

John Updike and the Grandeur of the American Suburbs

Oliver Hadingham, Rikkyo University, Japan

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Abstract

The standing of John Updike (1932-2009), a multiple prize-winning author of more than 60 books, has suffered over the last two decades. Critics have recognized Updike's skill as a writer of beautiful prose, but fail to include him among the highest rank of 20th century American novelists. What is most frustrating about the posthumous reputation of Updike is the failure by critics to fully acknowledge what is it about his books that makes them so enduringly popular. Updike combines beautifully crafted prose with something more serious: an attempt to clarify for the reader the truths and texture of America itself.

Keywords: John Updike, middle-class, suburbia, postwar America

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Over the last few decades the reputation of John Updike (1932-2009) has suffered greatly. Updike's doggedness and craft as a writer turned him into a multi-prize winning author of 23 novels, fourteen poetry collections, ten hefty collections of essays, two books of art criticism, a play, some children's books, and numerous short story collections. Yet such a prolific output and the numerous awards won have not placed him among the greats of 20th century American literature. He is remembered as someone who could write elegant prose, but to no lasting effect in articulating something worthwhile. Since the acclaim and prizes showered on *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), Updike has fallen out of favour with the literary world. At best Updike is considered a second-tier author, well behind Nabokov, Bellow, and Roth - the true greats of postwar American literature.

The dwindling reputation of Updike can be explained in various ways. He was a literary man, elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in the mid-60s and the Academy of Arts and Letters a decade later, but one with an output befitting a journalist. Updike did not really stop writing, churning out on average a book a year – not to mention his reviews, poems, and short stories – over a career spanning six decades. This incredible work ethic went counter to the notion of a reclusive writer painfully crafting great literature at huge emotional cost. Critics sensed the waning quality of the factory-like output of Updike; writing that was mass-produced could never replicate the craft necessary to produce great literature, even if on occasion Updike suggested it might. When Updike chose to leave his job at *The New Yorker* it was the fear that if he did not, he was destined to become an 'elegant hack' within an insular literary world (as cited in Begley, 2014, p. 149). But despite the physical dislocation of Ipswich, a small town in Massachusetts, perhaps he remained too associated with *The New Yorker* through his doggedness to stay in its pages by writing stories, poems, or reviews that would feature in it over the next five decades. The accusation that he was, indeed, little more than an elegant hack gained traction.

There was also the sense that Updike was too much the WASP and lacked the deep experience as an outsider to America necessary to say something about America. The acknowledged greats of twentieth century American literature – Vladimir Nabokov, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth – are all outsiders of a sort, able to draw on a rich ancestral past (Nabokov was a Russian émigré, Bellow the son of Russian émigrés, Roth's parents Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe). Updike's protestant Pennsylvania heritage did not bestow a sense of subject quite like writers who could draw on a more cosmopolitan lineage.

In 1966 Updike declared a reluctant support for the Vietnam War providing it led to the political freedom for the South Vietnamese, which turned more reluctant as the futility of the bombing campaign of the following year became apparent (1967). Yet Updike would never really lose trust in his country and what to him was its essential goodness. As American soldiers faltered in Iraq and anti-America sentiment was roused across the world, he reaffirmed his core belief in his country: 'With all its faults - vulgarity, self-indulgence, youth-worship, romanticism in thought and ruthlessness in practice - it is still a template for the world' (2012, p. 470). Such pronouncements of faith in America may not square with our ideal of the writer, someone ready to highlight societal ills or talk truth to power. This may have affected the critical response to Updike's work over the last few decades: he was not quite what is now expected of a writer.

Updike's work over the last few decades of his life received a mixed reception. Critics praised him for his felicitous prose throughout his career, but this undoubted attribute was viewed suspiciously as Updike relentlessly kept to his goal of producing a book a year. A substantial oeuvre was forming, but did Updike's beautiful style mask an emptiness? Updike described elegantly but to no purpose, Harold Bloom declared in the late 1980s, casting him as merely 'a minor writer with a major style' (1987, p. 7). Gore Vidal (1996, p. 5) declared 'I've never taken Updike seriously as a writer.' *Towards the End of Time* (1997) was savaged by critics. To Michiko Kakutani (1997), it was 'sour, ugly, and haphazardly constructed'; David Foster Wallace, the literary star of the new generation, declared that Updike's prose, once a great strength of his work, now seemed 'less like John Updike than like somebody doing a mean parody of John Updike' (1997). In reviewing a collection of short stories, James Woods (2001, p. 30) offered faint praise turning to insult: 'Of course it is "beautifully written" if by that one means a harmless puffy lyricism.' Christopher Hitchens (2006) admitted in his review of a later Updike effort, *Terrorist* (2006), to sending it 'windmilling across the room in a spasm of boredom and annoyance'. Others balked at his portrayal of sexual relations and the vague misogyny in his treatment of his female characters.

