

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



JOHN UPDIKE

Edited by Stacey Olster

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Edward Vargo has been a professor of English and dean at Divine Word College in Iowa; Fu Jen University in Taipei, Taiwan; and Assumption University in Bangkok, Thailand. He is the author of one of the first full-length studies of Updike's writings, *Rainstorms and Fire: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike* (1973). In addition to his work on Updike, he has also published essays on cross-cultural readings of American literature and on higher education in the New World Order in international journals and collections. He currently lives and writes in Bangkok.

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1932 John Hoyer Updike is born on 18 March in Reading, Pennsylvania, the only child of Wesley Russell Updike, who later would teach mathematics at Shillington High School, and Linda Grace (Hoyer) Updike, an employee at Pomeroy's Department Store and aspiring writer. Until the age of thirteen, lives in Shillington (later fictionalized as Olinger), a suburb of Reading (later fictionalized as Brewer). For most of this period, lives with both his parents and maternal grandparents in the same house.
- 1936 Begins Shillington public schools.
- 1938 Experiences first attack of psoriasis.
- 1945 First publication, "A Handshake with the Congressman," appears in the Shillington High School *Chatterbox*. Moves with parents and grandparents to a farmhouse, originally owned by the Hoyers, in Plowville on 31 October.
- 1950 Graduates Shillington High School as senior class president and co-valedictorian. Enters Harvard University on a tuition scholarship, where he eventually majors in English. Begins writing and drawing sketches and cartoons for the *Harvard Lampoon*.
- 1953 Elected president of the *Harvard Lampoon*. Marries Mary Pennington, a Radcliffe fine arts student and daughter of a Unitarian minister, on 26 June.
- 1954 Graduates from Harvard *summa cum laude*. Spends 1954-55 academic year at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, England, on a Knox Fellowship. First poem published in the *New Yorker*, "Duet, with Muffled Brake Drums," appears in 14 August issue, followed by first short story, "Friends from Philadelphia," in 30 October issue. Offered a staff position at the magazine by fiction editor Katharine White.

