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Here is a classic novel from one of our most honored writers--the author of such acclaimed works as So Long, See You Tomorrow and All the Days and Nights." The Folded Leaf is the serenely observed yet deeply moving story of two boys finding one another in the Midwest of the 1920s, when childhood lasted longer than it does today and even adults were more innocent of what life could bring.
Long before he was editing the likes of Nabokov, Updike, Salinger, Welty, and Cheever at The New Yorker, William Maxwell had established himself as a moderately successful novelist and story writer. Although "The Folded Leaf" is not his most acclaimed or famous novel, it probably has the most devoted (indeed, nearly cult-like) following. Its charm is its utter simplicity; a coming-of-age story, it is also a passionate tale about love--between two men. Yet this is no classic of "gay fiction" (although it will certainly appeal to gay readers); instead, "The Folded Leaf" tells about the intensely intimate, innocuously physical, yet almost entirely platonic relationship between two boys who don't quite fit in with the crowd and who grow up to be very different men. Published in 1945, this is the type of novel only the bravest of straight male authors would be comfortable writing today--and, in a way, that's too bad.

Lymie Peters is the ectomorphic and studious introvert who meets Spud Latham, a dim yet muscular teenager who serves "as a kind of reminder of those ideal, almost abstract rules of proportion from which the human being, however faulty, is copied." Latham is new in town--his father has lost his job, and he lives with his family in a cramped apartment--and he inexplicably gravitates towards Lymie. At first Lymie's own feelings about Spud's attentions are ambivalent: "He couldn't help noticing the scales of fortune were tipped considerably in Spud's favor, and resenting it." What the boys have in common, though, is an undercurrent of barely suppressed fury that the people they know and the world around them aren't the stuff of their daydreams.

This is the best William Maxwell novel I've read and one of the best novels I've ever read. I found the writing in this book to have the quality of a daydream and for the situations to ring true to life. The novel unfolds as life does and the details fall right into place. The characters themselves often engage in daydreams, which helps give it that life-like quality. Anyway, with most novels you get a sense of a strong authorial voice behind the words, as if someone is telling you the story. With Bellow or Cheever or Nabokov, for example, Maxwell's contemporaries, all of whom I like, you get a strong sense that their voice is theirs alone. With Maxwell, the authorial voice is much more gentle, almost as if the author were vanishing and his words were rising up off the page like vapor. It's interesting that Maxwell's voice seems somewhat different, novel to novel. There are some stunning passages in So Long, See You Tomorrow, but this is my favorite of the Maxwell I've read. It captures time and place so well. The midwest in the 1920's. It's very endearing - Sally says things like, "in a pig's ear" - yet still mysterious and, finally, heartbreaking. I've read it three times in the past nine months and it is a book I'm sure I'll return to again.

William Maxwell writes in the small spaces. He explores the little sad areas of our lives that are comprised of looks that are not returned, thoughts that remain unuttered because we simply cannot figure out how to say them, and embraces we wish we have shared but did not because we lack the courage to put our arms around the person we love. The Folded Leaf is a beautiful, melancholy story by an author whose understated value has sadly caused a lack of popular appreciation compared to his flashier contemporaries - Hemingway, Nabokov, Bellow, Updike, Roth.

The Folded Leaf is the story of Lymie and Spud, two young boys who share a strong friendship, even though they seem utterly different. The novel is told primarily from the perspective of Lymie, a shy, withdrawn, introverted and very sensitive young man who loves Spud with all of his heart. Spud, on the other hand, is something of a strong man, an athlete who does not understand, but is able to appreciate, the sensitivity of his friend. They compliment one another, with Lymie taking security from Spud's strength while Spud draws another kind of strength from his friend.

The two boys love one another, with Lymie's love much the stronger, but the love remains platonic. It is the casual, affectionate, innocently physical love of young boys who become college men understanding that there is nobody else in the world more compatible with them than the other. A girl, of course, shatters this, but even though Spud may lose that first blush of pre-sexual affection, Lymie does not. The novel moves very slowly from the boys' strong relationship to a rather one-sided, heartbreaking examination of what happens when one friend moves on and the other cannot.
In the suburbs of Chicago in the 1920s, two boys initiate an unusual friendship: Lymie Peters, a skinny and somewhat clumsy boy who always gets good grades, and newcomer Spud Latham, a star athlete and mediocre student. Spud accepts Lymie's devotion without questioning it, but once high school ends and the boys enter college, tensions begin to arise between them. Lymie is

En los suburbios de Chicago en los años veinte, dos chicos inician una insólita amistad: Lymie Peters, un muchacho delgado y un poco torpe que siempre saca buenas notas, y el recién llegado Spud Latham, un atlético atleta y estudiante mediocre. Spud acepta la devoción de Lymie sin cuestionarla, pero al terminar la escuela secundaria y comenzar la universidad, aparecen las primeras tensiones entre ellos. Lymie es el primero en conocer a Sally Forbes, pero ella se enamora de Spud, y este hecho marca el inicio del distanciamiento entre los dos amigos. Pero la ruptura es más de lo que Lymie podrá soportar. He aquí un conmovedor retrato de la adolescencia y el paso de la juventud a la edad adulta.