It is true that Updike writes elegant prose, and seemingly on every few pages there is something that merits rereading for its sheer felicitousness. This is not a shortcoming: reading should be pleasurable. Perhaps he was too prolific, and should not have written so much criticism (around 4500 pages of it, collected in five large volumes). The reception of each novel may have been diluted by him never seemingly being out of the pages of *The New Yorker*, and was ever ready to accept all manner of written assignments, large and small. That novels are of differing quality goes for any author; a writer seldom produces their best work late in life, powers wane, and perhaps Updike simply carried on too long. The novels of his last decade are not especially memorable. His last book of note was *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996). He tried hard to counter claims of misogyny, creating sympathetically drawn female lead characters in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) and its sequel *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), but never fully escaped such criticisms. Something that Updike did not have much choice about was his parents and upbringing. He admitted in an interview in the late 1980s that he would have liked a more cosmopolitan, more urban heritage, but was at pains to stress his lack of choice in the matter. Writers should not be overly concerned with what they are not but strive to write about what they know in their patch of America (as cited in Plath, 1994, p. 212).

It seemed also that once a newer generation of critics reviewed his work from the 1990s, middle-class, Protestant America had ceased to be of much literary interest. Updike's great subject was ordinary middle class America. But America by that time was fast becoming a different country. New voices were needed to articulate and express this New America. But this is to neglect precisely what makes Updike's work of such value. He strove to illuminate the truths of suburban America, to reveal the beauty in its ordinariness. America may have become a more diverse and fractured nation, but Updike's understanding of the true purpose of art was to help the reader – all readers no matter who they were - to 'enjoy and endure' as Philip Larkin had claimed (1983, p. 297). Literature had a role in articulating and clarifying common experience, of life as it is lived. This would ensure its lasting power, and Updike's too.

John Updike was born into Depression era Pennsylvania. His childhood was spent reading comics and dreaming of being a cartoonist. This was the era of Walt Disney, of scratchy early animation with mass appeal. His mother, Linda, an aspiring writer, remained a strong presence in her son's life. She would instill a confidence in her son that he was destined to achieve. Her bookish only child won a scholarship to Harvard, produced cartoons and light verse for the Harvard *Lampoon*, and graduated *summa cum laude*. He was awarded a one-year Knox scholarship to study painting in Oxford upon graduation. He became a staff writer *The New Yorker* on his return.

In a letter to his mother the 19-year-old Updike pinpointed what the American literary scene lacked: 'We need a writer who desires both to be great and to be popular' (as cited in Begley, 2014, p. 82). To Updike, this was something that the classics of American literature had not really managed. To Updike, America's great books had all featured outlandish characters finding themselves in peripheral situations, like *Moby Dick* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (2012, p. 447). Living in suburban America would allow 'an abrupt purchase on lived life' (1991, p. 135) in the real America, and the 'sensation of breaking through, as if through a thin sheet of restraining glass, to material, to truth, previously locked up' (ibid.). In a speech at Harvard in 1987 Updike praised William Dean Howell's desire to view 'the novel as a means of seizing reality, monotonous and delicate though it be' (1991, p.174). For Updike, if a writer really loved America in all its ordinariness they would be 'able to produce an epic out of the Protestant ethic' (1991, p. 135).

Updike's saw value in Stendhal's definition of the novel as 'a mirror that strolls along the highway' both illuminating the 'blue of the skies' and the 'mud puddles underfoot' (as cited in Belgey, 2014, p. 358-9). For Updike, the writer should connect with a wider audience through capturing life as it is lived by the majority of people, and the ambiguities people constantly lived with. 'To transcribe middleness, with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and misery' became his artistic purpose (1965, p. 186).

