John Plotz:
From Recall This Book, welcome to a new feature that sends us plunging back through time to resurrect the short fiction of the past with the writers of today. The series "Recall This Story," premieres with my delightful Brandeis creative writing colleague Steve McCauley. I feel again, Steve, how little introduction you need to this podcast or any other place. You readers and listeners doubtless know and love him already for his seven plus novels from his 1987 debut Object of My Affection to his Rain Mitchell, Tales From the Yoga Studio (those are the plus there) or Insignificant Others, to his latest dazzling novel, You Only Call When You're in Trouble, which has been dizzyingly praised by, for example, Maureen Corrigan on NPR, who compared him to Tom Perrotta, Wharton, Jane Austen and William Shakespeare. Though not Proust. That was me. I'm the one who compared you to Proust.

Steve McCauley:
I know. When I read that I thought, "How embarrassing." And then I thought, "Well what about Tolstoy?" immediately. A little praise is dangerous thing.

John Plotz:
Exactly. And although Steve himself actually tends to circle gingerly around the short story, and maybe we can discuss that today, I bet somewhere he has also been compared to today's shortstorian (Drum roll please) John Cheever. His classic Homeric epithet is "Chekhov of The Suburbs." Do you have a phrase to describe Cheever?

Steve McCauley:
That one sticks. It's a good one.
Yeah. He lived from 1912 to 1982. But there's so much to be said about his life, it's really hard to know what to dwell on in introducing him. There's just dozens and dozens of stories. And I'd also completely forgotten that he had five novels (I don't think of him as a novelist) set on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, Westchester County suburbs and the South Shore of Boston, his childhood town of Quincy. And then towards the end of his life, a lot of fiction set in Rome. So maybe one way to think about him is that he was the genus loci of the New Yorker short story of mid-century America. So in one way that means he anatomized the world of Madison Avenue and those weary white alcoholics, or at least heavy drinkers, who filled Midtown bars in the evening and only ventured uneasily uptown or downtown.

But putting him that way makes him sound like one more predictable bonbon in a known sampler that puts him in a set of genealogical company like Richard Yates, for example, Edmund Wilson, Jean Stafford, Dawn Powell, maybe. And certainly that puts him up against people like John Updike. But I actually don't think that conveys what he's really like. And Steve, you're going to tell us more about this, but when I think of him, I think of those poignant late diaries about the Vietnam War, and mainly I think about the way that the stories open for us, a sense of other unled or unrecorded lives that get glimpsed only for a second or a sidelong glance. And from that early short story, "The Enormous Radio" on, he produces in his fiction, not just a sense of the people he's talking about, but a sense of other lighted rooms that are briefly framed for the reader and then whisked away.

So that's what I think of when I think about what makes a Cheever story great. And today, Steve, you chose to read one of his amazing, one of maybe his greatest story, "The Five-Forty-Eight" originally published in April, 1954 in the New Yorker, later collected in the Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories. So Steve, over to you channeling Mr. Cheever. Do you want to say anything by way of introduction?

Steve McCauley:
No, I'm just realizing that it is almost exactly to the day. 70 years.

John Plotz:
70 years. That's amazing.

Steve McCauley:
Which seems not possible, but it is. I've got the proof in front of me. So should I hit it?

John Plotz:
Yeah, hit it.

Steve McCauley:
[reads “The Five-Forty-Eight” by John Cheever]

Steve McCauley:
I'm very familiar with this story because I often use it in my creative writing workshops, and so I've read it many, many times. And reading it aloud is a different experience. I felt a little bit more of the sense of suspense and mystery and the kind of little genre inflection of film noir in the story.

John Plotz:
Yeah, yeah. Right. Yeah. One thing I noticed hearing you read it was this whole, his memory of being in the war, and the moment when he thinks of the corpses. I didn't think of him as having any real break, but that's a break. I mean, when he thinks back to the fact of what it was like to see the entrails.

Steve McCauley:
How do you mean break?

John Plotz:
Well, it's like a moment where he actually seems to realize that, I don't know, he grapples with the fact of, I guess it's not his own evil, but that he grapples with the fact that there's just this grotesque world out there that he doesn't want to acknowledge before that.

Steve McCauley:
And I think that that is so much a fact of a lot of fiction and films from this period. Just two weeks ago, oddly enough, I watched the Man in the Gray Flannel suit for the first time.

John Plotz:
Oh yeah.

Steve McCauley:

John Plotz:
I don't think I've ever seen the movie. I've read the novel. I love the novel.

