

THE

# SPRINGFIELD READER

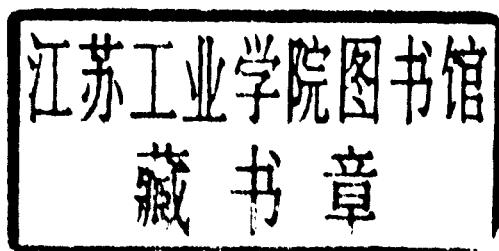
David Cavitch

# THE SPRINGFIELD READER

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David Cavitch

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## PREFACE

### FOR INSTRUCTORS

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Like many composition anthologies, *The Springfield Reader* assembles essays and stories that are meant to generate good class discussion and galvanize student writing. Its brevity and low cost are what make this reader unique. An education has become an expensive commodity, and this reader was assembled with the assumption that good things can come in a compact, affordable package. With many of the features offered by more expensive anthologies, *The Springfield Reader* contains essays and stories that provide strong examples of the power of good writing — more than enough material for a semester.

The twenty-nine selections are grouped into five thematic chapters, themes that strongly matter to students. Starting with issues of self-awareness, the chapters move from dealing with the sense of home in family and groups, to our relationships of love and friendship, the many languages we have for acquiring knowledge, and the moral issues we face when thinking about current social problems. Each chapter includes diverse perspectives on culture, race, and gender, and ends with a story addressing the theme imaginatively. While many selections are familiar favorites, six of the essays have never before appeared in a composition reader.

The editorial apparatus guides students into intelligent awareness, and it promotes their articulate responses. A biographical headnote introduces each selection. To help improve critical reading, every selection is followed by “Considerations” about meaning and methods. Each of these questions can stimulate extended discussion in class. One or two challenging writing topics lead students into developing their ideas in thoughtful essays.

A succinct and encouraging Introduction for Students stresses the importance of critical reading to improve writing. It makes allowance for but does not spell out detailed instructions that teachers may prefer to originate in class. An Instructor’s Manual coauthored by Debra Spark offers suggestions for dealing with each selection in class. A rhetorical index to the selections appears in the back of the book.

### Acknowledgments

The idea for this reader originated with Chuck Christensen and Joan Feinberg. I am grateful for the opportunity to give it concrete form, and for their wise counsel as the work proceeded. It was also a pleasure to work with others at Bedford Books. The editor, Alanya Harter,

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# INTRODUCTION

## FOR STUDENTS

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This collection of essays and stories can help you write better. Each selection offers a good read, and better writing comes from better reading. Works that stimulate ideas and feelings rouse our desire to respond articulately about important matters. A good writer is probably someone who has found reasons to answer — and perhaps surpass — some good reading.

We acquire the skill to write well by practice, of course. Revising and polishing and correcting our writing are the fundamental processes of composition. But practice is more successful if we also read with close attention and active responses. Reading increases our awareness of the variety of styles and methods that serve different purposes in writing. We learn new patterns of expression and new models for organizing our thoughts. By analyzing examples, we learn how to develop ideas and how to present complicated thoughts clearly.

To help raise your level of critical awareness, each selection in this book is followed by “Considerations” about meaning and methods. Strategies for critical reading include underlining and commenting on the page of the text, or keeping a journal to note down your responses.

Whatever your techniques, the key is to concentrate all your attention. Take in the essay or story with all its details, the entire work and not just part of it. Don’t skim or skip a thing. Remember that you are reading not merely to grasp a general point but to absorb the full range and variety of writing effects. The more you take in, the more tools you will possess for writing of your own.

Following each selection a writing topic suggests how you can further develop your responses to the reading. The topic might introduce a different approach or related matters to consider. The best way to think fruitfully about an idea is to write about it. Through all the phases of composition, such as pre-writing, drafting, revising, and proofreading, a writer discovers additional meanings. Each improvement adds substance, emphasis, and clarity. By becoming a critical reader of your own work you see that better writing comes from better readers.

# CONTENTS

---

<i>Preface for Instructors</i>	v
<i>Introduction for Students</i>	vii

## 1

### IDENTITY

---

#### Self-Image and Reflections 1

JOHN UPDIKE, *The Disposable Rocket* 1

“Men put their bodies at risk to experience the release from gravity.”

NORA EPHRON, *Shaping Up Absurd* 5

“Even though I was outwardly a girl and had many of the trappings generally associated with the field of girlhood . . . I spent the early years of my adolescence absolutely certain that I might at any point gum it up.”

