

# UPDIKE, RABBIT, AND THE MYTH OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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## 1: John Updike - American Literature - Oxford Bibliographies

*Updike, film, and American popular culture* James A. Schiff; *John Updike, Rabbit Angstrom, and the myth of American exceptionalism* Donald J. Greiner; *Conclusion: U(pdike) & P(ostmodernism)* John N. Duvall; *Select bibliography*.

Resources De Bellis, Jack. The John Updike Encyclopedia. Greenwood Publishing Group, Conversations with John Updike. University Press of Mississippi, Lehigh University Press, Ohio University Press, A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources. Foreword by John Updike. De Bellis, Jack and Michael Broomfield. Oak Knoll Press, Harvard College Library, First Printings of American Authors: Contributions Toward Descriptive Checklists. Kent State UP, Mastered Irony in Motion. University of Missouri Press, Thorns Spell a Word. Midwestern State UP, Mercer University Press, The Other John Updike: Hamilton, Alice and Kenneth. The Elements of John Updike. Sex, Religion, and Art. Peter Lang Publishing, A Study of the Short Fiction. Theme in the Novels of John Updike. Myth and Gospel in the Fiction of John Updike. John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain. Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction: Faith, Fundamentalism, and Fanaticism in the Age of Terror. Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma: Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels. Rewriting The Scarlet Letter. Married Men and Magic Tricks: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike. Collections of Essays Broer, Lawrence R. Critical Essays on John Updike. European Perspectives on John Updike. The Cambridge Companion to John Updike. A Collection of Critical Essays. New Essays on Rabbit, Run. John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace. And if anyone knows of new or uncatalogued items by, about, or relating to John Updike, Jack De Bellis would appreciate hearing from you. You can email him at bjd1 Lehigh.

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10 *Updike, Rabbit, and the myth of American exceptionalism* DONALD J. GREINER Conclusion: *U(pdike) &c P(ostmodernism)* JOHN N. DUVALL *Select bibliography*

Harvard University , A. Novelist, critic, short story writer, poet, essayist, and dramatist. New Yorker magazine, reporter, " Department of State, *Six Poems* limited edition , Oliphant Press, *Cunts* poem; limited edition , Frank Hallman, *Too Far to Go: Your Lover Just Called: Confessions of a Wild Bore*, Tamazunchale Press, *The Complete Henry Bech: Emersonianism*, Bits Press, Editor David Levine, *Pens and Needles: Editor A Century of Arts and Letters: Contributor of short stories, book reviews, and poems to New Yorker and other periodicals.* John Updike "has earned an "imposing stance on the literary landscape," wrote Los Angeles Times contributor Katherine Stephen, "earning virtually every American literary award, repeated best-sellerdom and the near-royal status of the American author-celebrity. Greiner in a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essay. As Joseph Kanon explained in *Saturday Review*: An old milk carton is worth a rose. The idea of a hero is aristocratic. Now either nobody is a hero or everyone is. I vote for everyone. My subject is the American Protestant small town middle class. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. As Curt Supplee noted in his *Washington Post* profile of the author: Burchard in John Updike: His work is worth reading if for no reason other than to enjoy the piquant phrase, the lyric vision, the fluent rhetoric. And yet, after pages and pages of his minutely detailed impressions, the accumulated effect is one of waste. Aldridge wrote in *Time* to Murder and Create: *The Contemporary Novel in Crisis* that the novelist "has none of the attributes we conventionally associate with major literary talent. He does not have an interesting mind. He does not possess remarkable narrative gifts or a distinguished style. He does not create dynamic or colorful or deeply meaningful characters. In fact, one of the problems he poses for the critic is that he engages the imagination so little that one has real difficulty remembering his work long enough to think clearly about it. Most of the reviews appeared to be impulsive reactions to the subject matter rather than measured assessments. Published at ten-year intervals, the novels follow the life of "Rabbit" as he tries to leave his marriage, discovers his wife has been unfaithful, finds himself laid off from his blue-collar job, and as he confronts middle-age, ill health, and death. Greiner noted that in the *Rabbit* tetralogy, Updike "takes a common American experience—the graduation from high school of a star athlete who has no life to lead once the applause diminishes and the headlines fade—and turns it into a subtle expose of the frailty of the American dream. It is now clear that he has written a saga of middle-class America in the second half of the twentieth century. Personal limitation mirrors national malaise. Yet a glimpse of final defeat is the price to be paid for membership in that exclusive club. Alf ruminates upon his past and discovers, as Charles Johnson in *New York Times Book Review* noted, he "can only remember two things—his knot of extramarital affairs and his never-completed opus on the life of President James Buchanan. While one of the plots pulls us through the sex, the dissolving marital unions, the saturnalian nights of the Ford years, another works its sinuous way into the past and finds an American male unrecognizable to us moderns. The plot, as Caroline Moore summarized it in *Spectator*, is uninhibited: They are pursued, recaptured, re-elope, and undergo severe yet picaresque sufferings in the wilds of western Brazil, including starvation and slavery. Mary Pickford , short of sleep and over-costumed for a hot day, faints. When film is mentioned again in the text, Barnes argues, the connection is made by the reader: Steinberg in a *Publishers Weekly* interview with Updike paraphrased: I wanted to give an American version of that sense. The setting is the year after a war between the United States and China that has toppled the government and turned the Great Plains into "a radioactive dustbowl and left the management of local affairs to thugs who demand protection money," summarized a *Publishers Weekly* critic. In his journal, Ben reveals his "basic Updikean traits" similar to other Updike characters, including his "importunate sexual urges combined with vague spiritual yearnings, an inclination toward melancholy introspection and a love of golf," noted Michiko Kakutani in *New York Times Book Review*. But, argued

