

John Updike, 1932–2009

J. D. McCLATCHY

When one of its 250 members dies, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, at a subsequent general meeting, asks another member to compose a tribute in honor of the deceased colleague. The Academy consulted with John Updike's widow, Martha, on the choice of a speaker, and she suggested the poet and critic J. D. McClatchy, who was then serving as the Academy's president. The following remarks were, thus, delivered at the meeting in November 2009. Among the Academy's guests for this occasion were Martha Updike and editor Judith Jones.

John Updike was a member of this Academy for 45 years. He was not quite the youngest person ever elected, but nearly. Over those years he was awarded prizes (including the William Dean Howells Medal and the Gold Medal for Fiction), he served on every conceivable committee, he presided as both Secretary and Chancellor, he gave the Blashfield Address, and he edited *A Century of Arts and Letters*, the Academy's centennial history. I dare say he knew more about this institution than anyone among us today, and loved it enough to both cherish its traditions and gently mock them. On the one hand, he parodied us wittily in his *Bech* books; on the other, he once wrote a magazine squib about 155th Street as his favorite spot in New York City. "Manhattan's claustrophobic closeness lifts in this vicinity," he wrote, "the buildings throw short shadows, and the neighborhood's stately elements—the terrace, the walled cemetery, the Episcopal church across Broadway—stand as a kind of pledge the past once made to the future." And when he wrote about what happens inside this building . . . well, here is his sardonic little sonnet from 1992, called "Academy":

The shuffle up the stairs betrays our age:
sunk to polite senility our fire

and tense perfectionism, our curious rage
to excel, to exceed, to climb still higher.
Our battles were fought elsewhere; here, this peace
betrays and cheats us with a tame reward—
a klieg-lit stage and numbered chairs, an ease
of prize and praise that sets sheath to the sword.

The naked models, the Village gin, the wife
whose hot tears sped the novel to its end,
the radio that leaked distracting life
into the symphony's cerebral blend.
A struggle it was, and a dream; we wake
to bright bald honors. Tell us our mistake.

At my age, I am rarely surprised any longer by newspaper headlines. But I was genuinely shocked, last January, to read of John Updike's death. Why had I thought *he* would live forever, when all of us merely think *we* will? It was only later, reading the work of his last months, that one could see him wondering the same thing, watching with a wry detachment and a sudden fresh upwelling of old memories what had suddenly become his own last act unfold. Just a month before he died, he wrote a poem about two Shillington High School classmates of his who must that day unexpectedly have walked into the lamplight of idle consciousness, and whom he addresses—after a very specific account of their lives a half century earlier—this way:

Dear friends of childhood, classmates, thank you,
scant hundred of you, for providing a
sufficiency of human types: beauty,
bully, hanger-on, natural,
twin, and fatso—all a writer needs,
all there in Shillington, its trolley cars
and little factories, cornfields and trees,
leaf fires, snowflakes, pumpkins, valentines.

To think of you brings tears less caustic
than those the thought of death brings. Perhaps
we meet our heaven at the start and not
the end of life. Even then were tears
and fear and struggle, but the town itself
draped in plain glory the passing days.

This is like a fable of his career: to have taken the types life offers, and rendered them with such detail as to make a moral allegory of the ordinary. And those final phrases—*plain glory* and *passing days*—were his abiding themes, despite the lavish ways he used to evoke them. No writer since his beloved Nabokov had manipulated, massaged, and mastered English prose as John Updike did. He laid down sentences like marble inlay in a grand corridor that led to the inner recesses of the heart. To linger again over those sentences is to admire a virtuosity so rare and exhilarating that we sometimes forget it was in service to something considerably beyond its own giddy pleasures.

But even before they got to the new sentences, writers picking up a just-published book by John Updike would invariably panic. The print size on the list of previous publications got smaller over the years to accommodate his titles. After five dozen of them, I think even the experts were confused about the exact number. Their range was prodigious—the novels and story collections, the poems and essays—as was his instinct to surprise us with a new narrative experiment or with an expertise in something obscure and compelling. But scanning those columns of books, what was most daunting at the heart of them was the Rabbit Angstrom books, long since properly gathered into a single massive volume that stands without question as the greatest novel of postwar America.