This novel is both extraordinary and ordinary: extraordinary in its prose, and its insights into the mind and behavior of two ordinary boys, their families, other friends and even teachers and university administrators. It has a lot to say about the impact of the early death of a mother and of a distant father on a boy, even during a time when that distance must've been viewed as ordinary.

The outline of the plot is ordinary, the intense friendship between two opposites inevitably tested when they are at college together; but the writing, especially those passages when the narratorial voice steps out of his storytelling at the perfect times to explore the wide spaces that come between even the closest of human beings, and what we must do to traverse those spaces, so we can expand beyond ourselves, so we can live, is extraordinary.

The Folded Leaf was written in 1945. Maxwell said it was his favorite novel for “personal reasons - the whole of my youth is in it”. Set in the 1920s in Chicago, the story centered on the unlikely friendship between two adolescent males: Lymie Peters and Spud Latham. It depicted a true-to-life picture of life on an American university campus that came with horrific initiation parties, the facetious pomposity of being a member of a Fraternity or Sorority, drills of lectures, and after-class cafe chats.

I had a soft spot for Lymie who could not play a game to save his life. Lymie was also socially awkward and painfully thin. He was always the last to be chosen in any kind of team sport. But Lymie's academic star was shining. Spud, by contrast, had the body of a Greek god. He was athletic, confident, and socially aloof. Lymie was drawn to Spud when the latter saved him from drowning. The friendship developed in heartwarming ways but became strained when Sally Forbes became a mutual love interest.

The novel, however, is no shallow coming of age story. I was surprised at the philosophical reflections that emerged at various points in the narrative; some of which, I felt, were out of place. For example, this interlude - "But to live in the world at all is to be committed to some kind of a journey." appeared somewhat dislocated in the narrative. There was a chapter wholly devoted to the desert which did flow better from the story line: "The desert is the natural dwelling place not only of Arabs and Indians but also of people who can't speak when they want to and of those others who, like Lymie Peters, have nothing more to say, people who have stopped justifying and explaining, stopped trying to account for themselves or their actions, stopped hoping that someone will come along and love them, and so make sense out of their lives." Heartbreaking but real for some of us.

To me, the most disturbing reflection was on truth. "The truth is nothing like as simple or as straightforward a thing as Lymie believed it to be. It masquerades in inversions and paradoxes, is easier to get at in a lie than in an honest statement. If pursued, the truth withdraws, puts on one
false face after another, and finally goes underground, where it can only be got at in the complex, agonizing absurdity of dreams." I could not help but wonder if even a strong friendship could confront the truth and not be irrevocably jeopardized. Truth comes at a cost.

One can see the coming perfection of "Time Will Darken It" (1948) all over William Maxwell's 1945 novel. I first read this 15-20 years ago, and liked it enough to later read "Time" and love it. But a 2010 revisit to "The Folded Leaf" revealed qualities I seemed not to have fully appreciated earlier. Perhaps I wasn't completely ready for its simplicity and beauty then; maybe I'm wiser.

"The Folded Leaf" tells the lovely and at times heartbreaking story of an unusual friendship, a love story, if you will, between male friends with no labels attached. Lymie Peters is an unathletic, thin, smart "geek," I suppose, though I'm not sure that word existed in 1920s Illinois. Lymie isn't picked on; he's liked as a sort of quiet appendage to other groups of boys. Spud Latham is everything Lymie wishes he were: athletic and broodingly charismatic, popular. Spud, just moved to the small Illinois town, gets in fights as a way to prove something to himself. Maxwell follows the boys' friendship for about four years, from high school into college. Viewed from a distance, it might seem as if Lymie is always underfoot: he's constantly at Spud's side to lace up his boxing gloves, hand him a towel; the two are physically close, even spooning in the cold upper floor of their college residence. When walking outdoors, Lymie puts his hand in Spud's coat pocket and their fingers intertwine. It is the way their friendship works, and it certainly is love in its simplest state. Though one could glean hints that Lymie's love might be unthinking homosexuality or that he might be bisexual, that's a pretty modern look at the relationship and the truth here doesn't really matter. I think it's better to leave it be. As Maxwell writes: "The truth is nothing as simple or as straightforward a thing as Lymie believed it to be. It masquerades in inversions and paradoxes, is easier to get at in a lie than in an honest statement. If pursued, the truth withdraws, puts on one false face after another, and finally goes underground, where it can only be got at in the complex, agonizing absurdity of dreams."