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Kakutani, Turnbull is less like Rabbit Angstrom and more a "narcissistic and dirty minded old man. Critics of *Toward the End of Time* were typically mixed in their assessment. Updike, as usual, does not shy away from the more graphic aspects of sex, and, as usual, his work has been met with mixed reviews. Reviewing *The Afterlife and Other Stories*, Peter Kemp in the *London Sunday Times* found nearly the entire volume of stories "masterpieces of steady delineation, in which psychological and emotional nuance are traced with as much lucid finesse as the wealth of visual detail. Updike is also a prolific author of prose nonfiction, including "book reviews, essays, addresses, comic feuilletons and random, autobiographical jottings," according to Michiko Kakutani in a review of *More Matter*: His best pieces manage both to edify and to beguile. With heart-clutching clarity, he transmutes the stubborn banality of middle-class existence into tableaux that shiver with the hint of spiritual meaning. Baker, Nicholas, U and I: Bloom, Harold, editor, *John Updike: Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography: De Bellis*, Jack, John Updike: Quentin, John Updike and the Cold War: Neary, John, *Something and Nothingness*: Newman, Judie, John Updike, St. Lang New York, NY, Publishing Delhi, India, A Collection of Critical Essays, G. Hall Boston, MA, Yerkes, James, editor, *John Updike and Religion*: Wackerman, review of *Golf Dreams*, p. Hunt, "Of Many Things," p. Miracky, review of *Toward the End of Time*, p. *Atlantic*, December, , review of *Seek My Face*, p. Book, November- December, , D. Max, "Noticers in Chief: John Updike and Rabbit," p. *Books Abroad*, winter, *Books and Culture*, January-February, , p. *Christian Century*, July 17, , p. *Economist*, February, 12, , review of *Villages*, p. *Entertainment Weekly*, October 17, , L. Klepp, review of *Toward the End of Time*, p. *Kenyon Review*, spring, *Kirkus Reviews*, September 1, , p. *Library Journal*, September 15, , Edward B. John, review of *Toward the End of Time*, p. *LJ Talks to John Updike*, p. Henderson, review of *Gertrude and Claudius*, p. Mills, review of *Still Looking*, p. *Life*, November 4, *London Review of Books*, March 11, , p. *Modern Fiction Studies*, spring, devoted to Updike; autumn, ; spring, devoted to Updike. New York, January 31, , p. *Partisan Review*, winter, , Elizabeth Dalton, review of *Couples*. *Publishers Weekly*, September 5, , p. *Saturday Review*, March 17, ; September 30, *Southern Review*, spring, , James Schiff, interview with Updike, p. *Spectator*, April 9, , Caroline Moore, review of *Brazil*, p. *Times London*, England, January 14, ; February 5, *Washington Post*, September 27, ; April 26,

