

ONE Sunshine and Shadows

A PROFILE OF JOHN UPDIKE

The name Updike is unusual enough in Pennsylvania to make its bearers self-conscious. It is an "odd name," according to America's most famous Updike, that once upon a time "got a loud laugh in the movie theater." For a chuckle, "Updike" could be parodied as "Downdike" or "Downditch." When he told people his name, John Updike says, they were inclined to think he was being "fresh." The book in which he makes this admission of pain is called *Self-Consciousness*. "Hotel clerks and telephone operators would ask you to repeat it, bringing on (in my case) a fit of blushing and stuttering." Only when he moved to New York City did he find people capable of hearing his name at first try and writing it down "correctly, with a respectful nod."

If Updike's name now commands respect throughout New York and beyond, it is in part thanks to the magazine inseparably identified with the city. He has been a contributor to the *New Yorker* for half a century and shows no signs of drying up. "John is very competitive with the younger writers," says Roger Angell, who has been his editor for fiction at the *New Yorker* since 1976. "For about twenty years he has thought he's on the brink of not being able to write any more short fiction. If I mention that we've got a story by a terrific young writer, he'll say, 'Oh really,' and within a couple of weeks he'll send in a wonderful short story."

The *New Yorker* has been a saving grace for Updike throughout his life. The "little lost pocket" of Updikes in Berks County, Pennsylvania, a ter-

ritory characterized by farming and Protestantism, and the gloomy outlook that is apt to attach itself to both callings, was expanded by the presence of a relative who lived within commuting distance of the big city. Updike's Aunt Mary had once worked as a secretary to the critic Edmund Wilson. As well as bringing a fashionable "flapper figure" into the kitchen of her country cousins, she introduced copies of the *New Yorker*. "The magazine couldn't be bought in Berks County," Updike says, "except maybe at the railway station. My Aunt Mary bought us a subscription for Christmas." Her existence suggested a world of cultural wealth to her nephew. "I wanted to become rich in this way."

Updike is "rich" now in ways he never imagined. He lives with his second wife, Martha, in a large house at the stringy end of a settlement called Beverly Farms, some forty minutes' drive north of Boston. The Atlantic Ocean laps at his doorstep. He can make passing reference, while picking at a newly discovered hole in his yellow corduroys, to "my woods." His industry—as a novelist, short-story writer, poet, critic, and humorist—requires three desks: one oak, one steel, and one veneered in Formica, where, respectively, he answers letters, writes his first drafts in pencil, and makes his advance on the word processor. Updike is tall and trim, happy to smile at the world over his good fortune and to deprecate his boyish manner. His head is topped by what Tom Wolfe once called a "great thatchy medieval haircut." Angles of elbows and shins cut sharply across the laughter patterned regularly throughout his conversation. His talk flows with a richness comparable to his prose. "Updike is the first fully harvested, fully expressed American writer since Henry James," says Adam Gopnik, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, who admits to having "semi-worshipped him since adolescence." Without the nourishment of the magazine, Gopnik feels, "he might be one touch less completely expressed than he is. I have a great love for his small, tender things—the memoirs of Pennsylvania boyhood, for example—and doubt there would be as many without a magazine to need them. This is as good a vindication of the *New Yorker's* existence as any could be."

There have been less friendly reactions to Updike's proficiency. Gore Vidal referred to him as being "fixed in facility," while Norman Podhoretz, former editor of the Jewish intellectual magazine *Commentary*,

protested: "I have been puzzled by many things in the course of my career as a literary critic, and one of them is the high reputation of John Updike." Updike's mischievous response was to make his puffed-up Jewish-writer hero Henry Bech—in *Bech: A Book* (1970) and *Bech Is Back* (1982)—a darling of the *Commentary* crowd.