BRENT STAPLES, *Black Men and Public Space* 12

“It was in the echo of that terrified woman’s footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I’d come into — the ability to alter public space in ugly ways.”

E. B. WHITE, *Once More to the Lake* 16

“I seemed to be living a dual existence. I would be in the middle of some simple act . . . and suddenly it would be not I but my father who was saying the words or making the gesture.”

JOSEPH STEFFAN, *Honor Bound* 22

“In giving me the opportunity to deny my sexuality, the commandant was challenging that identity. He could just as well have asked, ‘Are you ashamed enough to deny your true identity in order to graduate?’”

JAMAICA KINCAID, *Girl* (fiction) 26

“. . . this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming. . . .”

## 2

## HOME

## Family and Groups 29

THOMAS SIMMONS, *Motorcycle Talk* 29

"The motorcycle was a compendium of gears and springs and sprockets and cylinder heads and piston rings, which between my father and me acquired the force of more affectionate words that we could never seem to use in each other's presence."

BARBARA DAFOE WHITEHEAD, *Women and the Future of Fatherhood* 33

"Without marriage, men also lose access to the social and emotional intelligence of women in building relationships. . . . In general, men need marriage in order to be good fathers."

NANCY FRIDAY, *Competition* 38

"I can't remember ever hearing my grandfather say to my mother, 'Well done, Jane.' I can't remember my mother ever saying to my sister, 'Well done, Susie.' And I never gave my mother the chance to say it to me."

SHELBY STEELE, *On Being Black and Middle Class* 43

"Being both black and middle class becomes a double bind when class and race are defined in sharply antagonistic terms, so that one must be repressed to appease the other."

ALICE WALKER, *Everyday Use* (fiction) 50

"'Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!' she said. 'She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use.'"

## 3

## RELATIONSHIPS

## Friends and Lovers 58

BARBARA EHRENREICH, *In Praise of "Best Friends"* 58

"The beauty of best friendship, as opposed to, say, marriage, is that it's a totally grass-roots, creative effort that requires no help at all from the powers-that-be."



PATRICIA WILLIAMS, *My Best White Friend* 62

"I've called my best white friend my best white friend ever since she started calling me her best black friend."

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS, *The Men We Carry  
in Our Minds* 68

"When the women I met at college thought about the joys and privileges of men, they did not carry in their minds the sort of men I had known in my childhood."

MARC FEIGEN FASTEAU, *Friendships Among Men* 73

"There is a long-standing myth in our society that the great friendships are between men."

DIANE ACKERMAN, *The Chemistry of Love* 82

"An amphetaminelike chemical, PEA whips the brain into a frenzy of excitement, which is why lovers feel euphoric, rejuvenated, optimistic, and energized, happy to sit up talking all night or making love for hours on end."

RAYMOND CARVER, *What We Talk About When We  
Talk About Love* (fiction) 86

"If something happened to one of us tomorrow, I think the other one, the other person, would grieve for a while, you know, but then the surviving party would go out and love again, have someone else soon enough."

4

LESSONS

*Language and Learning* 97

JOAN DIDION, *On Keeping a Notebook* 97

"Our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable 'I.'"

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ, *Public and Private Language* 104

"Because I wrongly imagined that English was intrinsically a public language and Spanish an intrinsically private one, I easily noted the difference between classroom language and the language of home."

MAYA ANGELOU, *Graduation* 109

"The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race."

AMY TAN, *Mother Tongue* 119

"Some of my friends tell me they understand 50 percent of what my mother says. . . . But to me, my mother's English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It's my mother tongue."

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *Professions for Women* 125

"I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. . . . You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her — you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House."

TONI CADE BAMBARA, *The Lesson* (fiction) 130

"So this one day Miss Moore rounds us all up at the mailbox and it's puredee hot and she's knockin herself out about arithmetic. And school suppose to let up in the summer I heard, but she don't never let up."

## 5

## DILEMMAS

---

 Problems, Theories, and Opinions 137
SALLIE TISDALE, *We Do Abortions Here* 137

"Abortion requires of me an entirely new set of assumptions. It requires a willingness to live with conflict, fearlessness, and grief."

HENDRIK HERTZBERG AND HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.,  
*The African-American Century* 145

"For African-Americans, the country of oppression and the country of liberation are the same country."

GEORGE ORWELL, *Shooting an Elephant* 148

"I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that pre-occupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him."