# UPDIKE, RABBIT, AND THE MYTH OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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*John Updike is one of the most prolific and important American authors of the contemporary period, with an acclaimed body of work that spans half a century and is inspired by everything from American exceptionalism to American popular culture.*

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content: Essentially, I have included only items of scholarly and critical interest, so most routine reviews from the popular press are not listed. Foreign criticism, short book notices, and items in encyclopedias, handbooks, anthologies, histories of literature and newspapers are highly selective. Doctoral dissertations have not been included. For those who believe that this production is commensurate with the highest quality of writing now being produced by an American writer, the wealth of commentary on Updike is not surprising. Imperfect [End Page ] though it may of necessity be, this bibliography should help to make the fine quality of Updike scholarship all the richer. I wish to acknowledge with pleasure the contributions of Leena Chakrabarti, Christina McGuire, Kristi Nimmo, Diana Wilson, and especially my indefatigable research assistant, Edyta Oczkowicz, graduate students in my Updike seminar in fall, Suzanne Ferguson and Barbara Groselclose. Ohio State UP, U of Illinois P, Reprinted in *Modern Critical Views: The Transcendental Constant in American Literature*. New York UP, *A Panoply of Metaphor*. Harold Bloom, "Introduction"; John W. Mellard, "The Novel as Lyric Elegy: Greiner, "The Coup"; Chronology; and Bibliography. *New Directions in Feminist Criticism*. *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Thorns Spell a Word*. *Midwestern State UP, The Letters of John Cheever. The Mismatched Marriages of Manichean Minds*. You are not currently authenticated. View freely available titles:

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*Updike, middles, and the spell of subjective geography / D. Quentin Miller -- Nakedness or realism in Updike's early short stories / Kristiaan Versluys*

Sex, Religion, and Art. In a compendious study of American fiction since , Frederick R. Karl offers a useful overview of Updike: In such a world, problems are not always solved; they are more often endured, if not fully understood. However, even the curtains of actuality occasionally part, unexpectedly, to offer gifts, as Updike avers in his preface to *Olinger Stories: A Selection* "such gifts as keep alive a vision of wholeness in an often lost and fragmented world. This opposition is embodied in the two principal characters: Such progress has been made at a price: In a world totally run by the head, the heart dies. The incident symbolizes the inherent desire and need for self-assertion and individualism. The annual fair is symbolic of an antientropic spirit in its celebration of the fruits of individual self-expression" patchwork quilts and peach-pit sculptures. It is Hook, one of the last links to that lost America, who struggles at the end for some word to leave with Conner as a kind of testament, but he cannot find it. Both novels"though very different from each other"concern the reckoning of a son with a parent, in the case of *The Centaur* with his father and in *Of the Farm* with his mother, before he can proceed with his life. Although the novel won the National Book Award, its reception was quite mixed. Peter Caldwell, the narrator, reminisces to his black mistress in a Manhattan loft about a three-day period in the winter of , fourteen years earlier. On the realistic level, Peter tells the story of his self-conscious adolescence growing up an only child, living on a farm with his parents and Pop Kramer, his grandfather. His father is the high school biology teacher and swim coach, whose acts of compassion and charity embarrass the boy. On the mythic level, the father is depicted as Chiron the centaur, part man and part stallion, who serves as mentor to the youthful Greek heroes. As such, he suffers for his charges. Just as Chiron sacrifices his immortality"he accepts death"so that Prometheus may be free to live, so too does George give his life for his son. Although George is obsessed with death, it is doubtful that his sacrifice takes the form of death. Rather, his sacrifice is his willingness to go on fulfilling his obligations to his family. In reflecting upon this sacrifice by his father, Peter, feeling a failure in his art, asks: Love, guilt, and sacrifice are somehow inherent in the very structure of life. It is this that his mythicized father reveals to him in the very act of his narrating the story. For others, the novel is a mock epic showing in Peter the artist, the son of a scientist father and the grandson of a preacher, a loss of the metaphoric realm that makes great art possible and that leaves Peter diminished by his confinement to the earth alone. *Of the Farm* A short novel, *Of the Farm* is another tale of the intricacy of love, guilt, sacrifice, and betrayal. In *The Centaur*, Peter Caldwell, stalled and failing in his artistic vocation, goes home through a creative act of the memory and imagination to recover his lost vision, a basis to continue his work. Peter can fulfill his Promethean charge because his father was Chiron. Joey seeks forgiveness of the guilt he bears for the acts of betrayal that have constituted his life. He betrays his poetic aspirations by becoming an advertising executive and betrays his marriage to Joan and his three children through adultery and divorce. Joey cannot please both women or heal the wounds of his past betrayals. If the novel is an exploration of human freedom, as the epigraph from Jean-Paul Sartre would suggest, the reader sees that freedom escapes all the characters, bound as they are by conflicting desires, guilt, and obligation. This series of novels is among the most popular of his work. For *Rabbit, Run*, Updike uses a quote from Pascal for an epigraph: In a real sense, those things also describe the basic movements and conflicts in the *Rabbit* novels. Out of frustration, *Rabbit* bolts from his life-stifling existence, feeling that something out there wants him to find it. Janice accidentally drowns the baby; Ruth is impregnated and seeks an abortion. Pursued by the weak-faithed, do-gooder minister Eccles and failed by his old coach Tothero, *Rabbit* has no one to whom he can turn for help. *Rabbit*, though irresponsible, registers his refusal to succumb to such a world through movement, his running replacing the lost territories of innocent escape. He is back home with Janice and works as a typesetter. *Rabbit* feels that the whole country is doing what he did ten years earlier. As Janice