Updike was born in 1932 and raised in the town of Shillington, Pennsylvania. Worship at the local Sunday School, attached to the Lutheran church, began what has become lifelong observance, though he is now among the Episcopalians. His mother's family, the Hoyers, had been farmers, and when John was thirteen, the family moved back to the Hoyer farm to live with his maternal grandparents, an event in which his novel *Of the Farm* (1965) is rooted. Money had been lost in the crash—"Oh no, Johnny, we were poor," Updike's father once protested when the son pluckily claimed to have wanted for nothing. While Updike senior made a living as a schoolteacher, he was laid off each May and could only hope to be rehired in September. During the summer, he worked on building sites.

Updike's initial artistic impulse took the form of drawing, specifically the kind of cartoons he saw in magazines. "Thinking it over, I can't locate another artist in the Updike family. I guess it was my idea. I was an only child, I needed an alternative to family life—to real life, you could almost say—and cartoons, pictures in a book, the animated movies, seemed to provide it." As a boy, he "was not galvanized by the literary ideal." There was, however, one writer in the Updike family. His mother, Linda Grace Hoyer, wrote short stories, which she sent to magazines, including the *New Yorker*, only to have them returned. Disheartening though her failure was to her, Updike reflects that "if my mother hadn't been trying to be a writer, I don't know if I would have thought of it myself." Amid his early memories, he can see himself "crawling up into her lap while she sat at the typewriter banging away at the keys." Later on, his mother had more success with the *New Yorker*, and a collection of her stories was published in 1971 as *Enchantment*. Updike's eldest son, David, a teacher, also made appearances in the magazine and has published several books.

Updike began writing for the *New Yorker* at twenty-two. "They accepted a light-verse poem, and then they took a story. Taking the story

was very important to me because that was the *New Yorker*, and here I was on that Pennsylvania farm. I had once thought: how can you get from here to there? And now I had gotten there." His first intention was to be a humorist—"I thought that was a very harmless thing to be"—and to join the suave Algonquin gang whose jokes had given him much pleasure and whose drawings he had traced in imitation. "But of course by the time I got there the gang was gone and the party was over. It's sometimes said that cold war anxieties, atomic bomb anxieties, killed humor, though I don't really buy it. But anyway, the time when facetious writing could attract real talents was over, and the talents were looking elsewhere."

While Updike is seldom identified as the author of "facetious" pieces, the spirit, according to Gopnik, remains. "The secret of his writing lies in his early ambition to be a cartoonist and a humorist. The artisanal high spirits of the humorist have never drained from his hand. Among masters, none is so eager to please. I pick up an Updike story more or less at random every day and find always a high-hearted vein of humor running through everything he writes." This, Gopnik believes, is what lifts Updike's work "out of the normal range of poetic writing into a genial and generous dimension of its own." Angell has found him "a formidable self-editor. He is very critical of his own work. If we've taken something, and I feel that a section doesn't connect with the piece as a whole, I'll bring it up with John. We'll go over it on the phone, and he'll come up with a variation. He often finds something at the very last moment and rewrites it."

Updike majored in English at Harvard, then took up a yearlong fellowship at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford in 1954. He mostly studied life drawing there, but it was while he was in England that he discovered the writer Henry Green, who was to exercise a persistent power over his style. "He showed a new way to use the language. Another writer might have done it, but Henry Green happened to be the one." After holding an office job at the *New Yorker* from 1955 to 1957, Updike retreated with his first wife, Mary, and their two young children, Elizabeth and David, to Ipswich, Massachusetts, where two more children, Michael and Miranda, were born. Living there, not far from his present home, Updike extended himself in novels and experienced critical

and financial success. He drove a convertible and came to assume the identity in the mildly bohemian Ipswich community, as he once put it in a typical mock-and-jab aside, of a “mini-Mailer.” Updike and his wife separated in the mid-1970s and were granted a no-fault divorce in 1976. He married Martha, thus acquiring three stepsons, the following year.

