

JOHN

As we walk through even a boring day, we see an awful lot and feel an awful lot.

By Leanne Milway

JOHAN UPDIKE (1932—) MASTERED THE ART of capturing the ordinary moments that govern our lives. His chronicles of the everyday speak to the joys, sorrows, and transitions of human existence—and the humdrum forms these experiences often take. His description of a young man pausing on his walk home to wife and child to watch a group of boys play basketball is just such a moment; it happens every day, across the country. In *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Updike depicts this trivial moment in exquisite, poetic detail: “Legs, shouts. The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles seems to catapult their voices high into the moist March air blue above the wires.” Or, take his snapshot of a checkout boy watching a bikini-clad trio stroll through the local supermarket in the short story *A & P* (1961): “The one that caught my eye first was the one in the plaid green two-piece. She was a chunky kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with

those two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never seems to hit. ... I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not.” A simple observation, a simple scene—yet the boy’s action therein transforms his life.

With more than 60 novels and collections of short stories, poetry, and criticism to his name, Updike is one of America’s great writers. In much of his work, he focuses on the ordinary, middle-class man who often brews with dissatisfaction, jitters with lust, and wants more out of life. His protagonists are pensive and moody and live in small towns in Pennsylvania or Massachusetts. Just look at the unhappy suburbanites in *Couples* (1968), the anguished Jewish writer Bech in *Bech* (1970), and Hamlet’s adulterous uncle in *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000). All of them doggedly search for more ... more sex, more money, more praise, and more meaning in life—quests that usually elude them.

Where to Start

In its first sentences, **RABBIT, RUN** showcases Updike’s lyrical genius and introduces his most famous creation Harry Angstrom; the award-winning **RABBIT IS RICH** follows. Updike’s short stories will also appeal to new readers. **EARLY STORIES: 1953-1975** presents 102 of his first pieces, all incredibly mature; **THE AFTERLIFE** includes stories about aging.

UPDIKE



To try to say some of that seems more worthy than cooking up thrillers.

—John Updike, *Academy of Achievement* interview, 6/12/04.

Harry Angstrom is Updike's most famous character, whose stifling sense of entrapment is based on Updike's own rapid trajectory from student to family man. "Basically it's true that my own life has been my chief window for life in America," Updike admits, "beginning with my childhood and the conflicts, the struggles, the strains that I felt in my own family" (Academy of Achievement interview, 6/12/04). Born March 18, 1932, John Hoyer Updike spent the first 13 years of his life in Shillington, Pennsylvania before moving to an 80-acre family farm nearby. In 1950 he won an academic scholarship to Harvard, where he wrote and drew for the *Harvard Lampoon*. Within four years, he married, had kids, and had a job writing "Talk of the Town" columns for *The New Yorker*. He was 27. The young author latched on to "a certain fright and dodginess within myself," he explained to the National Book Foundation. "This kind of man who won't hold still, who won't make a commitment, who won't quite pull his load in society, became Harry Angstrom." The resulting angry and imperfect man, first introduced in *Rabbit, Run*, earned his creator many honors, including two Pulitzer Prizes.

The *Rabbit* books explore a major theme that haunts all of Updike's work: the desire to find meaning beyond the daily grind. Updike "is our unchallenged master at evoking the heroic void of ordinary life," Curt Suplee wrote in the *Washington Post*. "With heart-clutching clarity, he transmutes the stubborn banality of middle-class existence into tableaux that shiver with the hint of spiritual meaning."

Man, wife, home, children, work: for almost half a century, Updike has explored the daily concerns of our national psyche, using his own life as a guide. "Fiction," he told the *Washington Post*, "is part confession, part lie" (5/5/04). Nowhere is this truer than in Updike's work.

Worshiping Updike

a true story



NICHOLSON BAKER is the author of *Vox*, a book about phone sex, the book *Monica Lewinsky* presented to Bill Clinton. Baker is also obsessed with John Updike. Baker's *U and I: A True Story* (1991) details his twisted, adulterous affair with the older writer. He writes about what he has learned from Updike, what he has stolen, and what he still can't bring himself to read.