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moves out to live with her lover Stavros, Rabbit and his son Nelson end up as hosts to Jill, a runaway flower child, and a bail-jumping Vietnam veteran and black radical named Skeeter. This time Rabbit is more a passive listener-observer than an activist searcher. As a result, Rabbit is helpless when disaster comes—his house is set on fire, and Jill dies inside. Rabbit helps Skeeter escape. Rabbit bears witness, numbingly, to a disintegrating America, even as it puts a man on the Moon. The novel ends with Rabbit and Janice asleep together. Perhaps they can awake to a new maturity and sense of responsibility for what they do in the world. He and Janice are prospering during the decade of inflation and energy crises. They own a car dealership and are members of a country club. Rabbit plays golf and goes to Rotary Club lunches. Instead of newspapers, as in *Rabbit Redux*, he reads *Consumer Reports*, the bible of his new status. The ghosts of his past haunt him, however: With Skylab falling and America held hostage by Iranians, the present is uneasy and anxious, the future uncertain. Characteristically, Rabbit turns to sex to fill the spiritual void. He and Janice make love on top of their gold Krugerrands. Rabbit and Janice now winter in Florida, and Nelson runs the car dealership. Rabbit sustains himself on junk food and endless television viewing, images of the emptiness of American life under Ronald Reagan. He suffers a heart attack and undergoes an angioplasty procedure. He wonders about the Dalai Lama then in the news. As the Cold War dissipates, Rabbit asks: Can such a man find peace, an acceptance and understanding of a life lived in such struggle and perplexity? The fear that it will end some day, and the fear that tomorrow will be the same as yesterday. A confession of his own excesses and indulgences, or a command of sorts that he has had enough? These are only a few of the questions raised by the Rabbit novels. *Marry Me* Many critics praise Updike for being the premier American novelist of marriage. Nearly all of his fiction displays the mysterious as well as commonplace but ineluctable complexities and conflicts of marriage. Such are the ingredients in the novels *Couples*, *Marry Me: A Romance* and *The Witches of Eastwick*. Although not published until , *Marry Me* was actually written before *Couples*. In fact, one story seems to lead right into the other. Both Jerry Conant of *Marry Me* and Piet Hanema of *Couples* are educated professionals, married with children, and live in upper-middle-class suburbs of great cities. They are both suffering spiritually, longing for an affirmation from outside their selves, for some sort of blessing and certainty. *Marry Me* takes place during the second year of the Kennedy administration, when the charm of the Camelot myth still captivated the United States. The novel ends in ambiguity, with no clear resolution. In fact, there are three possible endings: A certain light has gone out in the land; death and decay haunt the imagination. In contrast to *Marry Me*, choices are made and lives reconstitute themselves in a kind of cyclical way at the end of *Couples*. These two rather weak men fail at their quest to find in the flesh what they have lost in the spirit. Both men are believers and churchgoers, and both face a crisis in their faith. The church, committed to secularity and worldliness, fails them. Their respective wives are naturalistic and feel at home on earth and offer them little surcease to their anxiety. For Jerry, however, every choice involves a loss that he cannot tolerate. In *Couples*, Piet is pitted against Freddy Thorne, the self-proclaimed priest of the new religion of sensuality. When his church is destroyed by fire, Piet is freed from his old morality and guilt and the tension inherent in his sense of fallenness. However, the satisfaction obtained with Foxy is a foreclosure of the vertical hope and is a kind of death. Both novels depict the failure of sex as a religion as well as the profound disappointments with love in its romantic or secular forms. The delicate balance of their friendship is upset by the entrance of the apparently demoniac Darryl Van Horne, who takes them all as his lovers. The three women disband and find their way into suitable marriages. Such use of witchcraft allows Updike to explore the nature of evil and its connections with nature, history, and technology. *A Book* is a collection of seven stories about a middle-aged and very successful Jewish novelist, Henry Bech, and his various experiences both abroad and in America. The collection is framed by the fiction of Updike writing about an actual person contemporary with him. The book has a foreword by the putative author as well as two appendices. Such devices afford Updike an opportunity for humorous satire of the literary life in America. Bech emerges as a strong and believable character struggling with the failure of his success as a writer in a success-plagued culture. He must struggle with the question of whether he has sold out his talent for the marketplace, defiling both. Felix Ellellou, the



