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John Updike, a Lyrical Writer of the Middle-Class Man, Dies at 76

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

John Updike, the kaleidoscopically gifted writer whose quartet of Rabbit novels highlighted a body of fiction, verse, essays and criticism so vast, protean and lyrical as to place him in the first rank of American authors, died on Tuesday in Danvers, Mass. He was 76 and lived in Beverly Farms, Mass.

The cause was cancer, according to a statement by Knopf, his publisher. A spokesman said Mr. Updike had died at the Hospice of the North Shore in Danvers.

Of Mr. Updike's many novels and stories, perhaps none captured the imagination of the book-reading public more than his precisely observed tales about ordinary citizens in small-town and urban settings.

His best-known protagonist, Harry Rabbit Angstrom, first appears as a former high-school basketball star trapped in a loveless marriage and a sales job he hates. Through the four novels whose titles bear his nickname — "Rabbit, Run," "Rabbit Redux," "Rabbit Is Rich" and "Rabbit at Rest" — the author traces the funny, restless and questing life of this middle-American against the background of the last half-century's major events.

"My subject is the American Protestant small-town middle class," Mr. Updike told Jane Howard in a 1966 interview for Life magazine. "I like middles," he continued. "It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules."

From his earliest short stories, he found his subject in the everyday dramas of marriage, sex and divorce, setting them most often in the fictional town of Olinger, Pa., which he described as "a square mile of middle-class homes physically distinguished by a bend in the central avenue that compels some side streets to deviate from the grid." He wrote about America with boundless curiosity and wit in prose so careful and attentive that it burnished the ordinary with a painterly gleam.

Here he is in "A Sense of Shelter," an early short story:

"Snow fell against the high school all day, wet big-flake snow that did not accumulate well. Sharpening two pencils, William looked down on a parking lot that was a blackboard in reverse; car tires had cut smooth arcs of black into the white, and wherever a school bus had backed around, it had left an autocratic signature of two V's."

The detail of his writing was so rich that it inspired two schools of thought on Mr. Updike's fiction: those who responded to his descriptive prose as to a kind of poetry, a sensuous engagement with the world, and

those who argued that it was more style than content.

The latter position was defined by James Wood in the 1999 essay “John Updike’s Complacent God.”

“He is a prose writer of great beauty,” Mr. Wood wrote, “but that prose confronts one with the question of whether beauty is enough, and whether beauty always conveys all that a novelist must convey.”

Astonishingly industrious and prolific, Mr. Updike turned out three pages a day of fiction, essays, criticism or verse, proving the maxim that several pages a day was at least a book a year — or more. Mr. Updike published 60 books in his lifetime; his final one, “My Father’s Tears and Other Stories,” is to be published in June.

“I would write ads for deodorants or labels for catsup bottles, if I had to,” he told The Paris Review in 1967. “The miracle of turning inklings into thoughts and thoughts into words and words into metal and print and ink never palls for me.”

His vast output of poetry, which tended toward light verse, and his wide-ranging essays and criticism filled volume after volume. Among them are “Golf Dreams: Writings on Golf” (1996), “Just Looking: Essays on Art” (1989), “Still Looking: Essays on American Art” (2005) and “Self-Consciousness: Memoirs” (1989). One famous article was on the baseball star Ted Williams’s last game, “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu” (1977), which first appeared in The New Yorker in 1960.

As his fiction matured, Mr. Updike’s novels sometimes became more exotic and experimental in form, locale and subject matter. “The Coup” (1978) was set in an imaginary African country. “Brazil” (1994) was a venture in magic realism. “Toward the End of Time” (1997) was set in 2020, after a war between the United States and China. “Gertrude and Claudius” (2000) was about Hamlet’s mother and uncle. And “The Terrorist” (2006) was a fictional study of a convert to Islam who tries to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel.

Mr. Updike never abandoned short stories, of which he turned out several hundred, most of them first appearing in The New Yorker. It was here that he exercised his exquisitely sharp eye for the minutiae of domestic routine and the conflicts that animated it for him — between present satisfaction and future possibility, between sex and spirituality, and between the beauty of creation and the looming threat of death, which he summed up famously in the concluding sentence of “Pigeon Feathers,” the title story of his second collection (1962).