- 1955 Daughter Elizabeth born on 1 April. Returns to US and sets up house on West 85th Street and Riverside Drive in New York City. Becomes a “Talk of the Town” writer for the *New Yorker*.
- 1957 Son David born on 19 January. Leaves the *New Yorker* and moves to Ipswich, Massachusetts (later fictionalized as Tarbox), to concentrate on his fiction and poetry.
- 1958 First poetry collection, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*, published.
- 1959 First novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, and first short story collection, *The Same Door*, published. Awarded Guggenheim Fellowship to support work on *Rabbit, Run*. Immerses himself in writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. Son Michael born on 14 May.
- 1960 *Rabbit, Run*, with alterations to avoid potential obscenity lawsuits, published. *The Poorhouse Fair* wins the Rosenthal Foundation Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Daughter Miranda born on 15 December.
- 1962 Teaches creative writing at Harvard in July and August, the first of two unsatisfying stints as a college instructor.
- 1963 *The Centaur* published and receives the National Book Award for Fiction the following year.
- 1964 Elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Travels to Russia and Eastern Europe as part of the US-USSR Cultural Exchange Program.
- 1965 Awarded Le prix du meilleur livre étranger for *The Centaur*. Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Starts depositing his papers in the Houghton Library at Harvard.
- 1966 “The Bulgarian Poetess” wins First Prize in the O. Henry Prize Stories competition.
- 1967 Expresses support of Vietnam War among responses collected in *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam*. Along with other writers signs letter urging Soviet writers to help safeguard Jewish cultural institutions.
- 1968 *Couples* published and remains on the bestseller lists for a year. Updike featured on 26 April cover of *Time*. Moves to London for a year with his family and begins research into the life of James Buchanan, Pennsylvania’s only US President.
- 1969 *Midpoint and Other Poems* published.
- 1970 Film version of *Rabbit, Run* released.
- 1971 *Rabbit Redux* published and receives the Signet Society Medal for Achievement in the Arts.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1972 Appointed Honorary Consultant in American Letters to the Library of Congress for a three-year term. Wesley Updike dies on 16 April.
- 1973 Travels to Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia as a Fulbright Lincoln Lecturer.
- 1974 Separates from his wife Mary and moves into an apartment in Boston. Teaches at Boston University in the fall, his last stint as a college instructor.
- 1975 *A Month of Sundays*, first of three rewritings of *The Scarlet Letter*, published.
- 1976 Elected to the fifty-member Academy of Arts and Letters. Awarded no-fault divorce in March.
- 1977 Marries Martha Ruggles Bernhard on 30 September. Lives with her and her three sons in Georgetown, Massachusetts.
- 1978 Testifies against government support of the arts before House of Representatives Subcommittee on Select Education.
- 1979 *Too Far to Go: The Maples Stories* published and made into a two-hour television movie.
- 1981 *Rabbit Is Rich* published and wins the National Book Critics Circle Award, to be followed the next year by the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the American National Book Award. Updike receives the Edward MacDowell Medal for literature and is made the subject of a BBC documentary, "What Makes Rabbit Run?"
- 1982 Appears on 18 October cover of *Time*. Moves to Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, in May.
- 1984 Receives the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism for *Hugging the Shore*.
- 1987 Receives the Elmer Holmes Bobst Award for Fiction. Movie adaptation of *The Witches of Eastwick* released.
- 1989 *Self-Consciousness* (memoirs) published. Linda (Hoyer) Updike dies on 10 October. Updike presented with the National Medal of Arts at the White House.
- 1990 *Rabbit at Rest* published, completing the Rabbit tetralogy, and wins the National Book Critics Circle Award, to be followed the next year by the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.
- 1991 Receives First Prize in the O. Henry Prize Stories competition for "A Sandstone Farmhouse" and Italy's Premio Scanno Prize for *Trust Me*.
- 1992 Travels to Brazil. Awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Harvard University.
- 1993 *Collected Poems 1953-1993* published.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1995 Awarded the Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, given every five years to the best work of fiction published during that period, for *Rabbit at Rest*. Receives the French honorary rank of Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. *Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy* published.
- 1996 *In the Beauty of the Lilies* published and receives the Ambassador Book Award.
- 1998 Receives the Harvard Arts First Medal and the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.
- 2000 *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Licks of Love* published.
- 2003 Presented with the National Medal for the Humanities at the White House. *The Early Stories, 1953–1975* published.
- 2004 Receives the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for *The Early Stories, 1953–1975*.

ABBREVIATIONS

All page citations to Updike's works refer to the first editions listed in the Select Bibliography. When, for purposes of clarification, additional information was required, shortened titles appear. Those abbreviations refer to the following texts:

<i>Afterlife</i>	<i>The Afterlife and Other Stories</i>
<i>Americana</i>	<i>Americana and Other Poems</i>
<i>Assorted</i>	<i>Assorted Prose</i>
<i>Back</i>	<i>Bech Is Back</i>
<i>Bay</i>	<i>Bech at Bay: A Quasi-Novel</i>
<i>Bech</i>	<i>Bech: A Book</i>
<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Brazil</i>
<i>Buchanan</i>	<i>Buchanan Dying: A Play</i>
<i>Carpentered</i>	<i>The Carpententered Hen and Other Tame Creatures</i>
<i>Centaur</i>	<i>The Centaur</i>
<i>Coup</i>	<i>The Coup</i>
<i>Couples</i>	<i>Couples</i>
<i>Early</i>	<i>The Early Stories, 1953-1975</i>
<i>Farm</i>	<i>Of the Farm</i>
<i>Gertrude</i>	<i>Gertrude and Claudius</i>
<i>Hugging</i>	<i>Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism</i>
<i>Licks</i>	<i>Licks of Love: Short Stories and a Sequel</i>
<i>Lilies</i>	<i>In the Beauty of the Lilies</i>
<i>Looking</i>	<i>Just Looking: Essays on Art</i>
<i>Marry</i>	<i>Marry Me: A Romance</i>
<i>Memories</i>	<i>Memories of the Ford Administration: A Novel</i>
<i>Midpoint</i>	<i>Midpoint and Other Poems</i>
<i>Month</i>	<i>A Month of Sundays</i>
<i>More</i>	<i>More Matter: Essays and Criticism</i>
<i>Museums</i>	<i>Museums and Women and Other Stories</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Music</i>	<i>The Music School: Short Stories</i>
<i>Odd</i>	<i>Odd Jobs: Essays and Criticism</i>
<i>Picked-Up</i>	<i>Picked-Up Pieces</i>
<i>Pigeon</i>	<i>Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories</i>
<i>Poorhouse</i>	<i>The Poorhouse Fair</i>
<i>Problems</i>	<i>Problems and Other Stories</i>
<i>Redux</i>	<i>Rabbit Redux</i>
<i>Rest</i>	<i>Rabbit at Rest</i>
<i>Rich</i>	<i>Rabbit Is Rich</i>
<i>Roger's</i>	<i>Roger's Version</i>
<i>Run</i>	<i>Rabbit, Run</i>
<i>S.</i>	<i>S.</i>
<i>Same</i>	<i>The Same Door: Short Stories</i>
<i>Seek</i>	<i>Seek My Face</i>
<i>Self-Consciousness</i>	<i>Self-Consciousness: Memoirs</i>
<i>Tetralogy</i>	<i>Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy</i>
<i>Tossing</i>	<i>Tossing and Turning: Poems</i>
<i>Toward</i>	<i>Toward the End of Time</i>
<i>Witches</i>	<i>The Witches of Eastwick</i>