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DONALD J. GREINER pdf

protagonist of *The Coup*, is a bold creation for Updike, a black Islamic Marxist whose memoirs constitute the novel. Now in exile, the former president of the fictional sub-Saharan nation of Kush recounts the story of his rise and fall and of his perpetual struggle to avoid the ambiguous gifts of American aid.

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DONALD J. GREINER pdf

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Widely praised for his facility with language, visual style, and lyric love of the surface world, Updike was capable of generating scenes and images of extraordinary beauty and freshness. Born in Reading, Pennsylvania, he was educated in public schools in the nearby suburb of Shillington. Pushed toward a career in the arts by his mother, Linda, a homemaker who herself had ambitions of becoming a writer, he earned a tuition scholarship to Harvard. After Harvard and graduate study in drawing in Oxford England, he was offered a job at the New Yorker, a magazine that he had worshiped ever since he was a boy. He and his young family spent two years in Manhattan but then left in, moving to Ipswich, Massachusetts, a small town an hour north of Boston. Except for a year in London and two in Boston, he would spend the final fifty-two years of his life in small Massachusetts towns on the North Shore, composing at least one book each year. Throughout his life he maintained close ties with the New Yorker, publishing nearly eight hundred pieces fiction, poetry, articles, reviews in its pages. His best-known work is Rabbit Angstrom, a sequence of four novels and one novella, written at ten-year intervals between and General Overviews In spite of the abundance of critical commentary on Updike, no single study provides a comprehensive view of his entire oeuvre. Begley, a biography, addresses the entire life and career, though its focus is on the early works. All of these general overviews, along with Baker and Olster, are accessible. An unconventional, clever, and humorously engaging consideration of and homage to Updike and literary influence, written by a prominent novelist. Provides an excellent introduction to the life and work. One of the best early studies first published in and later revised. Ohio University Press, Avoiding a thesis approach, Greiner examines each novel through close reading and attention to the comments of reviewers and critics. Whereas many early critical studies of Updike stressed religious and philosophical concerns, Newman was one of the first, in a book-length manuscript, to explore political, cultural, sexual, and social themes. The Cambridge Companion to John Updike. Cambridge University Press, Excellent, wide-ranging collection of essays dealing with literary style, race, religion, gender, history, film, popular culture, and postmodernism from such familiar Updike critics as Boswell, Greiner, Miller, Olster, Plath, Schiff, Vargo, and Verduin.

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*John Updike (b. d. ) was an immensely versatile and prolific writer who produced more than sixty volumes, including novels, short stories, literary and art criticism, poems, children's books, a memoir, and a play.*

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