The story is about a boy, David, who is forced to shoot some pigeons in a barn and then watches, fascinated, as their feathers float to the ground. “He was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever.”

Philip Roth, one of Mr. Updike’s literary peers, said Tuesday: “John Updike is our time’s greatest man of letters, as brilliant a literary critic and essayist as he was a novelist and short story writer. He is and always will be no less a national treasure than his 19th-century precursor, Nathaniel Hawthorne.”

Growing Up

John Hoyer Updike was born on March 18, 1932, in Reading, Pa., and grew up in the nearby town of Shillington. He was the only child of Wesley Russell Updike, a junior high school math teacher of Dutch

descent, and Linda Grace Hoyer Updike, who later also published fiction in The New Yorker and elsewhere. His was a solitary childhood made more so by his family's move when he was 13 to his mother's birthplace, on an 80-acre farm near Plowville, Pa. From there both he and his father commuted 11 miles to school in town, but the isolation fired the boy's imagination as well as his desire to take flight from aloneness.

Sustained by hours of reading in the local library and by his mother's encouragement to write, he aspired first to be either an animator for Walt Disney or a magazine cartoonist. But a sense of narrative was implanted early, perhaps nurtured by summer work as a copyboy for a local newspaper, The Reading Eagle, for which he wrote several feature articles.

After graduating from high school as co-valedictorian and senior-class president, Mr. Updike attended Harvard College on a scholarship. Although he majored in English and wrote for and edited The Harvard Lampoon, he continued his cartooning. In 1953 he married Mary Entwistle Pennington, a Radcliffe fine arts major.

Graduating from Harvard in 1954 summa cum laude, he won a Knox Fellowship at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Arts in Oxford. In June of that year, his short story "Friends From Philadelphia" was accepted, along with a poem, by The New Yorker. It was an event, he later said, that remained "the ecstatic breakthrough of my literary life."

Following the birth of his first child, Elizabeth, the couple returned to America, and Mr. Updike went to work writing Talk of the Town pieces for The New Yorker.

Two years later, with the arrival of a second child, David, the couple, needing more space, moved to Ipswich, Mass., an hour north of Boston, where Mr. Updike kept his ties to The New Yorker but concentrated on his poetry and fiction. In 1959, a third child, Michael, was born, followed the next year by a fourth, Miranda.

Early Works

The move to Ipswich proved creatively invigorating. By 1959 Mr. Updike had completed three books — a volume of poetry, "The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures," a novel, "The Poorhouse Fair" and a collection of stories, "The Same Door" — and placed them with Alfred A. Knopf, which remained his publisher throughout his career. From 1954 to 1959, he also published more than a hundred essays, articles, poems and short stories in The New Yorker.

The move to a small town also seemed to stimulate his memories of Shillington and his creation of its fictional counterpart, Olinger. All his early stories were set there or in a neighboring city modeled on Reading, as were his first four novels, "The Poorhouse Fair," "The Centaur," "Of the Farm" and "Rabbit, Run." "The Poorhouse Fair" (1959), avoiding the usual coming-of-age tale of most beginners, established Mr. Updike's reputation as an important novelist. Based on an old people's home near Shillington, the novel explores the homogenization of society among members of the author's grandfather's generation.

"The Centaur" (1963), more autobiographical, welds the Greek myth of Chiron, the wounded centaur who gives up his immortality for the release of Prometheus, to the story of a mocked Olinger high-school science teacher who sacrifices himself for his son. It won the 1964 National Book Award for fiction.

“Of the Farm” (1965), set not far from Olinger, focuses on the mother of a farm family who fears she will die before her son, gone into advertising in New York, will fulfill her dream of his becoming a poet.

With “Couples” (1968), his fifth novel, Mr. Updike moved his setting away from Pennsylvania to the fictional Tarbox, Mass. There he explores sexual coupling and uncoupling in a community of young married couples who, as Wilfrid Sheed wrote in The New York Times Book Review, “wanted to get away from the staleness of Old America and the vulgarity of the new; who wanted to live beautifully in beautiful surroundings; to raise intelligent children in renovated houses in absolutely authentic rural centers.” “Couples,” which became a best seller, was for its time remarkably frank about sex and became well known for its lengthy detail and often lyrical descriptions of sexual acts.