Updike’s first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), was, he says, “heavily influenced by Henry Green. Greenisms crop up in later novels, too. In *Couples* [1968], there are a lot of sentences that have that little blur, that little twist, that backward-something, that you find in Green.” *The Poorhouse Fair* was a promising debut (Updike had already published *The Carpentered Hen*, a volume of poems, in 1958), but a wider audience greeted his second novel, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the initial part of what was to become a tetralogy spanning three decades, with volumes appearing at roughly ten-year intervals. When we meet him, Rabbit, or Harry Angstrom (to give him his real name), is a twenty-six-year-old basketball player who is already past his peak. He is in a sour marriage with Janice, which is nonetheless to prove surprisingly resilient. “The character of Rabbit was for me a way into the America I found all around me,” Updike has remarked. “What I saw through Rabbit’s eyes was often more worth telling than what I saw through my own, though the difference was often slight.” When first encountered, Rabbit is having difficulty justifying to his peers his support for the American action in Vietnam. He is nervous of “Negroes” and is about to begin an affair that will rip into his marriage. As a result of his wife’s increasing recourse to the bottle, their newborn child is accidentally drowned, an event for which Rabbit will never forgive her, though he himself is partly to blame. The *angst* in Harry Angstrom’s name was put there on purpose. In the second installment, *Rabbit Redux* (1971), he will undergo a 1960s reeducation in the subjects of free love and civil rights. Toward the end of his too-brief life, documented in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), he is overweight and agitated less by angry blacks than by Middle Eastern terrorists, whose representatives have just blown up the Pan Am jet over Lockerbie.

“People ask me what would Rabbit think of 9/11, what would Rabbit think of George W. Bush, and I just can’t say. I killed him off. It’s strange, you never know when you’re going to die, so at fifty-something I thought

I'd better tidy him up before I die and then he's left hanging. I wanted to see him through. I think he would die young, that kind of athlete, sort of old before his time, bad diet and so on, so I wrapped him up in *Rabbit at Rest* and then regretted that enough to at least try to tidy up the children ["Rabbit Remembered," in *Licks of Love*, 2000]. I think Rabbit would probably have the same reaction to the invasion of Iraq that he had to Vietnam, that it may be a mistake but it's our duty to see it through. If he were alive, he'd probably be in Florida most of the year by now and he might have a stars-and-stripes sticker on his car. After 9/11, he certainly would have put the flag up. Janice would have been a little more skeptical." Judith Jones, who has worked at Alfred A. Knopf, the publisher, for more than forty years, shepherding Updike from typescript to hardcovers, was disappointed when Rabbit was laid to rest, "because I liked to read about him. I mean, I wouldn't like to live next door to Harry, or to sit down and have dinner with him, but John always gets an essential compassion for the person. Even with someone so ordinary as Harry, or even so obnoxious, he's always sympathetic. He never has contempt for his characters."

The Rabbit tetralogy is rich in sexual detail, as are many Updike novels. *Rabbit, Run* emerged at a time when books such as *Naked Lunch* and *Tropic of Cancer* were not published in the United States for fear of prosecution. Rabbit, taking eight pages to mount Ruth, the part-time prostitute he met earlier the same evening, had to proceed toward the bookstores with caution. Jones remembers Updike "being worried because *Rabbit, Run* was rather explicit and at that period America was rather conservative. John could see himself having legal suits and ending up with no money and four young children to support. So he said to Alfred Knopf, maybe you should get a lawyer in to look at the obscene parts. Alfred arranged for the lawyer to come in at the weekend, then telephoned John in Massachusetts. And John said: 'Oh no, I can't come down this weekend; I'm teaching summer Sunday school.'"