Early on, he told an interviewer, “My subject is the American Protestant small-town middle class. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules.” As a realist, he knew that the novelist’s task is not merely the accumulation but the illumination of details. And that, in turn, is accomplished not merely by a keen observation of the murky secrets repressed behind the bright façade, but by revealing that tension between inner and outer in sentences of astonishing lyrical grace and rhetorical power. If sex and religion preoccupied many of his chronicles of American life, it is because he wanted to discover how we cling to the moment and to something beyond the moment, or what he once called “the tension and guilt of being human.”

His least ambiguous faith, of course, was in language itself. But for a novelist who dealt so often with infidelity, he had a religious temperament. In a foreword to one of his favorite novels, Thornton Wilder’s *The Eighth Day*, John said of Wilder that he “kept religion’s bias—its basic gaiety,” and in the novel itself, Wilder says that “faith is an ever-widening pool of clarity, fed from springs beyond the margin of consciousness.” A bias that clarifies, a joy on the margins—these are about as good a definition of a contemporary American’s religion as any. John wouldn’t have wanted to be in any world but a fallen one, and one that had fallen

in a peculiarly American way, with our Puritan roots, with our evangelical fringes, with our restless, greedy, generous ambitions. Even in what we don't know, we know more than we suspect, *are* more than we hope. John Cheever once said that the characters in Updike's novels perform their lives in an environment suffused with a grandeur that escapes them.

In Harry Angstrom, he embodied all of these contradictions. Rabbit is one of literature's great characters—a rabbit and angst-ridden antihero who thought Ronald Reagan was like God in that “you never knew how much he knew, nothing or everything.” In the Rabbit tetralogy, Updike used everything to explore the nothing. “Boys are playing basketball around a telephone pole with a backboard bolted to it. 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.” So *Rabbit, Run* opens, with Harry watching them play. “He stands there thinking, the kids keep coming, they keep crowding you up.” Hundreds of pages later—pages with the amplitude and address of the great nineteenth-century novels—*everything* has happened (happened in suburban beds and convenience stores and cars and sailboats, under copper beeches and on golf courses) until the nothing happens, and we look back on Rabbit's life as our own, our century's, our culture's. It is our great anatomy of desire. In the Rabbit books, Updike wrote of an American's empty dreams and passionate loneliness. The dreams are empty so that there is room to move around in them, to change them. The loneliness is passionate because each of us falls in love with being alone.

Few writers are given the privilege of writing down their time. And beyond his skills at the typewriter, Updike was a true bookman. His longtime editor at Knopf, Judith Jones, remembers his sending in a new manuscript every year, and considering it a point of honor that it make money. But there was never an agent, a contract, or an advance. He cared only about the book. He pestered the art department to design what was in his mind's eye. He had top stain and full-cloth bindings to the end. In the days of letterpress, he would pick up the first copy of a new novel, smell the pages, and run his hand over the type to feel the ink.

He was also a patient writer, a practical one. As *Rabbit, Run*, which appeared in 1960, was being readied for publication, he became privately worried that its raw take on things like sex might get him hauled into local courts across the land. He had a family, after all, and tuitions to pay. So he suggested to Mr. Knopf that the firm's lawyers read the manuscript. They did, and came back with pages of anxious notes. Mr. Knopf telephoned John with the bad news, but was told that John was teaching Sunday school class and couldn't be disturbed. In the end,

much of what readers of the day would have considered to be smut was deleted from the novel, and John waited patiently as, edition by edition, over fifteen years or so, bits of it were folded, like beaten egg white, back into the original batter. By the time the whole original text was finally between covers, the temper of the time had changed, and nobody ever noticed what had been done.

John Updike was, in every sense, our first man of letters, a man made of words which he chose—in ways always surprising and sublime—to give back to us, shaped like ourselves, like our lives, our sorry hearts. He let us see and understand them, love and wonder at their textures and terrors. His books, in the poet's phrase, beheld "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

There is now an empty chair in this room, and always will be.