paragraph, even the last sentence, because I don’t know how it can end. It seems to me most honest personally to write something that still implies further complexity. I’m not writing confessionally. If I want to do that I can write my grandmother and say, “The day began here and it ended here.” It wouldn’t occur to me that this approach would be pleasurable or meaningful in a story.

[SG]: *You’ve mentioned how **Falling in Place** started. Do you recall what the opening image was in **Chilly Scenes of Winter**?*

No, not really. All I remember about that is that I had an idea in mind about the friendship between two men, Charles and Sam. I wrote quite a bit of background about them, and I showed it to a good friend of mine who handed it back to me and there was only a little shard of paper left—the remains of page 51 with Charles saying, “Permettez-moi de vous presenter Sam McGuire.” And everything about how Charles came to meet Sam, what town they lived in, everything else had been scissored away. And I thought, you’re right, just jump in. So whatever had been my original intention as I began the book was gone. The book that now stands is what took over. My friend had done the perfect job of editing. When the book came out I was amused when reviewers would talk about “Beattie’s amazing, stark beginning,” when in fact my friend had actually taken the scissors to it. My friend J. D. O’Hara, to whom *Falling in Place* is dedicated and who teaches at the University of Connecticut, used to take the scissors to the ends of my stories. Maybe I’m just a victim of my friends’ Freudian obsessions, but in both cases they were right. It was really O’Hara who, in literally taking the scissors to my pages, suggested that more elliptical endings to my stories might be advantageous.

[LM]: *I’ve also noticed that you seem to almost be deliberately refusing to provide the kinds of background and psychological information that most writers do—you just put your characters in a situation and show the reader that situation.*

I don’t think that my characters are what they are because of interesting psychological complexities. They’re not clinical studies to me. That would be a mind that worked in a different way than mine works. It’s like: I like *you*, but I don’t care about your child-