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INTRODUCTION: "A SORT OF HELPLESSLY 50'S GUY"

STACEY OLSTER

At the beginning of *U and I* (1991), news of Donald Barthelme's death prompts Nicholson Baker to contemplate how "disassembled and undirected and simply bereft" he would feel were he to learn of the demise of the writer he considers his "emotional plenipotentiary": "All I wanted, all I counted on, was Updike's immortality . . . He was, I felt, the model of the twentieth-century American man of letters: for him to die would be for my generation's personal connection with literature to die."¹ Hyperbolic, perhaps, but not inaccurate given the enormously prolific career that John Updike has had since the publication of his first story in 1954: twenty-one novels, fifteen short story collections, seven volumes of poetry, seven essay collections, five children's books, one play, and one memoir. It is no wonder that Baker, who acknowledges having read Updike "very intermittently," still admits to "thinking about him constantly."²

Updike's subject, broadly construed, has always been America, where, as the poem "Americana" (2001) states, "beauty is left / to make it on its own, with no directives / from kings or cultural commissars on high" (*Americana*, 5). Indeed, spanning as it does the entire second half of the twentieth century, Updike's writing provides a historical roadmap that traces the changes undergone by the nation since the end of the Second World War: beginning with the regionalism of the autobiographical short stories and the creation of Olinger as a Pennsylvania equivalent of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha and Anderson's Winesburg, extending to the Cold War whose inception and end frames the epic Rabbit Angstrom tetralogy (1960, 1971, 1981, 1990), and projected forward to a post-holocaust 2020 that is the temporal setting of *Toward the End of Time* (1997). Less obviously, but nevertheless consistently, Updike's subject has also been writing, evidenced first by his reviews of other writers – past (for example, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Wharton, Mencken) as well as present (Bellow, Vonnegut, Le Guin, Tyler, Roth), foreign (Queneau, Calvino, Sōseki, Borges, Soyinka) as well as American – and apparent more and more in the

intertextual allusiveness and metafictional devices that permeate his own novels themselves (*A Month of Sundays* [1975], *S.* [1988], *Memories of the Ford Administration* [1992], *Gertrude and Claudius* [2000]). In so doing, he has joined an awareness of contemporary theoretical developments to the modernist influence of those writers – Joyce, Proust, and Nabokov – he most often claims as his literary antecedents.