MICHAEL DORRIS, *For the Indians No Thanksgiving* 155

"Maybe those Pilgrims and Wampanoags actually got together for a November picnic, maybe not. It matters only as a facile, ironical footnote."

STEPHEN L. CARTER, *Schools of Disbelief* 157

"Contemporary American politics faces few greater dilemmas than deciding how to deal with the resurgence of religious belief."

TILLIE OLSEN, I Stand Here Ironing (fiction)	162
--	-----

“I was working, there were four smaller ones now, there was not time for her. She had to help be a mother, and housekeeper, and shopper. She had to set her seal.”

<i>Rhetorical Index</i>	173
<i>Index of Authors and Titles</i>	177

# IDENTITY

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## Self-Image and Reflections

JOHN UPDIKE

### The Disposable Rocket

JOHN UPDIKE (b. 1932), one of America's most recognized and prolific writers, started his career on the staff of *The New Yorker* after graduating from Harvard in 1954. His contribution to this and other major magazines — of stories, poems, essays, and reviews — continues to this day. His major novels include four about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom: *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990). His best-known novel may well be *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984), also adapted into a successful movie. As an essayist Updike often writes about painting and other visual art, his secondary interest. The following essay first appeared in a special issue of *The Michigan Quarterly Review* devoted to the topic of the male body.

Inhabiting a male body is like having a bank account; as long as it's healthy, you don't think much about it. Compared to the female body, it is a low-maintenance proposition: a shower now and then, trim the fingernails every ten days, a haircut once a month. Oh yes, shaving — scraping or buzzing away at your face every morning. Byron, in *Don Juan*, thought the repeated nuisance of shaving balanced out the periodic agony, for females, of childbirth. Women are, his lines tell us,

Condemn'd to child-bed, as men for their sins  
Have shaving too entail'd upon their chins, —

A daily plague, which in the aggregate  
May average on the whole with parturition.

From the standpoint of reproduction, the male body is a delivery system, as the female is a mazy device for retention. Once the delivery is made, men feel a faint but distinct falling-off of interest. Yet against the enduring female heroics of birth and nurture should be set the male's superhuman frenzy to deliver his goods: He vaults walls, skips sleep, risks wallet, health, and his political future all to ram home his seed into the gut of the chosen woman. The sense of the chase lives in him as the key to life. His body is, like a delivery rocket that falls away in space, a disposable means. Men put their bodies at risk to experience the release from gravity.

When my tenancy of a male body was fairly new — of six or so years' duration — I used to jump and fall just for the joy of it. Falling — backwards, or down stairs — became a specialty of mine, an attention-getting stunt I was still practicing into my thirties, at suburban parties. Falling is, after all, a kind of flying, though of briefer duration than would be ideal. My impulse to hurl myself from high windows and the edges of cliffs belongs to my body, not my mind, which resists the siren call of the chasm with all its might; the interior struggle knocks the wind from my lungs and tightens my scrotum and gives any trip to Europe, with its Alps, castle parapets, and gargoyle cathedral lookouts, a flavor of nightmare. Falling, strangely, no longer figures in my dreams, as it often did when I was a boy and my subconscious was more honest with me. An airplane, that necessary evil, turns the earth into a map so quickly the brain turns aloof and calm; still, I marvel that there is no end of young men willing to become jet pilots.

Any accounting of male-female differences must include the male's superior recklessness, a drive not, I think, toward death, as the darker feminist cosmogonies would have it, but to test the limits, to see what the traffic will bear — a kind of mechanic's curiosity. The number of men who do lasting damage to their young bodies is striking; war and car accidents aside, secondary-school sports, with the approval of parents and the encouragement of brutish coaches, take a fearful toll of skulls and knees. We were made for combat, back in the postsimian, East-African days, and the bumping, the whacking, the breathlessness, the pain-smothering adrenaline rush form a cumbersome and unfashionable bliss, but bliss nevertheless. Take your body to the edge, and see if it flies.

The male sense of space must differ from that of the female, who has such interesting, active, and significant inner space. The space that interests men is outer. The fly ball high against the sky, the long pass spiraling overhead, the jet fighter like a scarcely visible pinpoint nozzle laying down its vapor trail at forty thousand feet, the gazelle haunch flickering just beyond arrow-reach, the uncountable stars sprinkled on their great black wheel, the horizon, the mountaintop, the quasar — these bring portents with them and awaken a sense of relation with the invisible, with the empty. The ideal male body is taut with lines of potential force, a diagram extending outward; the ideal female body curves around centers of repose. Of course, no one is ideal, and the sexes are somewhat androgynous sub-

divisions of a species: Diana the huntress is a more trendy body type nowadays than languid, overweight Venus, and polymorphous Dionysus poses for more underwear ads than Mars. Relatively, though, men's bodies, however elegant, are designed for covering territory, for moving on.