With the Rabbit quartet, Mr. Updike cast his keen eye on a still wider world. Where “Rabbit, Run” plays out its present-tense narrative in domestic squalor, its three sequels, published in 10-year intervals, encompass the later 20th century American experience: “Rabbit Redux” (1971) the cultural turmoil of the 1960s; “Rabbit Is Rich” (1981) the boom years of the 1970s, the oil crisis and inflation; and “Rabbit at Rest” (1991), set in the time of what Rabbit calls “Reagan’s reign,” with its trade war with Japan, its AIDS epidemic and the terror bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Rabbit lies dying in a hospital at the end of the last volume, overweight, worn-out, felled by a coronary infarction during a one-on-one basketball game. With his life over, many critics judged that Rabbit had entered the pantheon of signal American literary figures, joining Huck Finn, Jay Gatsby, Holden Caulfield and the like.

“Rabbit Redux” was considered the weakest of the set, but “Rabbit Is Rich” and “Rabbit at Rest” both won Pulitzer Prizes and other awards. Reissued as a set in 1995, “Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy” was pronounced by some to be a contender for the crown of great American novel.

As a small-town businessman of limited scope, Rabbit is obviously very different from his creator. Yet the two of them share a middle-American view of the world, with the difference that Mr. Updike was exquisitely self-conscious. Against the grain of his calling and temperament, he strove, like the German writer Thomas Mann, for a burgherly life.

He took up golf, which he played with passionate enthusiasm and also a writer’s eye, noting the grace notes in others’ swings and tiny variations in the landscape. He was a tall, handsome man with a prominent nose and a head of hair that Tom Wolfe once compared to “monkish thatch.” It eventually turned white, as did his bushy eyebrows, giving him a senatorial appearance. And though as a youth he suffered from both a stutter and psoriasis, he became a person of immense charm, unfailingly polite and gracious in public.

As a citizen of Ipswich, he participated in local affairs, serving on the Congregational Church building committee and the Democratic town committee and writing a pageant for the town’s 17th-Century Day. For a while he worked downtown, in an office above a restaurant. Although politically liberal, he was virtually alone among American writers to declare himself in support of the Vietnam War.

In 1974 he separated from Mary and moved to Boston, where he taught briefly at Boston University. In 1976 the Updikes were divorced, and the following year he married Martha Ruggles Bernhard, settling with her and her three children first in Georgetown, Mass., and then in 1984 in Beverly Farms, both towns in the

same corner of the state as Ipswich.

In addition to his wife, Martha, he is survived by his sons David, of Cambridge, Mass., and Michael, of Newburyport, Mass.; his daughters Miranda, of Ipswich, and Elizabeth, of Maynard, Mass.; three stepsons, John Bernhard, of Lexington, Mass., Jason Bernhard, of Brooklyn, and Frederic Bernhard, of New Canaan, Conn.; seven grandchildren, and seven step-grandchildren.

A Book a Year

With the storehouse of his youthful experience emptying and his material circumstances enriched — the bestselling "Couples" put its author's face on the cover of Time magazine — he nevertheless determined to keep publishing a book a year.

"Writing's gotten to be a habit," he told Michiko Kakutani in an interview with The Times in 1982, a year after "Rabbit Is Rich" was published. "Sometimes the books do seem kind of silly and very papery, but there are moments when a sentence or a series of sentences clicks."

Among the dozen or more novels he brought out in the next quarter century, some clicked, like "The Witches of Eastwick" (1984), celebrated by some as an exuberant sexual comedy and a satirical view of women's liberation. It was made into a film starring Jack Nicholson, Cher, Susan Sarandon and Michelle Pfeiffer.

He returned to the witches in another novel, "The Widows of Eastwick," published in October, portraying them as widows revisiting the town. No longer preying on men as they once did, they are now "ordinary women," Ms. Kakutani wrote in her review, "haunted by the sins of their youth, frightened of the looming prospect of the grave and trying their best to get by, day by day by day."