In college, Lymie, Spud and Spud's girlfriend, Sally Forbes, are inseparable. Sally easily accepts Lymie not as a third wheel but as a true friend, a natural component of their three-way partnership. Spud joins a fraternity and no longer lives with Lymie, and cracks, never spoken about but sensed, start to form between Spud and Lymie. Spud, more a man of action than a thinker, better able to pound a Golden Gloves opponent into submission than understand what's really bothering him, becomes jealous of Lymie's relationship with Sally. Lymie, who really has done nothing wrong, is devastated by Spud's reaction.

This novel, written in 1945, explores in sensitive and subtle details the love of two boys as they become young men, and is probably as direct a novel that could be written on that subject at the time, maybe even now. I am not generally a fan of the "pained adolescence" novel, having had several of them forced on me in junior high and high school. Maxwell's gorgeous, patient prose, by contrast, achieves the admirable task of placing the reader in the minds and milieus of these young men, without...more This novel, written in 1945, explores in sensitive and subtle details the love of two boys as they become young men, and is probably as direct a novel that could be written on that subject at the time, maybe even now. I am not generally a fan of the "pained adolescence" novel, having had several of them forced on me in junior high and high school. Maxwell's gorgeous, patient prose, by contrast, achieves the admirable task of placing the reader in the minds and milieus of these young men, without forgetting that there is an entire world of frustrated and failing adults around them. Indeed, in addition to the story of the boys, Maxwell also shows us the almost charming ignorance of the privileged, the isolated social realm of the university and those who subsist on its margins, and the pained self-awareness of men who have failed at their task of raising their sons. But it is the story of Lymie and Spud--one a nearly helpless physical specimen, the other full of misdirected anger--that is the core of this extraordinary, heartbreaking novel.
high school and university life of 1920s America with the coon skin coats, letterman sweaters and the heady impo...more This book was published in 1945, so itâ€™s particularly decoded in such a way that it can be read without some people noticing the homosexual sub-text. I think perhaps that if the ending had been more upbeat in the way The Charioteer had been written then it would be as popular as that book because itâ€™s certainly written as beautifully and to read it is to truly immerse yourself in the high school and university life of 1920s America with the coon skin coats, letterman sweaters and the heady importance of who you knew against what you knew. However, these arenâ€™t grown men able to do what they like with their lives, and they arenâ€™t in England. They are 19 year old American schoolboys in 1920 smalltown America.

I think Iâ€™d have to disagree with the blurb, though. I didnâ€™t see any indication that Lymie was attracted to Sally at any point. They liked each other extremely well, but it is Spudâ€™s misinterpretation of Lymieâ€™s friendship with her that causes the conflict, not any realistic attraction at all.

Are Lymie and Spud homosexual? I think possibly, yes. I would say that Spud shows bisexual tendencies and Lymie homosexual. In todayâ€™s frat houses I think that they wouldâ€”as they are sleeping together in The Folded Leaf, and always sleep touching in a sweet innocent fashionâ€”take their relationship to another level. I got the impression from the story that neither boy ever had any suspicions as to what their deep feelings really meant. Even when Lymie longs to touch Spud, I felt it was more of an adoration of a body of a type that he could never hope to have, for he himself is an entirely different body shape, rather than any sexual desire.

The affection is clear between them both, but stronger from Lymie to Spud. Spud inhabits a much more physical world than Lymie; he boxes, he swimsâ€”does all sport well, while Lymieâ€™s skills are cerebral and Spud takes Lymie for granted, while always wanting him in his life. I think that others see their relationship a little more clearly than they do themselves, notably the effeminate landlord (thereâ€™s always one!) and Spudâ€™s own family, who, until Sally is brought home to meet them, had been entirely accepting of Lymieâ€™s place in Spudâ€™s life.

The crisis comes when a mutual acquaintance tells Lymie (and itâ€™s never acknowledged as to whether itâ€™s a true tale he tells) that Spud hates Lymie because of Sallyâ€™s friendship. Sensitive Lymie feels entirely betrayed and takes matters into his hands. Thankfully the book doesnâ€™t end with tragedy (and I think for the sake of readers of this blog Iâ€™ll be forgiven for spoiling this much) but still, the author writes the only ending that would have been accepted in 1945, after giving us one of the most memorable scenes in the book.

Just finished this and am fantasizing about being able to discuss it with my 2003 cohort at the University of Michigan, in a seminar or at the Heidelberg. Why it took me this long to read more Maxwell, I don't know. Maybe it's because I read _So Long, See you Tomorrow_ three times and kind of idealized it. _Folded Leaf_ didn't disappoint. The scenes in which volumes are left unsaid, the assumptions and misunderstandings, the tensions that are just barely or not relieved at all—it takes admirable patience to write like this, and a generosity of spirit to handle characters so delicately and ethically (meaning: they are fully drawn). I missed writing like this and didn't even know it. On to more of it.(less)

It's at the same time both easy AND very hard to write about this strange period of adolescence in a way by which I feel attracted. I have always had a particular fondness of stories such as the one presented here, however, often the tone & style make the different works of different authors too easily interchangeable to stand out as remarkable pieces.