An erection, too, defies gravity, flirts with it precariously. It extends the diagram of outward direction into downright detachability — objective in the case of the sperm, subjective in the case of the testicles and penis. Men's bodies, at this juncture, feel only partly theirs; a demon of sorts has been attached to their lower torsos, whose performance is erratic and whose errands seem, at times, ridiculous. It is like having a (much) smaller brother toward whom you feel both fond and impatient; if he is you, it is you in curiously simplified and ignoble form. This sense, of the male body being two of them, is acknowledged in verbal love play and erotic writing, where the penis is playfully given a pet name, an individuation not even the rarest rapture grants a vagina. Here, where maleness gathers to a quintessence of itself, there can be no insincerity, there can be no hiding; for sheer nakedness, there is nothing like a hopeful phallus; its aggressive shape is indivisible from its tender-skinned vulnerability. The act of intercourse, from the point of view of a consenting female, has an element of mothering, of enwrapment, of merciful concealment, even. The male body, for this interval, is tucked out of harm's way.

To inhabit a male body, then, is to feel somewhat detached from it. It is not an enemy, but not entirely a friend. Our being seems to lie not in cells and muscles but in the traces that our thoughts and actions inscribe on the air. The male body skims the surface of nature's deeps wherein the blood and pain and mysterious cravings of women perpetuate the species. Participating less in nature's processes than the female body, the male body gives the impression — false — of being exempt from time. Its powers of strength and reach descend in early adolescence, along with acne and sweaty feet, and depart, in imperceptible increments, after thirty or so. It surprises me to discover, when I remove my shoes and socks, the same paper-white, hairless ankles that struck me as pathetic when I observed them on my father. I felt betrayed when, in some tumble of touch football twenty years ago, I heard my tibia snap; and when, between two reading engagements in Cleveland, my appendix tried to burst; and when, the other day, not for the first time, there arose to my nostrils out of my own body the musty attic smell my grandfather's body had.

A man's body does not betray its tenant as rapidly as a woman's. Never as fine and lovely, it has less distance to fall; what rugged beauty it has is wrinkleproof. It keeps its capability of procreation indecently long. Unless intense athletic demands are made upon it, the thing serves well enough to sixty, which is my age now. From here on, it's chancy. There are no breasts or ovaries to admit cancer to the male body, but the prostate, that awkwardly located little source of seminal fluid, shows the strain of sexual function with fits of hysterical cell replication, and all that male-bonding beer and potato chips add up in the coronary arteries. A

writer, whose physical equipment can be minimal as long as it gets him to the desk, the lectern, and New York City once in a while, cannot but be grateful to his body, especially to his eyes, those tender and intricate sites where the brain extrudes from the skull, and to his hands, which hold the pen or tap the keyboard. His body has been, not himself exactly, but a close pal, potbellied and balding like most of his other pals now. A man and his body are like a boy and the buddy who has a driver's license and the use of his father's car for the evening; one only goes along, gratefully, for the ride.

### CONSIDERATIONS

1. Does Updike oversimplify male and female self-images? Or does he accurately present basic facts? In your answer, consider the implications of the essay's emphasis on male and female biology.
2. How would the connotations of Updike's metaphor change if he referred to the male body as *the reusable rocket*? How would that metaphor change the central idea of the essay?
3. In the final two paragraphs, what is the author's attitude toward his aging body? How does it differ from his youthful attitude?

### WRITING SUGGESTIONS

4. Updike refers to "ideal" forms of men and women, but he notes that "trendy" norms may differ (paragraph 4). What is currently considered attractive in women and men? Do popular images glamorize health and sportiness, delicateness and fragility, subtlety and mystery, or something else? What are the possibly negative effects of these images?
5. Choose a particular object, plant, or animal as a suitable metaphor for your sense of self. In explaining your choice of metaphor, include precise details that exemplify some of your complexities.