Steve McCauley:
Oh, really? The movie is not great, but ultimately I was happy I saw it. But there are long sections of Gregory Peck's experience in the war in that movie, and how it has left him traumatized, and what it means to him now. And I think you're right. That's like a detail that's slipped into this story very, very briefly and touched on very lightly. But it gives a rare moment, perhaps, of sympathy for this character to understand kind of that he actually is trying to organize his life in a way that, on the surface anyway, looks perfect and looks clean, where there are no entrails and no bloody bodies.

John Plotz:
So you said you've taught it many times. How do you begin when you teach it, what is it that you want your students to see?

Steve McCauley:
I mean, my workshops are usually organized around some issue of craft, whether it's setting or dialogue or plot development. And I usually teach this when we're discussing setting, because I think the settings of this story are so richly evoked. First of all, they're so incredibly vivid. They enlist all of your senses. Particularly he's really good with smells, which is something that often people leave out of their writing. And he does it so-

John Plotz:
The sugary warmth from the coffee ring.

Steve McCauley:
The sugary warmth from the coffee ring, the inside of the train that smells like a bomb shelter after families have been in there. And then later it smells...
The rancid underground

Steve McCauley:

... like a classroom. And there's that whole kind of sense. And then also sounds. The sounds of the city in the rain, just all of that evoked so beautifully, and they have so many layers of meaning. And there's what you in your introductory comments talked about as glimpses of lives that are overheard or seen briefly. I mean, you think about the other, maybe even the most famous of his stories is "The Swimmer" in which this guy is swimming from one swimming pool to the next through his Connecticut town, and dropping in briefly on all these lives, all the people.

And there's that moment in the early on in this story where he looks into the store window, he sees what should be this kind of ideal life with flowers and food for the guests and so on. But of course it's empty and it's hollow. To me, that's like he has these moments throughout the story like that and the moment of thinking about the war, and also when he kind of looks up and imagines the families on the hill and the children being bathed and fed and so on, where he has these glimpses of what he doesn't have, what he perhaps aspired to have at some point. But unlike The Man In The Gray Flannel Suit, who, I mean that film anyway, I don't know about the novel, but it's all about integrity. This guy has none.

John Plotz:
Yeah. Yeah.

Steve McCauley:

I also think, if I can, about the setting, the other thing that interests me about this is that in my mind, there are three main settings for this story. There's the city, there's the train, which is this kind of liminal space, I guess you might say. And then there's the suburb. And the city is where all of the dastardly business of mostly the men of this period takes place. And then there's the connecting tissue of the train and then the suburb that is supposed to be safe and is supposed to be kind of pure and so on. And it makes me think a little bit about Cheever himself, who was this closeted bisexual man with a really pretty severe alcohol problem. And it makes me wonder about that in his life.

John Plotz:
So it's so funny you mentioned it as three distinct places, and I was thinking that the third place was just going to be down on the ground and the cinders and the ashes. But no, you're totally right. It is the suburb that holds out this prospect of if you could only get to those houses...

Steve McCauley:
And I love when she says, "I didn't think it would be so," what is the word she uses?

John Plotz:
Shabby.

Steve McCauley:
Shabby. I didn't think it would be so shabby

John Plotz:
That the shabbiness of life follows you even there. But even there, aren't we supposed to sense the wrongness of that world too? Like when the last woman comes to pick up her husband? "I'm sorry darling. All our clocks are slow." The most non-explanatory explanation.

Steve McCauley:
But there are so many moments like that that I think Cheever is so good at putting in these really loaded words and images that somehow come across as absolutely just true to life. But they have all of these other.

John Plotz:
So when they arrived back in Shady Hill, a few people got off from each of the other coaches. He recognized most of them, but none of them offered to give him a ride. So were you meant to think that everybody in his world is like the Hastings, and Watkins and Compton? He's just blown it up with everyone?

Steve McCauley:
That's right. I mean, I think everybody in that town knows that he is a pretty odious character and has alienated himself from everyone in the neighborhood. No one even acknowledges his presence.

John Plotz:
So when he weeps at the end, are we supposed to think that something happened? I was thinking a little bit about that Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," which ends with the image of "she would've been a good woman if there had been someone there to shoot her every day of her life."

Steve McCauley:
Yeah. Oh, you're right. It's a good parallel.

John Plotz:
Yeah. I mean, he is weeping in the dust at the end, but we're not meant to take much?

Steve McCauley:
I mean, there's something about the way he gets up and-

John Plotz:
Brushes himself off.

Steve McCauley:
Brushes himself off and picks up his hat and walks home, that I don't feel any hope that he's really learned anything from this. Do you? I mean, how do you interpret the ending?

John Plotz:
I don't know, I'm pausing because I'm looking over it hoping for some moment. I mean, she feels that she's accomplished something, right?