The blue skies and mud puddles were on view in *Couples* (1968), a novel about suburban adultery among a group of young marrieds. It stayed in the bestseller lists for months after word spread of its then groundbreaking sexual frankness. *Couples* captured something behind the affairs, the way the young couples had lost faith in religion to provide solace, and no longer took much interest in politics or work. The parties and games allowed the young couples to insulate themselves from a hollow outside world. To replace it, they were attempting to make a religion out of each other. The sexual frankness of *Couples* should not deflect from its underlying seriousness of message. The ambivalence of such promiscuity and blissfulness is a constant undercurrent. People are hurt, friendships destroyed, marriages ruined. As weekends drew to an end, the couples fear the mud puddles of Sunday evenings when the 'sad music' (1983, p. 885) of suburban adultery ceased to be played and the suburban couples returned from flirting at volleyball or tennis court, beach or garden, and

saw an evening weighing upon them, an evening without a game, an evening spent among flickering lamps and cranky children and leftover food and the nagging half-read newspaper with its weary portents and atrocities, an evening when marriages closed in upon

themselves like flowers from which the sun is withdrawn, an evening giving like a smeared window or Monday and the long week when they must perform again their impersonations or working men, of stockbrokers and dentists and engineers, of mothers and housekeepers, of adults who are not the world's guests but its hosts (1968, p. 89).

This is a wonderful evocation of a Sunday evening in suburban homes, when reality seeps back in to our thoughts after a weekend of blissful leisure. It displays a truth about life, of ordinary life as it is lived. It too displays Updike's treatment of the apparent trivialities of life. In drawing attention to the small details, the debris of half-read newspapers, the leftovers, Updike is highlighting its significance. The parents create as much debris as their children do at play. But also Updike conveys the sense that the aftermath of casual adultery is part of the debris of a weekend; as the weekend ends so does the titillation of playing with other people, marriages are left to the humdrum week ahead, to chores and children. Once the 'playtime' of the weekend is over, the adults revert to imitating adults, as they have to.

Updike achieved his first major commercial success with *Couples*, but it is for a series of novels appearing once every decade from the early 1960s that won him most acclaim and most fully realize his artist purpose. Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom was a more ordinary suburban American, and was to prove Updike's 'ticket to the America all around me' (2012, p. 448). *Rabbit Run* was the first what became four novels charting the course of America during the previous decade. Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom is a one-time high school sports star adjusting to an ordinary routine life after so much early adulation. It may have started as a swipe at Kerouac's *On the Road*, which glorifies the vagrant's life, the necessity and meaning all would find by hitting the road. Updike would joke in an interview that Kerouac would go home to his mother between trips for months at a time, hardly the behavior of the beatnik he claimed to be ("Revisiting," 2012). Updike's hero does bolt, leaving his pregnant wife and toddler, but after a time driving across county lines and into a different state he turns his car around and returns to a conventional life, unexciting no doubt, but more true somehow. 'There was no painless dropping out of the Fifties fraying but still tight social weave,' Updike noted in a later afterword to the novel (2006, p. 477).

Rabbit, Run articulates a constant theme in Updike's work: the clash between the mind and soul, on the one hand, and the body and desire, on the other. Harry Angstrom is caught between the external circumstances of his life – a pregnant wife, familial and financial responsibilities – and the desire to be free and recapture the omnipotence of his short-lived high school celebrity. Updike's characters grapple with the realisation that although all material desires are within reach, there remains a yearning for a higher spiritual dimension in life. To Updike, the permanent condition of life is that we find ourselves in an inescapable quandary. Rabbit's instinct is to run but he becomes aware as he drives across the state boundary that social restraint is a more powerful presence in life.

The sequel, *Rabbit Redux*, places Harry in an America that is spiraling out of control during the summer of 1969. The turbulence that came to define the late 1960s enter Harry's suburban world in the shape of an abused teenage upper class waif called Jill and Skeeter, a militant black Vietnam veteran. Millions of ordinary Americas could

not help feeling like the prevailing social and political discontent was seeping into their usually humdrum lives and questioning the very beliefs in which suburban America sustains itself. After toying with the sensual and political anarchy of the late 60s, Harry realizes towards the end of *Rabbit Redux* the irreconcilable nature of his desires and his responsibilities. After Jill's death in the fire that destroys Harry's house - for which Harry is partly responsible - he finds himself back at his parents' house. In his old childhood bedroom he remembers his old stamp collection and the dreams of travel the stamps evoked in his younger self, before he achieved celebrity as a high-school basketball star, and before adult life imposed its demands:

He was in love with the idea of traveling, with running, with geography, with Parcheesi and Safari and all the other board games where you roll the dice and move; the sense of a railroad car was so vivid he could almost see his sallow overhead light, tulip-shaped, tremble and sway with the motion. Yet traveling became an offense in the game he got good at (1971, p. 377-378).

