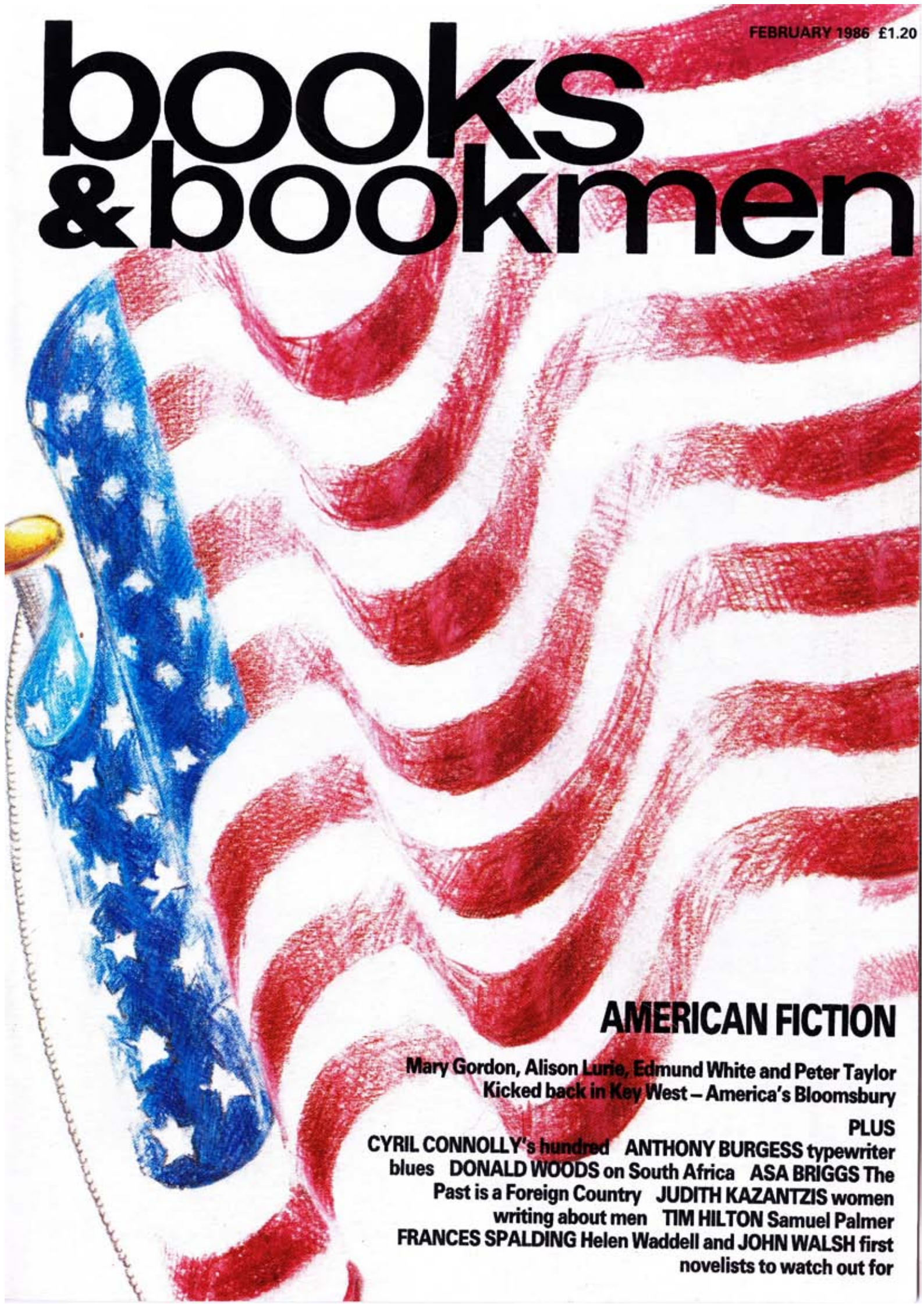


# books & bookmen



## AMERICAN FICTION

Mary Gordon, Alison Lurie, Edmund White and Peter Taylor  
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PLUS

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DONALD WOODS on South Africa ASA BRIGGS The Past is a Foreign Country  
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# Fine old Tennessee

Robert Temple on the short story writer Peter Taylor

Since the deaths of Flannery O'Connor and Katherine Anne Porter, the master of the American short story has unquestionably been Peter Taylor. But perhaps his mastery in miniature unduly masks his larger achievement. The forms may be small, but the fact that he writes short stories should not be allowed to disguise from us the fact that he writes. I view him as a world figure in the field of literature, who will become more and more appreciated as time passes. One recent critic put the matter well in the *Washington Post*: 'Quite simply, there is not a better writer of fiction at work in the United States.' And if there is, I haven't heard of him.

It may sound strange to describe as a world figure someone whose fiction largely concerns the intimate depiction of regional types. Peter Taylor's world is almost entirely the American state of Tennessee. Lest 'almost entirely' may seem an incorrect usage, let me state that it is justified in his particular case. For, even when a story is set in St Louis, Missouri, in the outward sense, the realm inhabited mentally by the characters is still the state of Tennessee. This may be seen in the very title of Taylor's full-length play, *Tennessee Day in St Louis*. For, apart from his famous stories, Taylor has also written plays and a short novel.