Steve McCauley:
Yeah.

John Plotz:
She thinks she can wash her hands because she says that what she's done is some kindness or some saneness. It's hard to see, but yeah.

Steve McCauley:
Yeah. But it's all about her.
John Plotz:
Yeah.

Steve McCauley:
I mean, I interpret it as she has done something that allows her to feel better and allows her to feel that she's had some kind of revenge, and whether or not it's received the way she hopes it will be received almost doesn't matter.

John Plotz:
Yeah. Yeah. So I guess that is another, I was thinking about all those John Cheever stories I love. I don't know. I think we've never talked about "The Jewels of the Cabots," which is a late one, but there's so many different interlocking stories there. Oh, yeah. But you get the story of the stolen gems, the person they were stolen from, what happened, what happened to the sister of the person who stole the gems. But this one, you really only get, it does feel like just the one story.

Steve McCauley:
It's very concentrated, which is I think some of the brilliance of the story. It makes it so gripping to read. And since you mentioned Chekhov and the suburbs, as I was reading it aloud, this thought had occurred to me before, but especially as I was reading it aloud, I was thinking about that scene where he goes to her room and they have sex, and then she weeps afterwards, and he just kind of ignores the whole thing.

John Plotz:
He feels contented and sleepy, I think. Right?

Steve McCauley:
Yeah.

John Plotz:
It just means nothing.

Steve McCauley:
He accomplished what he set out to accomplish. But it reminds me of that scene in "Lady with the Lap Dog," where he goes back to her hotel room and she's weeping and just sort of has this long monologue about how he won't
respect her and so on. And he sits in silence and eats a slice of watermelon for
half an hour, something extraordinarily long.

John Plotz:
Wow. Oh, I had forgotten that. My image of that story has to do with the end in
which it really does seem that something has changed for them. That notion,
that final image of it's snowing and he says "Yes, but it's up in the atmosphere.
It's freezing." Yeah.

Steve McCauley:
No, this story takes a very different turn. I think that the womanizer in that
story does learn something.

John Plotz:
Yeah. Definitely.

Steve McCauley:
And become more of a human being as a result of his love affair with this
unlikely woman.

John Plotz:
So can you generalize about that with Cheever stories? Because I think with
Cheever stories, I tend to look for the ones in which it seems as if people have
changed at the end. I mean, this one seems it's just he's trapped and he's on
his path. He's going to keep going down this same path.

Steve McCauley:
Yeah. Or he's too far down, he's too damaged. I'm not sure.

John Plotz:
If he can't get the express, he'll get the local. If he can't get the local, he'll get
the next local. Yeah.

Steve McCauley:
I mean, I don't know. Do you think that there's some sense of redemption here
for him or not? Or change?

John Plotz:
To me, it's a story. I mean, I accept that it's a great Cheever story, but it's like I often feel with his stories, what's it called? Is it "O Youth and Beauty" or "O Youth, O Beauty"? which of course does end up with somebody getting murdered in midair, but I often feel that the story rotates enough for you to be able to see it by looking in a side window or something. This story, no, it doesn't seem to happen. But that feels, yeah, I mean, I accept the word concentrated. That makes sense. But it also feels there's something relentless about it that I don't always associate with his stories.

Steve McCauley:
Yeah. I mean, I think it's also just a great, well, you mentioned Yates and this kind of mid-century world of men going into offices. We never know what he does there, and if it were Richard Yates story, he wouldn't know what he was doing in the company either. But whatever it is, it doesn't seem very important. I mean, he talks about that the papers in his briefcase as irrelevant, big business of the world. So.

John Plotz:
Speaking of which, Steve, can I ask you what you make of the "we" in this story? The earliest I noticed is the first paragraph. It just kind of seems to implicate us with him. "He turned and walked towards the glass doors at the end of the lobby, feeling that faint guilt and bewilderment we experience when we bypass some old friend or classmate who seems threadbare or sick or miserable in some other way."

Steve McCauley:
And there's another moment later in the story, and I can't remember what it was, but as I was reading it kind of stood out, where this clear omniscience comes in, where we're not perceiving things through Blake's point of view, where we're being told by the narrator that there's something else going on there.

John Plotz:
How about that moment early on when he leaps to the conclusion that she might be meaning to kill him? I mean, it definitely took me aback when I first read it. And yet she might, he's not wrong.

Steve McCauley:
Yeah. Yeah. Well, I mean, maybe that's a glimmer, maybe a glimmer of guilt, which would suggest some kind of conscience that he has, although he doesn't seem to exhibit it anywhere else. But I think that there's a sense of some awareness of consequences, perhaps, that he's facing.