Updike's faith has remained constant through the changes of venue. Between the Lutherans and the Episcopalians, Updike was a Congregationalist, and the shadow of the Congregational church falls across the adulterous players of verbal and sexual games in *Couples* (1968). Piet

Hanemas in that novel is led to wonder "what barred him from the ranks of those many blessed who believed nothing. Courage, he supposed." Updike claims to "get anxious at 4 AM. I seem to have this need to belong to some church. I get worried on Sunday mornings. Life without religion seems to me to lack a dimension. You may say that dimension's an illusion, but in some ways it's what people have done through these two millennia and many more millennia before that." He feels that his artistic activity "is in some way bound up with my religious faith." Creativity as a gift from God, to be reciprocated via worship, is not a concept he hastens to disavow. "I do think I've been fortunate in life. I've been fortunate to achieve some of my vague ambitions and I'm grateful, when I remember to be grateful. At some point in my adolescence there was an act of faith involved in my setting myself to become an artist. That I have succeeded in doing so is some kind of miracle, as I see it. I think of the boy I was, and I look back and . . . I'm breathless, you know?" He is willing to ask his religion to accommodate earthly pleasures, such as a round of golf on a Sunday morning. "William James says something like, 'If men can believe in gods, then the days pass by with zest; they stir with prospect, they thrill with remoter values.' It's a little like that with me."

Updike stands apart from the ranks of contemporaries in leaning to the right in matters private and political. In 1966, in a symposium dedicated to writers' views on Vietnam, he found himself more or less isolated as a hawk. The *New York Times* pointed this out, without giving proper consideration to his ambivalence. In reaction, Updike wrote "On Not Being a Dove," a fifty-page essay in which he attempted to chart the ins and outs of his resistance to the peace movement and to explain the roots of the untrendy patriotism fortifying his position. "I was sort of embarrassed not to be a dove, since most writers are doves," he says. "It's not my nature to go against the grain. But it was arresting to someone raised in the depression to witness the hatred, venom, fury of those years. In general, I think that these men we elect should be left to do the job, and my guess is that they're doing about as well as they can do, given the problems they face. And I'd be willing to give the benefit of the doubt even to Richard Nixon . . . which maybe is eccentric of me. I find it very hard to believe that the government leaders are villainous, of our democ-

racy or the British democracy. But maybe I've been brainwashed." He is, however, a Democrat, not a Republican, and he finds the situation in Iraq "very troubling. It makes the administration look bad, and I won't be sorry if and when they're replaced."

Gopnik delights in Updike's departure from orthodoxy. "It is the tension between opposed poles in his work that gives it its electricity. He is a patriot, a conservative, a hawk—and an erotic trailblazer, a radical writer of great courage." The critic Zachary Leader, who has written widely on Updike, says, "I always think of that moment in *Rabbit Is Rich*, when Harry leads a Fourth of July parade dressed up like Uncle Sam. His paunch, Updike says, 'in itself must weigh as much as an Ethiopian child.' Updike knows all about American excess and its consequences. He's a clear-eyed patriot, certainly. But he can be cold-eyed too, and defiant, like someone who knows it's wrong to drive an SUV but still does. He'd stand by Harry's conclusion that 'all in all, this is the happiest fucking country the world has ever seen.'"

Updike's ingrained conservatism extends to other matters. In a ten-thousand-word assault on the Updike edifice in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1996, Gore Vidal wrote: "He is full of Shillington self-effacing gracefulness on what—if any—race problem there might be in the grand old United States." Partly, this was an effect of geography. In the Shillington of his boyhood, there were few black faces, and the same could be said of Harvard in the early 1950s. In "On Not Being a Dove," Updike declares himself a supporter of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and a contributor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, though he goes on to remark that he once "lent a black man we knew some money that he never repaid." (Harry lends a black colleague money in *Rabbit Redux*, which he expects not to be repaid, and is surprised when it is.) There is scant encouragement to integration in Updike's fiction of the period, where black people put in mostly perfunctory appearances, as in old movies. The couple in *Marry Me*, a story of adultery and stubbornly cohesive marriage written in the mid-1960s but not published until 1976 (the year of Updike's own divorce), return to their hotel after lunch to find their bed of passion "stripped and shoved against the bureau, and a slouching Negro was lathering the carpet with a screaming machine," which is pretty much a typical interracial experi-

ence in Updike's work. When a central role was given to a black character named Skeeter in *Rabbit Redux*, the result was heavily burlesque. As Skeeter is ferried into the wilderness by Rabbit at the end of the novel, everyone, including the queasy reader, is relieved to see the back of him.