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NORA EPHRON

## Shaping Up Absurd

NORA EPHRON (b. 1941) grew up in the adult world of Hollywood screenwriters, entertainers, and celebrities. After graduating from Wellesley College she began a career as a journalist in New York by writing for *Newsweek* and contributing articles to entertainment magazines, eventually joining the staff of magazines such as *New York* and *Esquire*. Her essays have been collected in *Wallflower at the Orgy* (1970), *Crazy Salad* (1975), and *Nora Ephron Collected* (1991). She has also written a comic novel, *Heartburn* (1983), and several screenplays. Recently Ephron co-wrote and directed the film *Sleepless in Seattle* (1992). “Shaping Up Absurd”<sup>1</sup> considers a troubling self-image in her early life.

I have to begin with a few words about androgyny. In grammar school, in the fifth and sixth grades, we were all tyrannized by a rigid set of rules that supposedly determined whether we were boys or girls. The episode in *Huckleberry Finn* where Huck is disguised as a girl and gives himself away by the way he threads a needle and catches a ball — that kind of thing. We learned that the way you sat, crossed your legs, held a cigarette, and looked at your nails — the way you did these things instinctively was absolute proof of your sex. Now obviously most children did not take this literally, but I did. I thought that just one slip, just one incorrect cross of my legs or flick of an imaginary cigarette ash would turn me from whatever I was into the other thing; that would be all it took, really. Even though I was outwardly a girl and had many of the trappings generally associated with the field of girlhood — a girl’s name, for example, and dresses, my own telephone, an autograph book — I spent the early years of my adolescence absolutely certain that I might at any point gum it up. I did not feel at all like a girl. I was boyish. I was athletic, ambitious, outspoken, competitive, noisy, rambunctious. I had scabs on my knees and my socks slid into my loafers and I could throw a football. I wanted desperately not to be that way, not to be a mixture of both things but instead just one, a girl, a definite indisputable girl. As soft and as pink as a nursery. And nothing would do that for me, I felt, but breasts.

I was about six months younger than everyone else in my class, and so for about six months after it began, for six months after my friends had

<sup>1</sup>Editor’s title. [All notes are the editor’s unless identified otherwise.]



begun to develop — that was the word we used, develop — I was not particularly worried. I would sit in the bathtub and look down at my breasts and know that any day now, any second now, they would start growing like everyone else's. They didn't. "I want to buy a bra," I said to my mother one night. "What for?" she said. My mother was really hateful about bras, and by the time my third sister had gotten to the point where she was ready to want one, my mother had worked the whole business into a comedy routine. "Why not use a Band-Aid instead?" she would say. It was a source of great pride to my mother that she had never even had to wear a brassiere until she had her fourth child, and then only because her gynecologist made her. It was incomprehensible to me that anyone could ever be proud of something like that. It was the 1950s, for God's sake. Jane Russell. Cashmere sweaters. Couldn't my mother see that? "*I am too old to wear an undershirt.*" Screaming. Weeping. Shouting. "Then don't wear an undershirt," said my mother. "But I want to buy a bra." "What for?"

I suppose that for most girls, breasts, brassieres, that entire thing, has more trauma, more to do with the coming of adolescence, of becoming a woman, than anything else. Certainly more than getting your period, although that too was traumatic, symbolic. But you could *see* breasts; they were there; they were visible. Whereas a girl could claim to have her period for months before she actually got it and nobody would ever know the difference. Which is exactly what I did. All you had to do was make a great fuss over having enough nickels for the Kotex machine and walk around clutching your stomach and moaning for three to five days a month about The Curse and you could convince anybody. There is a school of thought somewhere in the women's lib/women's mag/gynecology establishment that claims that menstrual cramps are purely psychological, and I lean toward it. Not that I didn't have them finally. Agonizing cramps, heating-pad cramps, go-down-to-the-school-nurse-and-lie-on-the-cot cramps. But unlike any pain I had ever suffered, I adored the pain of cramps, welcomed it, wallowed in it, bragged about it. "I can't go. I have cramps." "I can't do that. I have cramps." And most of all, gigglingly, blushing: "I can't swim. I have cramps." Nobody ever used the hard-core word. Menstruation. God, what an awful word. Never that. "I have cramps."

The morning I first got my period, I went into my mother's bedroom to tell her. And my mother, my utterly-hateful-about-bras mother, burst into tears. It was really a lovely moment, and I remember it so clearly not just because it was one of the two times I ever saw my mother cry on my account (the other was when I was caught being a six-year-old kleptomaniac), but also because the incident did not mean to me what it meant to her. Her little girl, her firstborn, had finally become a woman. That was what she was crying about. My reaction to the event, however, was that I might well be a woman in some scientific, textbook sense (and