These concerns are not unique to Updike, of course. Among those contemporaries who emerged during the 1950s and whose works also may be seen as chronicling the past half-century of American history, the names of Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, and Philip Roth come immediately to mind. But unlike Mailer, who approaches his subject by way of the psychopathic outsider in works like *The Executioner's Song* (1979) and *Oswald's Tale* (1995), or Vidal, who adopts the point of view of the privileged Washington, DC, insider in his “American Chronicle” series, or Roth, who employs the lens of Jewish ethnicity in *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Plot Against America* (2004), Updike has devoted himself to the transcription of “middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and mystery” (*Assorted*, 186). Significantly, Updike's relationship to that “middle” has altered over time. In 1968, the year that *Couples* was published, his appearance on the 26 April cover of *Time* that accompanied a feature on “The Adulterous Society” presumed that Updike's perspective typified the American perspective. In 1989, by contrast, the writer who still located his authorial “stock in trade” in “an intuition into the mass consciousness and an identification with our national fortunes” was forced to admit that the liberal political position by which he defined himself “had unfairly gone unfashionable on me” during that same late 1960s period (*Self-Consciousness*, 124, 125). Far from simply – and uncritically – articulating the concerns of an American mainstream, then, Updike's canon tells the more interesting story of a writer, often distinctly out of sync with his culture, grappling with a half-century's worth of change.

Born in 1932, Updike is too young for that “unfashionable” political position to have been the result of what Thomas Hill Schaub has termed the “story of chastened liberalism” that the failure of Soviet Russia to live up to the utopian Marxist dream produced.³ On the contrary, to the extent that Updike identifies himself as having a political affiliation, it is the result of early exigency: of growing up the son of a Roosevelt Democrat forced to supplement a high school teacher's salary with construction work during the summers and the grandson of a Jacksonian Democrat forced to labor on town highway crews after losing his money in the 1929 Wall Street Crash, of coming from a family, in short, that “had simply *been* poor, and voted Democrat out of crude self-interest” (119). The priorities inscribed in his writing,

nonetheless, are fully in keeping with key elements of that 1950s discourse in which a liberalism defined, according to Lionel Trilling, by “an impassioned longing to believe” and betrayed by Soviet practices eventuated:⁴ the replacement of ideology with psychology, adherence to a realism of ordinary facts as distinct from the perceived naïveté of 1930s–1940s naturalism and social realism, affirmation of what William Phillips dubbed “new ‘Americanism.’”⁵ Yet if such confluence between personal and cultural values enabled Updike to claim, in retrospect, “I was happy in the Fifties” – especially after having survived “the khaki-brown Forties and the grit-gray Thirties” (*More*, 25) – the fiction that emerged from that period did not provide the triumphant “yea-saying to the goodness and joy of life” that a 1955 *Life* editorial titled “Wanted: An American Novel” demanded.⁶ Reflecting instead his sense of the period as an intermediate “post-war decade,” the 1950s in Updike’s early work typically figures, in recollection or direct portrayal, as a “middle bulge” (*Coup*, 132), a “climate of time between, of standoff and day-by-day” (*Couples*, 106). As such, the tensions of Cold War standoffs are translated into the tensions of domestic standoffs – what Updike has called the “politico-marital” (*Self-Consciousness*, 134) – and competitive gamesmanship, and an inability to locate viable systems of belief yields endings in which characters remain in suspension.

Nowhere are these qualities more clearly displayed than in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the “helplessly 50’s kind of book written by a sort of helplessly 50’s guy,” as Updike recalled, that serves in many ways as a template for much of the fiction that follows.⁷ Overflowing ashtrays, dust balls beneath radiators, pork chops congealing in grease, and scatter rugs whose corners keep turning under comprise the facts at the forefront of Harry Angstrom’s daily life, while in the background Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harold Macmillan begin a series of talks in Gettysburg and Tibetans battle Chinese Communists in Lhasa. Excellence in sports becomes a gauge of excellence in love, as Harry compares his first-rate basketball career with his second-rate marriage. Athletic rivalry translates into erotic rivalry once Harry discovers that a former teammate has slept with his mistress. Perhaps most important, the “crisscrossing mess” of domesticity that “clings to [Harry’s] back like a tightening net” is just a localized version of the “red lines and blue lines and stars” that form the “net he is somewhere caught in” that, in turn, forms the map of the country by which he tries to chart his escape at the novel’s outset (*Run*, 14, 36). Receiving no answer to the question posed during that aborted attempt – in an America that “from shore to shore” seems identical, “[i]s it just these people I’m outside, or is it all America?” (33) – and confronted by “a paralyzing sense of reality” in which “his child is really dead, his day is really done” (302), he ends the book once again midflight.