Skeeter is drawn with a large dose of affection, however, and in serving up his desperate psyche in garish tones, Updike is simply following Rabbit into the America he finds all around him. After his daughter Elizabeth married a Ghanaian in the 1980s, the author found himself delighted by two African American grandchildren. In a meditation on the subject, he counseled Anoff and Kwame that "though exactly half white" they would be "considered black," and black identity was often uncomfortable in a land where "the stereotypical black is a mugger, addict, dropout and outlaw." Updike ended "A Letter to My Grandsons" by urging them to choose an identity of their own making, and by quoting his maternal grandfather: "You carry your own hide to market."

Contemplation of skin as the coating of personal identity is something with which Updike is painfully familiar. Since a bout of measles at the age of six, he has suffered from psoriasis, a dermatological condition that gives the victim "the sense of another presence co-occupying your body and singling you out from the happy herds of healthy, normal mankind." In a poem in his most recent collection, *Americana* (2001), he refers to himself as a "literary Mr. Sunshine," a piquant description, since it refers not only to his evident good nature but to his annual effort, over many years, to obliterate his psoriasis by hammering it with ultraviolet rays, once the only known remedy. In summer months, Updike was indeed "Mr. Sunshine," but with the onset of winter his psoriasis flourished again. He suggests that "having this disability, which was really quite shaming, forced me to be more adventurous and daring than I ordinarily would have been. I'm at heart a kind of cautious, conservative person, and without the skin ailment I might not have left New York, but just stayed and grown old in *New Yorker* harness. It was the need to get to the sun, get to the beach, that forced me to leave the city and my job, and of course to earn my living as a freelance writer." He suffers less now—"they have pills"—but the relentless sunshine to which he exposed himself has resulted in skin damage. "So I have that to cope with."

Updike is surely the most prolific American writer of serious intent of

the past half-century. In addition to thirty novels and collections of stories, he has published six volumes of poetry (his *Collected Poems* came out in 1993), assorted memoirs, and children's stories. His criticism and occasional journalism fills four mammoth volumes, the latest of which he dubbed *More Matter*—an off-putting title which does no justice to the “farraginous” (a favorite word) contents. Yet he observes that he has had only a single number-one best seller, *Couples*, which appeared thirty-six years ago. Judith Jones feels that Updike “doesn’t always get his due,” but that nevertheless he has “the most consistent sales of any writer we publish at Knopf. He has a distinct audience. It’s not huge, but he’s read all over the world.” To Gopnik, talk of best-sellerdom in the context of Updike’s multifarious talent is “absurd.” Even though Rabbit is no longer here to grouse about the attacks on New York and Washington, Updike would like to write “a novel about post-9/11. I’m not sure what shape these catastrophes would take, since everything happens so violently and quickly, but I think of the British writers who described the events of the Blitz, Green for one, and I feel I should have a try. I think if you’re a writer you try to make something out of everything that happens.”

Updike is reluctant to give the impression of preferring the world as it was to the world he finds on his TV screen and in his grandchildren’s pop records. Americans, he says, are “trying to figure out how to be happy,” but lately “it occurred to me that I have some of my father’s depressive temperament. He used to sit in a chair and say, ‘I’ve got the blues.’ And I didn’t know what the blues was. Why should he have the blues? It might be a tendency of Protestants in general. There’s a kind of gloom, fear of death, fear of meaninglessness, and literary activity is one way of staving it off, isn’t it? When you’re writing something, you’re relatively innocent. Time goes by so fast, I find, when I’m writing. It speeds by. When I’m helping my wife in the garden, it crawls by.”