John Plotz:
So another thing I was thinking about, other Cheever stories that I like, including, "O Youth and Beauty," which is the one about the guy who always hurdles the furniture in living rooms until eventually he falls and breaks his leg, is that they are nested stories. That there are stories within stories that go way back. This one, I mean, I take your point about it being concentrated, but also just, it's a single day. And I guess that's another thing that feels different to me about it from other Cheever's.

Steve McCauley:
I mean, it's more than a single day. It's probably two hours at the very most.

John Plotz:
Right? Yeah. Yeah.

Steve McCauley:
Because he was going to get that 5:18 or whatever it was.

John Plotz:
It's 5:18 when he leaves and he catches the 5:48. So yeah, it's probably an hour and a half at most. Yeah. But yeah, I don't know. I mean, we do obviously get the flashback of the affair itself. He finally does remember her name, but....

Steve McCauley:
I feel as if we get a very full and rich picture of what his domestic life is like, and that everyone knows about, his, how is it put? That the neighbors know about his peculiar tastes, or something, which suggests some kind of... That and the locked bookshelf where you assume there's some kind of pornography or something tawdry that he doesn't want the kids to see.

John Plotz:
And how well does he know? I mean, at one point he says he's convinced she'll be easy to shake. He thinks he knows her. I mean, he recognizes her as an easy
mark from the beginning. He thinks he's got her sorted out, but of course, it turns out to be wrong.

Steve McCauley:
Right. Right. Yeah. Because all of his, the many women that he's had have all been chosen because of their low self-esteem.

John Plotz:
Low self-esteem, right.

Steve McCauley:
And that's kind of another nod it seems to me, to "Lady with the Lap Dog" in a way, that Gurov is always pursuing these, what does he call, the lower order or lesser race or something, depending on the translation.

John Plotz:
God, I don't remember that from "Lady with the Lap Dog."

Steve McCauley:
And that he finally meets in a very different sort of way, this woman who is his match.

John Plotz:
Has he met his match here? Is Ms. Dent his match? Is she the one he deserves?

Steve McCauley:
I mean, I think that he's suffered more at her hands probably than any other person, because he is humiliated. His face is in the dirt. And no matter how much of a lesson he takes from that, it seems to me that that's a pretty surprising turn of events for someone like this.

John Plotz:
Yeah. It's interesting when she says she imagines that she could have made more of a difference to him if she were, was it younger or more beautiful? But of course, that doesn't seem like the real lesson here. The lesson is he needed.

Steve McCauley:
Then you wonder, there are all these funny little moments in this story, like the "dear husband"; I love that.

John Plotz:
Yeah, I love that too.

Steve McCauley:
It's so crazy. I love the rat coming out of the bag, which is a little on the heavy-handed side, but nonetheless, it's very fun to read.

John Plotz:
I think "you poisoned their minds" is amazing too, that sudden sense of, because it takes a while to pivot to her viewpoint. I mean, we see her in her abjectness from his standpoint, but it takes us a while for her.

Steve McCauley:
Like Jean Stafford. I mean, this story is just incredibly rich in details. And even though it is compressed, and even though the timeframe is so small, and it occurs over such a short span of time, it is really loaded down with rich juicy details. A sort of abundance that is kind of about to go out of style with [Raymond] Carver.

John Plotz:
I see what you're saying. Yeah, no, I do feel that. Yeah.

Steve McCauley:
It would be difficult to write this story.

John Plotz:
Yeah. In fact, I just read that story, "Lost in the Fun House". Barth. Have you read that recently? I read it just because he died. And in effect, it's making fun of this proliferation of detail, that it only seems like a kind of Baroque trap, and that's only like 15 years on or something.

Steve McCauley:
But I love that abundance. To me that's like, oh, that's a real pleasure. And in fact, I'm doing this thing in my workshop this week where they're reading two versions of a Raymond Carver story, which is his original draft, and then the
Gordon Lish version, which was published in what we were talking about when we're talking about love.

John Plotz:
What's the story?

Steve McCauley:
Well, the story in the published book is called "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit." It's very, very short. Carver's original draft of it is 75% longer. So I think Carver's own instincts were leaning much more in the Cheever direction in a way.

John Plotz:
Can I just read you a first sentence? I want to read you the first sentence of, O Youth and Beauty, in terms of that notion of abundance. And I think this is literally all one sentence. So this is that one I was talking about with a guy who hurdles the furniture. Okay?