Choices made close down other avenues, and other people are harmed along the way. During an uneasy reunion with his wife, Harry acknowledges how far America had changed. His wife mocks the old high school basketball team jacket he is wearing for its hideous colours reminiscent of fake ice cream. Harry accepts it was 'an ice cream world he made his mark in' (2006, p. 341). Harry recognizes too that Janice is herself retreating into a bygone age in sporting a hairstyle reminiscent of the late 1940s. The novel's final pages see a marriage uneasily re-consummated, an attempt to reaffirm shared responsibilities after its two participants had dabbled in the freedoms of a more schizophrenic era.

Updike most evocative prose acutely captures the lived experience, one that so often merges elegy and longing. Towards the end of *Rabbit is Rich*, Harry, now rich thanks to his late father-in-law's booming Toyota franchise, is struck by the awkward beauty of his son's soon to be wife, Pru.

She breathed the air he'd forgotten, of high-school loveliness, come uninvited into bloom in the shadow of railroad overpasses, alongside telephone poles, within earshot of highways and battered aluminum center strips, out of mothers gone to lard and fathers ground down by gray days of work and more work, in an America littered with bottle-caps and pull-tabs and pieces of broken muffler (1981, p. 216).

Elegy seemed a natural response as Carter's presidency reached its end. America's energy was spent and its confidence was clearly faltering, but beauty was still discernible amidst the litter of a nation awash with Japanese cars and the consumer magazines Harry avidly reads. A world in which money was to seem, from the early 1980s, 'unreal' and effortlessly acquired (Toyotas sell themselves, Harry keeps repeating) and divorced from the hard, honest graft of his father's world.

Updike's vision was that 'the whole mass of middling, hidden, troubled America' is a worthy subject for serious literature (1989, p. 103). For Updike, such an America is and remains incorrigibly itself, a belief that he articulates through many of his fictional creations, not least the character of Harry Angstorm. In *Rabbit at Rest*

(1990), Harry is picked to be Uncle Sam in the local 4th July parade. Harry experiences the same sense of adulation he once did on the basketball court, hearing again his nickname yelled by the crowd, they remember him despite the passage of time. The people of Brewer seem more cheerful, with more appetite for pleasure, than those he grew up among. The Brewer he knew has been 'swallowed up' (2006, p. 336). The old mill is now a health food restaurant, farms are now executive housing, public tastes and mores have changed also. Ethnically, too, Brewer, like the rest of America, has become more diverse, a 'human melt' of whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians (ibid.). Yet amid such change, his arteries clogged up, his heart weak, death no doubt approaching, Harry can still marvel at the essential glory of America. Harry reflects, as the enjoyment of the passing crowds testifies, 'all in all this is the happiest fucking country the world has ever seen' (2006, p. 337).

Updike seems to focus purely on trivialities in his fiction - and what is more trivial than the passage of ordinary routine life? Yet the trivialities convey something more meaningful to the reader. Updike illuminates a society in which base motives struggle with higher purposes, actions are both thought out and unintended, and humdrum experiences are enlivened by episodes of momentary elation. Updike is striving to 'convey the quality of existence itself that hovers beneath the quotidian details' (2006, p. 478). Something more profound, Updike tells us, threads its way through the 'mild, middling truth of average American life' (1991, p. 183).

Rabbit is suddenly driving in a white tunnel, trees on both sides of the street in white blossoms, the trees young and oval in shape and blending one into the other like clouds, the sky's high blue above tingeing the topmost blossoms as it does the daytime moon. And up top where there is most light the leaves are beginning to unfold, shiny and small and heart-shaped as he knows because he is moved enough to pull the Celica to the curb and park and get out and pull off a single leaf to study, as if it will be a clue to all this glory. Along the sidewalk in this radiant long grove shadowy people push baby carriages and stand conversing by their steps as if oblivious of the beauty suspended above them, enclosing them, already shedding a confetti of petals: they are in Heaven. (1990, p. 187-188)

This evocatively expresses Updike's literary goal, a 'salvaging of otherwise overlookable truths from the ruthless sweep of generalization' (1999, p. 816). Such truths, stumbled upon or grappled towards by characters throughout Updike's oeuvre, help the reader to illuminate what seem humdrum experiences, and bestow them with meaning. The apparent smallness of everyday events does not mean they are inconsequential. For Updike, the immediate detail of ordinary life should be treated as a major theme of literature, with the writer striving to shape the 'daily dross into something shimmering and absolute' (ibid.). Updike's greatness lies in his ability to give 'the mundane its beautiful due' (2003, p. xvii). To clarify that suburbia and the lives played out within it contain grandeur even in their apparent ordinariness.

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