"It actually has enhanced my reputation—it has done me a favor, that book, because it's a book like few others. It's an act of homage, isn't it?" Updike said to *Salon.com* in 1996, when discussing *U and I*. "And he's a good writer, and he brings to that book all of his curious precision"

Fittingly, several critics admit that Baker is much funnier than his idol. ■

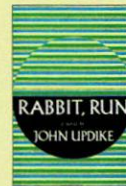
"People may have liked me better if I had written less."

"You can't really write to please critics, because you're not going to please them, probably, even if you try to write for them," Updike told *Salon.com* in 1996. He, of course, knew what he was talking about. His novels have rarely broken into the bestseller list, and many of them—especially his more recent titles—have garnered very mixed reviews. Critics argue that he overwrites the sex scenes. He creates unlikable characters. He's been telling the same story, with minor variations, for 40 years. Most importantly, some would say that his novels have no point, a criticism the author finds highly flawed. "My books are all meant to be moral debates with the reader," he told BBC, "and if they seem pointless ... it's because the reader has not been engaged in the debate. The question is usually, 'what is a good man?' or 'what is goodness ...'" (6/19/69). So, besides fetishizing sex and introducing distasteful protagonists who learn questionable lessons from their lives, he's also misunderstood.

Nearly all critics and readers, however, agree on one point: He is an amazing prose stylist. Updike, also an accomplished poet, brings sensuous, inspired turns of phrase to the most mundane actions. Instead of writing violent battle sequences or pages of straight dialogue, he describes the exact look on a woman's face upon waking. "There is a great deal to be said about almost anything," he told *Life* magazine. "My subject is the American Protestant small town middle class. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules." In other words, John Updike writes beautifully about nothing much, and that is exactly what makes it art.

MAJOR WORKS

Rabbit, Run (1960)



Rabbit, Run (1960) loudly announced the arrival of a distinct voice in American fiction. At 28, he had already published a book of poetry and written a novel—*The Poorhouse Fair* (1959)—that had been a finalist for the National Book Award. Deciding to devote himself to writing full-time, the young author quit working for *The New Yorker* and moved his family to a small town in Massachusetts. He then began pouring out short stories about the modern suburban man. *Rabbit, Run* is the first in a four-book cycle chronicling an average middle-class existence. At the time of its publication, Knopf feared a possible lawsuit for obscenity, but the novel sold over 2.5 million copies.

THE STORY: Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, 26, was once a high school basketball star. Now he's married with kids and works for his father-in-law in a used car lot. Unfulfilled, uncertain, and bored, one night Rabbit goes out for cigarettes

and doesn't come back. He deserts his alcoholic wife, argues with his minister, and takes a mistress.

"On one level *Rabbit, Run* is a grotesque allegory of American life, with its myth of happiness and success, its dangerous innocence and crippling antagonism between value and fact. But much more significantly it is a minor epic of the spirit thirsting for room to discover and be itself."

RICHARD GILMAN, COMMONWEAL, 10/28/60.

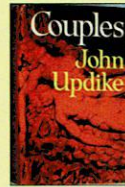
"Under the high-powered magnification and intense imagery of Updike's style, *Rabbit's* floundering in the deadly flypaper of his life has all the force and brilliance of an hallucination."

MILTON RUGOFF, NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE BOOK REVIEW, 11/6/60.

"Author Updike tells his depressing and frequently sordid story with a true novelist's power. His too-explicit sexual scenes are often in the worst of taste, but his set pieces ... show some of the surest writing in years." TIME, 11/7/60.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Updike encapsulates the American dream in *Rabbit*, in all his lazy, ignorant, and sexist glory. A true classic.

Couples (1968)



By his early 30s, Updike had taught creative writing at Harvard (he didn't enjoy it), taken home his first National Book Award for *The Centaur*, and become the youngest member ever elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. People noticed Updike's talent.