Taylor published his first story in 1939 at the age of 20. Within a short time, the leading literary figures in the American South recognised his genius and began to promote him as a mouthpiece to the outside world. But beyond the confines of the South, Taylor at first met with incomprehension. He did not deal with the decadent South at all, nor did the Deep South enter into his stories except as the place from which distant cousins occasionally came to stay in the centre of Taylor's world, the western part of Tennessee. It is true he did write a story about Kenyon College in Ohio, which he once attended, but it was an exception. Taylor was born in Trenton, Tennessee (called Thornton in his fiction), and it is from this small town that most of his characters originally came. For, like Taylor himself, most of them have left the idyllic world of the small town behind and moved to big cities like Nashville.

The intense and gripping portrayals of these regional types have a much larger significance, and they speak the universal language of the heart. Just as the three sisters of Chekhov's drama were trapped in the condition of narrow provincialism, and yet speak to us all of the yearnings of the human spirit, so Peter

Taylor's characters through the very intensity of their provincial setting become types for us all. Most of the characters are from fine old Tennessee families with 200 years of tradition behind them, a disintegrating upper class with the trappings of classical learning still hanging in tatters about their ears. One main character, otherwise boorish and insipid, has as his passion the translating of the Odes of Horace. Another is actually named Quintus Cincinnatus Lovell Dudley. But just as important as these characters are Taylor's loving and perceptive studies of the negroes who are their servants and nannies ('mammies' in the South). In the story 'Two Ladies in Retirement', the negro cook Vennie begins every story to the children with: 'Now, every Tolliver, black or white, know this story and know it be true.'

When a friend of one of the children interjects: 'How do you mean "black or white"? Are there black Tollivers?', Vennie is impatient: 'What do you think my name is?' Vennie asked, annoyed by the interruption. . . . "My name's Vennie Tolliver," Vennie said. Her name indeed was Tolliver. . . . The Negro Tollivers. . . . had kept the name of their former masters after emancipation, and most of them had continued in service to the Tollivers.'

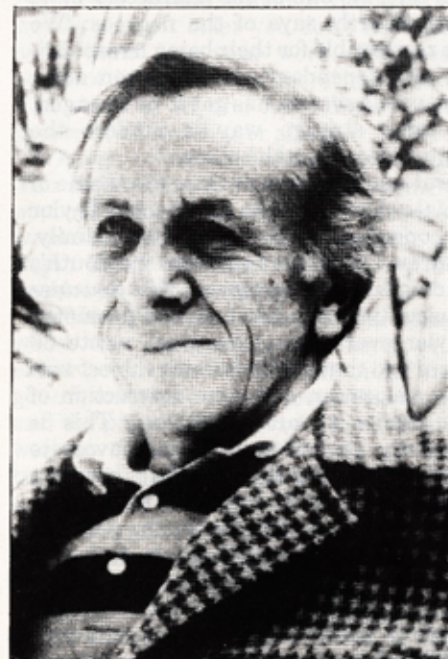
The Tollivers seem to be based on Taylor's own family, as they are the characters of a number of Taylor's works, from *Tennessee Day* to 'Two Ladies in Retirement', and including 'Bad Dreams'. The latter is a poignant study given over entirely to the description of the intimate family life of two negro servants and their baby. Some critics have called this Taylor's finest story. The tragic and destructive effects of kindness and paternalism towards black people by a nice white family are nowhere more vividly portrayed, than in this tale. As one of the characters in 'A Long Fourth' says of the negroes: 'We are responsible for their being irresponsible and dependent'. And the son adds: 'The whole system has got to be changed. In some strange way it hinders the whites more than the blacks.'

But more important than the theme of racial relations in the mid-South, Taylor is concerned with the white family. Andrew Lytle, later editor of the South's leading literary periodical, *The Sewanee Review* (which published and promoted Taylor over several decades), wrote 30 years ago that Taylor's main subject was 'the dislocation and slow destruction of the family as an institution'. This is certainly the case. Taylor's favourite kind of relationship is that between parent and child, to which he returns again and again with increasing pathos.

At a deeper level, Taylor's fiction is concerned with human beings who are lonely, ineffectual, and constrained. There is barely any 'action' in the conventional sense in Taylor's writings. Each short story is devoted to the achievement of an inner realisation by or

of a single character. Taylor seems to have led an unexciting exterior life, and his later work is an elegy to his own inaction, lack of passion, lack of excitement, and conventionality. His recent story 'The Old Forest' is a powerful portrayal of how a young man, through the force of convention, turns his back on a more exciting and fulfilling life. Significantly, the old forest itself is never entered by the narrator, though he broods on its primaevial call. In this story, even more than in earlier ones, Taylor incorporates many of the techniques of detective fiction such as tricks of narration to heighten the suspense of the plot.

It must be pointed out that most of Taylor's writings record actual events and characters. The old Senator Caswell of *Tennessee Day* is, for instance, Taylor's own grandfather, Bob Taylor, a famous politician of his time. Taylor has always been unable to write about things which he has not personally experienced or witnessed. This lends a powerful veracity and integrity to his work, and makes the pain of his realisations of human frailties all the more acute. Although Taylor may tell of a world unfamiliar and strange to English readers in some respects (though the class implications will be better understood here than in the American North), his voice is that of a universal man merely accented by the Tennessee drawl. There is no one who should be able to read Peter Taylor without being profoundly moved, and stirred to the deepest levels with thoughts of people and situations one has known, so true is the essence of this writer's work. We are indeed fortunate that Chatto & Windus, under their Hogarth Press imprint, have just published a collection of much of Taylor's finest writing, entitled *The Old Forest* (£9.95).



Peter Taylor, 'master of the American short story'