Christopher Carduff, editor  In 1934, at age 26, William Maxwell left small-town Illinois for New York City, convinced that life and literature were elsewhere. I had no idea then, he later wrote, that three-quarters of the material I would need for the rest of my writing life was already at my disposal. My father and mother. My brothers. The look of things. The Natural History of home . . . All there, waiting for me to learn my trade and recognize instinctively what would make a story. With his second book, They Came Like Swallows (1937), Maxwell found his signature subject matter—the fragility of human happiness—as well as his voice, a quiet, cadenced Midwestern voice that John Updike has called one of the wisest and kindest in American fiction. Set against the background of the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, this short novel presents the loving character of Elizabeth Morison, a devoted wife and mother, through the eyes of those whom she is fated to leave decades before her time. Edmund Wilson described The Folded Leaf (1945) as a quite unconventional study of adolescent relationships—between two boys, with a girl in the offfing—in Chicago and in a Middle Western college: very much lived and very much seen. He praised this drama of the immature for the compassion Maxwell brings to his male protagonists, whose intensely felt, unarticulated bond is beyond their inchoate ability to understand. Time Will Darken It (1948) is a drama of the mature: a good man’s struggle to keep duty before desire and his family’s needs before his own. It paints a portrait of Draperville, Illinois, in 1912, a proud and isolated community governed by gossip, where an ambitious young woman must not overreach the limits society has placed on her sex, and an older, married gentleman must not encourage her should she dare. Together with these major works, this Library of America edition of Maxwells early fiction collects his lighthearted first novel, Bright Center of Heaven (1934), out of print for nearly 70 years, and nine masterly short stories. It concludes with The Writer as Illusionist (1955), Maxwells fullest statement on the art of fiction as he practiced it.

Features:
My Personal Review:
The late William Maxwell (1908-2000) served for forty years as an editor at 'The New Yorker' magazine. An Illinois-born realist whose literary works provided his readers with 'windows' into small-town midwestern family life of the 1910 and 1920s, Maxwell's own mastery of American prose style was (and remains) unsurpassed by any of his contemporary including Eudora Welty, J. D. Slainger, John Updike, and Alice Munro (all of whom he was a first reader of their fiction in his professional capacity with 'The New Yorker'). Now his four early novels (Bright Century of Heaven; They Came Like Swallows; The Folded Leaf; and Time Will Darken It) have been collected under one cover, along with nine of his early short stories, and his essay 'The Writer as Illusionist' which he wrote in 1955. "William Maxwell: Early Novels And Stories" is a valued and very strongly recommended addition to community, college, and university American Literature reference collections and supplemental reading lists.

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