Other later Updike novels seemed schematic, like the author's three takes on Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter": "Roger's Version" (1986), "S" (1988) and "A Month of Sundays" (1975). "Memories of the Ford Administration" (1992), linking personal guilt to history; "Seek My Face" (2002), an improvisation on the life of Jackson Pollock; and "Villages" (2004), about small-town adultery, also found lukewarm receptions.

Some readers complained about his portrayal of women. In an interview with The Times in 1988, Mr. Updike acknowledged the criticism that "my women are never on the move, that they're always stuck where the men have put them." His "only defense," he said, "would be that it's in the domesticity, the family, the sexual relations, that women interest me. I don't write about too many male businessmen, and I'm not apt to write about too many female businessmen."

Yet in trying to address this criticism by creating what he called "active and dynamic" women in "The Witches of Eastwick" and "S," he may have made things worse. Some reviewers detected behind the author's apparent respect for these female dynamos more ambivalence than anything else.

Meanwhile, the essays, book reviews, art criticism, reminiscences, introductions, forewords, prefaces, speeches, travel notes, film commentary, prose sketches, ruminations and other occasional jottings poured forth inexhaustibly, as if the experiences of his five senses only became real once recorded on paper.

The novelist Martin Amis sketched Mr. Updike plausibly in a 1991 review of a collection for The Times Book

Review: “Preparing his cup of Sanka over the singing kettle, he wears his usual expression: that of a man beset by an embarrassment of delicious drolleries. The telephone starts ringing. A science magazine wants something pithy on the philosophy of subatomic thermodynamics; a fashion magazine wants 10,000 words on his favorite color. No problem — but can they hang on? Mr. Updike has to go upstairs again and blurt out a novel.”

Nonfiction Works

Over the decades, the assorted nonfiction filled six thick volumes, “Assorted Prose” (1965), “Picked-Up Pieces” (1975), “Hugging the Shore” (1983), “Odd Jobs” (1991), “More Matter” (1999) and “Due Considerations” (2007). The impression they left most indelibly was their author’s vast range in time, space and discipline as a reader, and his deep capacity to understand, appreciate, discriminate, explain and guide. As he once said: “I think it good for an author, baffled by obtuse reviews of himself, to discover what a recalcitrant art reviewing is, how hard it is to keep the plot straight, let alone to sort out one’s honest responses.”

And whatever his flaws as a novelist, his mastery of the short-story form at least for a time continued to grow. Reviewing Mr. Updike’s sixth collection of stories, “Museums and Women and Other Stories” (1972), Anatole Broyard wrote in The Times, “His former preciousness has toughened into precision.” He concluded, “His language, which was once like a cat licking its fur, now stays closer to its subject, has become a means instead of an end in itself.”

Not incidentally, it was in a story collection — his fifth, “Bech: A Book” (1970) — that Mr. Updike created a counter-self living a counter-life in the character Henry Bech. Bech is an unmarried, urban, blocked Jewish writer immersed in the swim of literary celebrity — “a vain, limp leech on the leg of literature as it waded through swampy times,” as Bech himself put it in the third volume devoted to him, “Bech at Bay: A Quasi-Novel” (1998), which followed “Bech Is Back” (1982).

As Mr. Updike’s opposite, Henry Bech not only entertained his readers in a voice very different from his creator’s — world-weary, full of schmerz and a touch of schmalz — he also undertook certain tasks that Mr. Updike avoided, like attending literary dinners, tsk-tsking over a younger generation’s minimalist prose and maximal tendency to write memoirs, working off grudges, murdering critics and interviewing John Updike for The New York Times Book Review.

Bech even wins the Nobel Prize for Literature, something that Mr. Updike never did, to the consternation of many Western writers and critics.

By contrasting so sharply with his creator, Henry Bech also defined Mr. Updike more distinctly, particularly his determination to stick to the essentials of his craft. As Mr. Updike told The Paris Review about his decision to shun the New York spotlight:

“Hemingway described literary New York as a bottle full of tapeworms trying to feed on each other. When I write, I aim in my mind not toward New York but toward a vague spot a little to the east of Kansas. I think of the books on library shelves, without their jackets, years old, and a countryish teenaged boy finding them, have them speak to him. The reviews, the stacks in Brentano’s, are just hurdles to get over, to place the books on that shelf.”