But his fifth novel, with its lyrically detailed sexual trysts, became a sensation.

"The book is, of course, not about sex as such," Updike explained in a 1969 BBC interview. "It's about sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left." That is, of course, why *Couples* stayed on best-seller lists for 36 weeks. It also earned Updike his first cover of *Time* magazine, under the headline "The Adulterous Society." Does Updike know something the rest of us don't? He didn't say. A few years later, he divorced his wife of 20 years, Mary Pennington, and married Martha Bernhard.

THE STORY: Piet's wife Angela is disinterested in sex, at least with him, so his carnal appetite leads him astray. They meet Ken and Foxy, a new couple in town. The book follows 10 sex-obsessed couples, all friends who frequently

Updike's Selected Works

THE POORHOUSE FAIR (1959)

A day in the life of several bickering residents of an old-age home.

* RABBIT, RUN (1960)

THE CENTAUR (1963)

This myth-based story about a rebellious son and his father won the National Book Award for fiction.

OF THE FARM (1965)

A middle-aged ad exec visits his widowed mother who still lives in the house where he grew up.

* COUPLES (1968)

BECH: A BOOK (1970)

These short stories follow writer Henry Bech, Updike's Jewish alter ego.

RABBIT REDUX (1971)

Ten years later, *Rabbit* is shaken by his wife's infidelity.

A MONTH OF SUNDAYS (1975)

An adulterous preacher attempts to hide his sins from the congregation.

MARRY ME: A ROMANCE (1976)

Two adulterers consider marriage. But what about their families?

THE COUP (1978)

A dictator of a struggling African nation faces revolution and the greed of superpower states.

* RABBIT IS RICH (1981)

BECH IS BACK (1982)

After 13 years of doubt, Bech gets married and writes a best-selling novel.

THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK (1984)

Three divorcees amuse themselves with their unhappy neighbors. Then the devil come to town.

ROGER'S VERSION (1986)

A divinity student attempts to prove God's existence with his computer.

S. (1988)

Sarah Worth, a doctor's wife obsessed with a religious guru, leaves the suburbs to join an ashram.

* RABBIT AT REST (1990)

MEMORIES OF THE FORD ADMINISTRATION (1992)

While writing about the Ford administration, Professor Alf Clayton assesses his past.

BRAZIL (1994)

In Rio de Janeiro, two teens fall passionately in love. He's poor and black; she's rich and white.

* IN THE BEAUTY OF THE LILIES (1996)

TOWARD THE END OF TIME (1997)

It's 2020. Retired Ben Turnbull argues with his wife, muses on the war with China, and writes in his journal.

BECH AT BAY: A QUASI-NOVEL (1998)

The Jewish-American writer is getting older, but his desires haven't weakened.

GERTRUDE AND CLAUDIUS (2000)

Hamlet's middle-aged mother and the King's younger brother engage in an unusual romance.

LICKS OF LOVE: SHORT STORIES AND A SEQUEL, RABBIT REMEMBERED (2000)

Family and friends recall the life of Harry Angstrom.

SEEK MY FACE (2002)

A 78-year-old painter ruminates on her career, her loves, and American art.

THE EARLY STORIES: 1953-1975 (2003)

Winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for best fiction collection.

VILLAGES (2004)

Birth, college, marriage, divorce, remarriage: the life story of Owen Mackenzie. ■

Updike the Literary Critic

Updike has been professionally reviewing books for more than 45 years, most recently as a regular critic for *The New Yorker*. While accepting an award for *Hugging the Shores: Essays and Criticism* (1983) from the National Book Critics Circle in 1984, Updike commented on the role of the book critic within the industry:

"An occasional sport, a *White Hotel* or *The Name of the Rose*, does show up in these lists to remind us that a certain whimsy, an ineluctable hankering for the elegant and unclassifiable, does persist in the soul of that rough beast, the book-buying public; but in general the list is all too predictable, and the industry as a whole is all too dependent upon the list. This potentially mirthless situation we self-appointed critics—and who will appoint us if not ourselves?—can ameliorate by being, within measure, self-amusing, by indulging our own tastes and pursuing our own educations, by seeking out the underpublished wall flower on the edge of the dance floor and giving her a twirl, by reminding ourselves that literary delights are rarefied delights, that today's blockbuster is tomorrow's insulation, that books are at best a beacon in the darkness but at second-best a holiday that lasts and lasts."

HERE IS A SELECTION of Updike's thoughts on recent books:



EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE | JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

"We must trust our parents, our children to hear us even in silence, in an age that fears silence, when Muzak, TV, and their computerized counterparts fill the few crannies left by traffic noise. Foer is, I would say, a naturally noisy writer—a natural parodist, a jokester, full of ideas and special effects, keen to keep us off balance and entertained. The novel's very title, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, suggests the kind of impact he wants to make on the reader. But a little more silence, a few fewer messages, less graphic apparatus might let Foer's excellent empathy, imagination, and good will resonate all the louder."

—*The New Yorker*, 3/14/2005



SNOW | ORHAN PAMUK

"If at times *Snow* seems attenuated and opaque, we should not forget that in Turkey, insofar as it partakes of the Islamic world's present murderous war of censorious fanaticism versus free speech and truth-seeking, to write with honest complexity about such matters as

head scarves and religious belief takes courage. ... To produce a major work so frankly troubled and provocatively bemused and, against the grain of the author's usual antiquarian bent, entirely contemporary in its setting and subjects, took the courage that art sometimes visits upon even its most detached practitioners."

—*The New Yorker*, 8/30/2004



KAFKA ON THE SHORE | HARUKI MURAKAMI

"... a real page-turner, as well as an insistently metaphysical mind-bender.

Spun out to four hundred and thirty-six pages, it seems more gripping than it has a right to be and less moving, perhaps, than the author wanted it to be." —*The New Yorker*, 1/24/2005



MY LIFE AS A FAKE | PETER CAREY

"Other reviewers of this folded and refolded tale of mental and physical adventure have claimed its moral to be that everyone depicted is a fake. I don't see this; the characters are as genuine as their words permit them to be, though all, being characters, are caught up in the business of fiction, which is fakery."

—*The New Yorker*, 11/24/2003 ■

party together, as they navigate the perils of adultery in a small Boston suburb.

"Some readers will gag with disgust at the excruciatingly detailed varieties of sexual play ... this novel will cause controversy, but because it so correctly and dramatically diagnoses the moral disease which is eating at the soft vitals of the American middle class, it should quickly assume the status of a major novel." R.F. CAYTON, LIBRARY JOURNAL, 3/15/68.

"Updike's weakness is not too much beauty but too much precision; he tells you more than you want to know, in words as arcane and exact as old legal language."

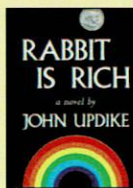
WILFRID SHEED, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 4/7/68.

"Updike's style can carry the burden of details with which the book is filled. He uses even the four-letter words with distinction." GRANVILLE HICKS, SATURDAY REVIEW, 4/6/68.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Updike gives no-holds-barred sexuality a prominent place in literature.

Rabbit is Rich (1981)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE, AMERICAN BOOK AWARD, AND NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD



Rabbit Redux (1971), the second installment of the *Rabbit* series, ended on a tragic note and alienated both critics and readers. In this sequel, the Vietnam War has ended and Rabbit prospers. With his 10th novel, Updike sailed to the top of everyone's best-of list.

THE STORY: At 46, Harry Angstrom is content and successful, managing his father-in-law's Toyota dealership during the 1970s oil crisis. His son Nelson, however, has inherited his father's irresponsible attitude toward life. Nelson drops out of college, begs for a job at the dealership, and gets a girl pregnant.

"Updike has in this book caught both the flotsam and the ethos of 1979. ... There is no novelist more tenderly in love with his characters. ... [He] has always taken his own readers' breath away by showing small instants of how people really live. No one since Joyce himself has made such a gorgeous marriage of dailiness and poetry."

THOMAS MALLON, NATION REVIEW, 11/13/81.

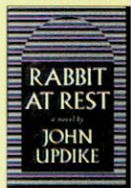
"What the New World was to Renaissance cartographers, sex is to Updike. ... A brilliant book, this, and though a chastening one, what we deserve." ALFRED KAZIN, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 11/19/81.

"... a superlative comic novel that is also an American romance." PAUL GRAY, TIME, 10/5/81.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Rabbit has achieved the American dream of money, but now crushing father-and-son conflicts haunt him. A bleak story, infused with hope and truth.

Rabbit at Rest (1990)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE; NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD



As with all the Harry Angstrom books, current events play a crucial role in the plot. Here, the decline of the country during Ronald Reagan's final years coincides with Rabbit's physical decay. Overall, critics saw Updike's later work as increasingly bleak and obsessed with aging, but his 14th novel allowed for a sliver of hope in the love Rabbit showers on his grandchildren.

THE STORY: Depressed, grossly overweight, and living in Florida, Rabbit comes out of retirement at 55 to work at the car dealership while his son struggles with a cocaine addiction. Rabbit's first heart attack is just around the corner.

"[This novel] is far more upbeat than its subject matter would seem to warrant. And in the bargain it manages to be both poignant and excruciatingly funny. ... This novel completes the most authoritative and most magical portrait yet written of the past four decades of American life." PAUL GRAY, TIME, 10/15/90.

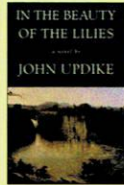
"Rabbit's son is as empty, but as prettily describable, as Rabbit. ... The endless verbal cleverness of Updike can run unimpeded by the weights of moral insight or of judgment."

GARRY WILLIS, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 10/25/90.

"Like Rabbit, this novel would have profited by losing weight. ... It's been a grand trip, and this finale is one of Updike's best books." PETER S. PRESCOTT, NEWSWEEK, 10/1/90.

THE BOTTOM LINE: With the country riddled with debt and AIDS, Rabbit faces his own mortality. After four decades, this is the final episode of an incredibly average, but oh-so-extraordinary, American life.

In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996)



This sprawling novel allowed Updike to put a decidedly American spin on one family's ever-morphing view of spirituality. Just as sex gave the people in *Couples* liberation, here his characters turn to film, with its mystery of darkness and light, as a new religion.

THE STORY: Late in his career, the Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot abruptly loses faith in God. He resigns from his congregation in 1910, sets out selling encyclopedias door to door, and dedicates himself to finding himself—and perhaps salvation—at the movies. The novel traces how Clarence's about-face reverberates through the next three generations of his family.

"This is ... a deeply disenchanted novel: disenchanted with America, religion, the movies. It is not, however, a piece of dismayed authorial valetudinarianism, but rather a novel of accumulated wisdom, with Mr. Updike in full control of his subtle, crafty and incessantly observing art."

JULIAN BARNES, THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 1/28/96.

"In the Beauty of the Lilies succeeds when the sensuality of Updike's prose matches the sensitivity of his characters, and creates an interior world thick with feeling and experience. The novel falters when he tries to plot those experiences on the broad canvas of American history." A.O. SCOTT, NATION, 2/12/96.

"Updike's genius, his place beside Hawthorne and Nabokov have never been more assured, or chilling."

GEORGE STEINER, THE NEW YORKER, 3/11/96.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Updike's only multi-generational epic displays impressive historical detail and sweeping American themes. Despite minor flaws, *Lilies* is a truly enjoyable journey. ■

Updike the Art Critic

UPDIKE'S NEXT BOOK is a follow-up to 2000's *Just Looking: Essays on Art* entitled *Still Looking: Essays on American Art*. This collection of 18 pieces, mostly from his stint as art critic for *The New York Review of Books*, will be released in November 2005. ■