"At the tag end of nearly every long, large Saturday night party in the suburb of Shady Hill, when almost everyone who was going to play golf or tennis in the morning had gone home hours ago, and the 10 or 12 people remaining seemed powerless to bring the evening to an end, although the gin and whiskey were running low, and here and there a woman who was sitting out her husband would've begun to drink milk, when everybody had lost track of time, and the babysitters who were waiting at home for those diehards would've long since have stretched out on the sofa and fallen into a deep sleep to dream about cooking contest prizes, ocean voyages, and romance, when the bellicose drunk, the crapshooter, the pianist, and the woman faced with the expiration of her hopes had all expressed themselves, when every proposal to go to the Farkerson's for breakfast to go swimming, to go and wake up to Townsend's, to go here and go there died as soon as it was made, then Trace Bearden would begin to chide Cash Bentley about his age and thinning hair."

Steve McCauley:
Yeah, that's a lot. That's one sentence.

John Plotz:
Yeah. I mean, there's just so many stories in there.

Steve McCauley:
Yeah, exactly.

John Plotz:
All of those people expressing themselves.
The woman faced for the expiration of her hopes had already expressed herself. So a series of monologues.

Steve McCauley:
And I love the way it inevitably moves toward that moment where you, oh, here are the two characters.

John Plotz:
Yeah. It turns out to be Trace and Cash and Cash's wife. But it could be any of the other people too. It could be the woman who decided to drink milk. It could be the dream of a cooking contest prize.

Steve McCauley:
Yeah. Well, I mean, that goes back to your original comment about glimpsing other lives, which is what Cheever seems to have been doing with such. He himself was observing all of these people. And maybe his feeling, I don't know, I mean, just ultimately being kind of an outsider in that world, in his true inner self that he had these layers to his own life that were unacknowledged publicly, gave him that ability to look as an outsider at what was going on.

John Plotz:
So then final comparison, Steve, to another writer that you and I both love, what about E.M. Forster, who also had that sense of remove from his own life? He's sort of on the surface looks as if he fits in in a pretty genteel way. It's easy to dismiss him retrospectively as like, "Oh, this mid-century Brit who was at home in his world," but of course he wasn't.

Steve McCauley:
Was he mid-century?

John Plotz:
Well, okay, fine. Early, but the moderate modernist.

Steve McCauley:
Yeah, no. Totally, of course.

John Plotz:  
But he doesn't seem, yeah, I don't know. The comparison works up to a point, but then there's something different too. Yeah. I don't know.

Steve McCauley:  
Well, I think there's even more, obfuscation is the wrong word. I mean, when I think of Forster, I think a lot about all of those women that he writes about and projecting himself, using them kind of as mouthpieces for his experience.

John Plotz:  
Yeah. Yeah. Well, maybe the question would be, I literally don't even think I really remember Cheever's novels at all. I know I've read them. I certainly read Bullet Park, but the Falconer, I guess?

Steve McCauley:  
Falconer. And then there was a late novella called, Oh What a Paradise It Seems.

John Plotz:  
Oh What a Paradise It Seems. Yeah, I don't think I've even read that.

Steve McCauley:  
Yeah, I've read that and I've read Falconer. Those are the only two I've read. I haven't read Bullet Park. And I know that I think Falconer, I mean, those were huge bestsellers actually, right around the time or right after maybe his collective stories.

John Plotz:  
But those have gone the way of all flesh. I mean, if even you haven't read them or even you don't, if you've missed one of them. And definitely our students wouldn't read them.

Steve McCauley:  
[Well when it comes to] wouldn't read--There's a lot.

John Plotz:
There’s a lot they don’t. Okay, fair enough. But I guess I wonder what it is about his novels. It seems like what he does, yeah, maybe it's like a sonata or something. It can be done in a very condensed way. And Forster sets himself up a model maybe because of what you're talking about, being able to put himself into his female characters where he can sustain longer passages or something. But Cheever.

Steve McCauley:
Yeah. I mean, I think like Alice Munro, I mean, Alice Munro is clearly a short story writer. I know there's at least one book.

John Plotz:
Collected short stories, isn't it?

Steve McCauley:
It's called a novel.

John Plotz:

Steve McCauley:
And I think that really was his forte, was the short story.

John Plotz:
Yeah. Well, Steve, thank you so much. Thank you for burning your voice out, reading it. We owe you a pair of vocal cords. And yeah, thank you all for listening to Steve McCauley and John Cheever and Recall This Story. So on behalf of Recall This Book, thanks and be sure to tune in for future episodes.

Recall This Book is the creation of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. Sound editing is by Khimaya Bagla, and music comes from a song by Eric Chaslow and Barbara Cassidy. We gratefully acknowledge support from Brandeis University and its Mandel Center for the Humanities. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please forward it to five people or write a review and rate us wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening.