



Updike

Adam Begley

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Updike is Adam Begley's masterful, much-anticipated biography of one of the most celebrated figures in American literature: Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Updike—a candid, intimate, and richly detailed look at his life and work.

In this magisterial biography, Adam Begley offers an illuminating portrait of John Updike, the acclaimed novelist, poet, short-story writer, and critic who saw himself as a literary spy in small-town and suburban America, who dedicated himself to the task of transcribing “middleness with all its grits, bumps and anonymities.”

Updike explores the stages of the writer's pilgrim's progress: his beloved home turf of Berks County, Pennsylvania; his escape to Harvard; his brief, busy working life as the golden boy at *The New Yorker*; his family years in suburban Ipswich, Massachusetts; his extensive travel abroad; and his retreat to another Massachusetts town, Beverly Farms, where he remained until his death in 2009. Drawing from in-depth research as well as interviews with the writer's colleagues, friends, and family, Begley explores how Updike's fiction was shaped by his tumultuous personal life—including his enduring religious faith, his two marriages, and his first-hand experience of the “adulterous society” he was credited with exposing in the bestselling *Couples*.

With a sharp critical sensibility that lends depth and originality to his analysis, Begley probes Updike's best-loved works—from *Pigeon Feathers* to *The Witches of Eastwick* to the *Rabbit* tetralogy—and reveals a surprising and deeply complex character fraught with contradictions: a kind man with a vicious wit, a gregarious charmer who was ruthlessly competitive, a private person compelled to spill his secrets on the printed page. *Updike* offers an admiring yet balanced look at this national treasure, a master whose writing continues to resonate like no one else's.

Updike Details

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From Reader Review Updike for online ebook

James Smith says

It would be easy to underestimate Begley's *Updike*, only because Begley makes it look so easy. The approach he has taken--to read Updike's fiction as a thinly veiled chronicle of his real life (in other words, the Maples stories are Updike's story)--seems so natural and fertile that one might think it obvious, even easy. But that would be to miss the creative genius it takes to land on this approach. It would also miss the stunning mastery of Updike's oeuvre that Begley displays--again, effortlessly. Mercifully, Begley does not try to mimic Updike's ornamented prose.

For someone of my generation, this glimpse into upscale suburbia in the 1960s is almost unfathomable--the culture of infidelity in Updike's Ipswich is incomprehensible. But then again, I come from the generation that *paid* for these shenanigans. (It struck me that this dynamic of irresponsible parents, seen from the perspective of the children hurt by it, is well captured in the much more recent film, *The Way Way Back*.)

Still, I gobbled up Begley's biography as my vacation read. "Humanizing" the eminent Updike certainly does not make him more loveable, but Begley succeeds in making him a "character."

After finishing the biography, I returned to Updike's essay, "On Literary Biography," in *Due Considerations*, one of his many omnibus collections (of which *Hugging the Shore* remains my favorite). This essay, like his memoir *Self-Consciousness*, is something of a pre-emptive strike against any would-be biographer. But embedded in it is an interesting tidbit. Updike describes reading a recent biography of William Shakespeare. The question so often brought to Shakespeare now is not "How did he do it?" but "*Did* he do it?" Updike's comment is its own little bit of autobiography:

"Unlike certain devotees of the nobility, I have never had any problem with the idea that a child of the middling provincial gentry (Shakespeare's mother was an Arden, a family of prosperous farmers) might enter the theatrical profession and spin a literary universe out of his dramatic flair, opportune learning, and country-bred street-smarts."

Well, of course not--since that also turns out to be *Updike's* story. But did he just equate himself with Shakespeare? Begley doesn't fall for that.

Dpdwyer says

A detailed, seemingly comprehensive 500 page biography that reads almost like a novel. Begley shows how Updike repeatedly and mercilessly, yet lovingly, mined the relationships and experiences of a lifetime in his fiction, essays, and poetry. Many exquisite quotes from Updike's works like the following:

Updike's stated goal in his writing: "to give the mundane its beautiful due."

"I read slower than I write."

"The world keeps ending but new people too dumb to know it keep showing up as if the fun just started."

“We forget most of our past but embody all of it.”

“Happiness is best seen out of the corner of the eye.”

“Between now and the grave lies a long slide of forestallment, a slew of dutiful, dutifully paid-for maintenance routines in which dermatological makeshift joins periodontal work and prostate examinations on the crowded appointment calendar of dwindling days.”

Updike’s boyhood plan was to ride “a thin pencil line out of Shillington, out of time altogether, into an infinity of unseen and even unborn hearts.” And he succeeded.

Dan says

Rabbit Run was the first grown up book I read as a young adult that I could truly identify with. I remember thinking that Updike was a genius without knowing anything else about him. He wrote with teutonic precision, to borrow a phrase from Adam Begley the biographer, in capturing Harry's innermost thoughts. I went and devoured the rest of the Rabbit tetralogy. All the novels in the series felt genuine and authentic in spite of the criticisms around Harry's excessive testosterone and mysogistic instincts. The latter two books, Rabbit is Rich and Rabbit at Rest each won Pulitzer prizes. I still consider this to be the best novel series that I have ever read. Perhaps it is because I grew up in a small town, like Updike, but I relate to Updike's writing in a way that I can't with say Philip Roth. So the Rabbit series was my introduction to Updike and I went on to read Centaur, Witches of Eastwick which I thought were good but I did not have the same emotional connection to the characters.

So I think to appreciate this biography, you will need to like Updike's writing. Begley does a superb job of capturing Updike the writer who was essentially Updike the person. All of Updyke's major works are discussed in the biography in chronological order and carefully interwoven with his life. It helps that Begley exhibits a careful command of vocabulary. It is always appropriate that a gifted writer would be the one to pen a biography about a legendary writer like Updike. The biography seems to capture the Updike that I remember from listening to interviews and reading some of his non-fiction articles. Since Updike was such a prodigious writer and gave so many interviews, his life story was as close to an open book as you'll find. I did like the literary circle discussion and some of the sniping that went on when Roth, Wolfe, Hitchens and Updike might comment on each other's works. Roth seemed to take the highest ground, Updike somewhere in the middle, Wolfe lower still and Hitchens at the bottom.

In a nutshell this biography is an excellent read especially if you are very fond of Updike the writer.

Ben Batchelder says

Let me say upfront: I’m not usually a fan of biographies. They always end badly. Especially in today’s morally unanchored world, the towering ambition of most lives worthy of a biography leaves a path of destruction on the way to temporal success: families destroyed, other careers shortened, lives poorly and feebly lived, if not outright crippled with disease.

Despite being one of my favorite authors on late 20th century American life, John Updike does not diverge

greatly from the pattern. While rocketing to success for being the first to indulge in and divulge rampant adultery in suburban America with his lightly-fictionalized novel *Couples* (1968), Updike – to his credit, later regretting “In our attempt to be beautiful, we often break a lot of innocent bystanders’ bones” (p.354) – left a path of destruction in his, and others’, children’s lives. It takes two to not only adulter, but to foster an environment in which it thrives, so Updike’s first wife Mary for years had affairs of her own. Yet, despite the murkiness of her transgressions, it can safely be assumed that Updike, not only as the man of the house but a powerhouse one, was most responsible.

Here was are, three paragraphs into the review, and not yet a word on the quality of Updike’s oeuvre, but biographies, and especially literary biographies, tend to do just that: focus us, in a sad Peeping Tom sort of way, on the particulars of an artist’s life rather than the supposed glories of his work. This is unavoidable, however, for we rightly suspect that the quality of a man’s character colors the quality of his work; particularly where the work is inscrutable or resistant to facile interpretation (as it must always be these post-modern times), a writer’s character becomes determinant, or controlling, a vital clue to the work’s trajectory and meaning.

Given all the challenges, new biographer Adam Begley has done an extraordinary job molding the life of one of America’s most famous recent authors, the first big bio since Updike’s death from lung cancer in 2009. He sets the tone early and well in his introduction. Snappily, Begley details Updike’s obvious charms, a prophetic first encounter with the great man from his crib (Begley’s father was a Harvard classmate of Updike’s), and ends the intro with a most winning, and agreeably humble, sentence: “It’s one of my fondest wishes that those books [the Library of America’s recently published two tomes of Updike collected stories] will mark the beginning of a surge in his posthumous reputation.” (Which this biography may ably contribute to.) We are immediately assured that such a big, important life is in the hands of a competent and sympathetic (not sycophantic) biographer.

Not only has he read all 29+ published novels, countless short stories, reviews, poems, and light verse, but a sizeable amount of the author’s correspondence, including with other authors (Joyce Carol Oates, in particular). No detail was too inconsequential for Begley to track down: he corrects Updike’s memory of past events in not-too-obtrusive footnotes (such as the source of his first wife’s French), and offers up the clarifying arcanity of *New Yorker* magazine payment particulars. He much more than ably weaves in quotations from diverse works without ever seeming pedantic. While, thankfully, avoiding psycho-babble, he brings insights into the potential motivations and drive of a literary titan hiding behind the vast facade of his public image – understandably so, as his “fiction” was almost always very thinly veiled autobiography. Peeking behind the veil, Begley does so with a light and competent touch, his literary judgments always well informed and argued, his psychological or moral ones a tad less so.

As the “it’s” of the Introduction quotation above, Begley writes with an informal style, a respectful and non-purple prose. Given Updike’s frequent lack of restraint when plumbing the depths of (his) sexual antics, Begley demonstrates an admirable remove, gliding swiftly over (the many) prurient details.

With frequent quotes, that tickle the palette like amuse-bouches, Begley builds a solid case for why the great man received so many awards (even if denied the coveted Nobel for Literature) and why we should care. Updike’s habitual self-deprecation is shown to be yet another lovely fruit of his generation. What I personally find most admirable is Updike’s startling and observant prose, coupled with his self-declared objective “to give the mundane its beautiful due.” He loved America and, unlike so many post-modernists, was unafraid to say so. Begley attributes this gestalt, and much else, to Updike’s only-son upbringing in the small town America of Shillington, Pennsylvania, an idyllic upbringing (rudely interrupted by his mother’s insisting on the young family’s retreat to the unimproved farmhouse of her own childhood), and that seems

just right. His mother, a frustrated writer (though eventually with several published works and New Yorker articles to her name), was clearly a towering figure in his life, who not only breast-fed a massive belief in his importance and talent, but followed him diligently with a constant correspondence. (In today's terminology, they were enmeshed.)

Yet – that familiar curse of the famous – Updike's life ends badly. He ends the marriage to his first wife Mary (who comes off as a much more sympathetic person than Wife #2) after twenty-one years, and marries Martha, or Mistress #?, towards the end of his Ipswich romp. He demonstrates regret, even telling Mary at the divorce proceedings he would undo it all if he could, but in the end gets what he wants: a controlling wife who protects his privacy and writing time like a lioness her pups. Among those kept at a distance are his children, now doubly wronged. (As son David later commented: his father decided early on that his writing would "take precedence over his relations with real people.") (p.410) His last three decades, accordingly, seem drained of color and warmth. (Begley, appropriately, titles his penultimate chapter "The Lonely Fort.")

Begley's judgement and task fail him in few areas. After prior allusions to the deleterious impact of Updike's philandering on the children, he offers a justification for the serial adultery this way:

"Couples made him rich and famous – and, in a sense, notorious. But his notoriety – the winking acknowledgment of his dizzy ride on the merry-go-round of Ipswich adultery – is misleading. The novel was made possible not because he made a habit of bedding down with the wives of his friends but rather because he remained detached, because his "inner remove" freed him from the moral and social constraints most adulterers surrender to." (p.294)

It is a curious supposition: that Updike's art is validated by an inner remove (while wreaking havoc in the lives of others) which justifies his repeatedly going back to the same passion-well without, thank goodness, surrendering to the usual moral and social constraints. Wow! That sounds like a 007-like Licence to Bed.

A final area where Begley's analysis likely falls short is with Updike's "spirituality" (today's non-terrifying euphemism for "Christianity"). One of the main reasons, at least for me, that Updike stood out from a post-World War II cohort of mega-stars who felt compelled to let it all hang out, was his professed belief. Begley, for good reason, treats the subject charily, for it represents the most glaring paradox of Updike's life, that he remained a believing man while his actions confessed something else. Many Updike stories treat the spiritual crises of the protagonist's. Begley writes that one such protagonist's "religious doubts are eventually resolved to his own satisfaction (if not the reader's – the boy deduces from the beauty of nature evidence of a caring deity.)" (p.40) Clearly Begley is skeptical of such deity-proofs. And while Begley makes many yeomen attempts at explaining Updike's beliefs through those of his characters, I couldn't shake the impression that the biographer was usually, while competently, speaking a foreign language. By adopting a non-judgmental tone about Updike's philandering ("It seems clear that the time and place were also ripe for an unbuttoned pursuit of happiness." "...they went too far, frolicked too freely. But I suspect that, at the time, they merely thought they were making the most of happy circumstances.") (p.184), Begley seems to condone that the end, great art, justifies the means.

Alas, we only get cold gruel about Updike's many spiritual crises. When a golf buddy quotes Updike as admitting that he'd "changed houses, church denominations, and wives," (p.191), the reader has to wait thirty-two pages to learn more about the change in churches, after dozens of pages detailing the house and wife swapping. Given Begley's declared desire to encourage more readers to return to Updike's extensive works, perhaps it was better he tread lightly on issues of faith and belief, as they could well have condemned Updike as a towering hypocrite.

One of the biography's few descriptive scenes of Updike's faith (other than rosters of church committees and service) is how, as the father of an unbroken home, he would go from one child's room to the next, together reciting the Lord Prayer's before bed. It is heartbreaking that only after the long, thirty-two year distancing from his children during his second marriage, that the scene is repeated, if inverted, with Updike, on his death bed at the hospice, repeating the Lord's Prayer with two of his adult children and his Episcopalian minister. (p.483)

Yet in the end analysis, Begley is largely persuasive: Updike's paradise lost was his Shillington childhood. He concludes the opus of Updike's biography with a curious echo of Citizen Kane's Rosebud:

"Up until the final weeks of his life, when he was too sick to write, he was always that little boy on the floor of the Shillington dining room, bending his attention to the paper, riding that thin pencil line into a glorious future, fulfilling the towering ambition of his grandest dreams. 'I've remained,' he once said, 'all too true to my youthful self.'" (p.486)

But even there, doubts creep in. Was the towering ambition his own or his mother's? Did his early resentment of his mother impact his treatment of women? If he was all too true to his youthful self, did he ever grow up in a meaningful, even spiritual way? As Begley earlier admits, Updike "seemed incapable of changing how he behaved," (p.350) and was "incorrigible." (p.352) Not a kind judgement of any adult, for it implies the spiritual crises were never resolved favorably.

I, for one, am encouraged to return to Updike's work, as an acutely and lovingly observed dissertation on the not-so mundane of American life. Yet, like one of his latter-day critics who, as I do, would characterize many of his passages as high-brow porn, I will delicately skip the pulpy parts.

(My grandparents and the Updikes were neighbors for many years, so I got to meet the man several times and exchange a few postcards. Adam Begley is an old friend from college days, to whom I wish a continuing and growing success – and more.)

Steve Petherbridge says

I am an avid Updike fan. He captures America and the lifestyle of middle America, emerging from post WWII austerity, from the 1950's to the early 21st Century, mostly through fictionalised lives of ordinary Americans, mostly middle class, embracing the post-pill freedoms, Vietnam, Kennedy, Johnson and Carter and touching on the Civil Rights and other 1960's turbulence, though he does not go deeply into any issue.

Mostly though, his fiction is isolated from the greater American political stage with the characters immersed in their own lives and limited surroundings, whether that be Shillington or Ipswich. His world revolved around Pennsylvania and was a small-town boy and man at heart, though he did travel internationally and extensively, rarely turning down an appearance or promotional tour if these broadened his horizons.

Apart from his womanising, he is a difficult, some would say boring biographical subject. He was geeky both in appearance and action, had a stutter and psoriasis. He was not an alcoholic and avoided controversy. He was a dedicated slave to his work in short-story, poetry and novel formats, driven by a fear of poverty and failure. He courted and enjoyed attention and was sensitive, even having established himself in latter years as a distinguished American writer of the late 20th Century with Mailer, Roth and Irving. Yet his prodigious output was bound to lend fuel to a negative Updike review – Adam Begley has written an

'exemplary biography', and has obviously worked hard at his accomplishment, but, getting to know the real Updike was difficult.

Sometimes critics who took a personal, and often vindictive, dislike to him. But, surely this goes with any high-profile public person. I feel that this is not the definitive biography, but, is a big chunk of the Updike biographical jigsaw and gives a good insight into what drove him to be a writer and the three women who dominated and sustained his life, his mother Linda, who had a premonition and knew she was nurturing a writer or artist of note in her only child, and his two wives, the equally permissive, Mary, whose critique and support he heavily relied on, and the over-protective gatekeeper of access to Updike, much to the chagrin and anger of his children, his second wife Martha. He never had an agent, but, Martha was as near he ever came to having one. What the reader mostly garners is how he constantly drew on his own life and experience for much of his fiction, and this creates an urge to revisit books already read and read books not read.

There is also an urge to explore his poetry, especially "Endpoint", a collection assembled when he knew that he was dying. The author is hindered by Martha, his second wife, and her refusal to co-operate, and in ways he subtly berates her e.g. by the perceived restrictions she placed on access by Updike's children and other students, journalists and outsiders. However, for all its faults, this is a worthwhile read giving an insight into a man who stands with the giants of late 20th Century American Literature. I enjoyed the read and will explore new and re-explore Updike's work, having been armed with biographical insight that, so heavily, influenced his output on the page.

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A study that fails to do justice to a great writer: Updike

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014...>

Updike review – Adam Begley has written an 'exemplary biography'

Jason Coleman says

I thought and dreamt about this book for many years before it existed, or before it was even in the works. I almost never read Updike these days; in my twenties, however, he was second only to Nabokov (another writer I almost never read any more). I didn't just read the Rabbit novels or those old anthology stand-bys "Pigeon Feathers" and "A&P." I read it all—things like *A Month of Sundays*, say, or the poetry. I think I even took a stab at his play *Buchanan Dying*. He was about my parents' age, so his work was, among other things, a vicarious peering-into that generation's life. I kind of loved Updike—I loved that dorkily elegant insider/outsider almost like I'd love a father. And although Updike, autobiographical to a fault, gave us so much, I wanted to know more.

I knew this book would eventually get written by somebody, and think I mainly wanted two things out of it: I wanted to know how Updike wrote so well, and I wanted to know about all the sex. As Begley reveals, the good writing came from a fairly un-mysterious combination of early training from a writer-mother, a ferocious work ethic, and a certifiably high IQ. Yes, Updike was really, really smart. As for the mistresses, Begley protects most of their identities, but he does plunge us deep into the first big affair, which damn near killed Updike, and the second, which led to his second marriage and sealed Updike away in a Beverly Farms mansion, where he cultivated his franchise and circled the wagons amidst all the dull charges of misogyny and solipsism.

Updike's great quest was to become a famous writer, and the great drama of his adult life was his years-long escape from his marriage via an epic run of infidelity. Once he had accomplished these two things, his life was effectively over. By his early fifties he was already lamenting the loss of everything—his creative energy, his youth, the works. So anyway, I knew one day I'd hold such a book in my hands and now here it is. Now I know. And so, it's over.

J.R. says

“More than fifty years after his first New Yorker check, he was still happily amazed that he could make a living this way, that his boyhood plan to ride ‘a thin pencil line out of Shillington, out of time altogether, into an infinity of unseen and even unborn hearts’ had succeeded quite so brilliantly.”

Pennsylvania-born John Updike was a man who found no greater joy in life than in the sheer act of writing.

Adam Begley’s comprehensive and sympathetic study of Updike’s life makes that abundantly clear. In a comment to friends about literary prizes, Updike said, “Being a writer at all is the prize.”

Begley has amassed a wonderful array of documentation on Updike’s journey as a man and writer, a journey that leaves the world a legacy of stories and poetry to enjoy.

Early influenced by his ambitious mother, who predicted her son was “going to fly,” Updike did transcend his small-town roots, though he never completely abandoned them or the values of his conservative upbringing. In fact, his blatantly autobiographical writing style thrives on nostalgia. Even in the period when he was recording fictionalized versions of his marital infidelities, his characters are haunted by guilt imposed by the religious faith he never abandoned.

Begley traces his journey from the boy dreaming of being a cartoonist to Harvard, on to the early success at the New Yorker and then the flight away from the city with the decision to become a freelance writer and novelist.

In addition to the many interviews with people close to Updike, Begley’s detailed look at the books, stories and poetry provides a penetrating look at what made the man tick and what will make his work endure.

Ryan Williams says

Borges once said of James Joyce that he was less a man of letters than an entire literature. If you wanted a sentence that sums up the career of John Updike - who published over fifty books over a long writing career and twice won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction - you'd struggle to dream up a better one than that.

Admittedly, 'struggle' isn't the first word you associate with Updike's career, but after reading Adam Begley's assured, informative biography, you might well modify that judgement. Updike was the only child of poor, Depression-era parents. The creator of juvenile basketball ace Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom doesn't sound like the type of kid you'd pick for the school team. Young Updike was gawky, shy with a bad stutter. Besides psoriasis, Updike also suffered frequent stomach pains, hay fever, and his hair would, at times, suddenly fall out in clumps. Home life was idyllic but secluded after his Mother moved the family to a farm. If you overlook Mother's mood swings, lack of ability for farming, producing publishable manuscripts, and tendency to ban her little treasure from seeing girls, she was undeniably devoted to pushing her son towards his literary destiny. In an interview, she talked of receiving 'a premonition' that if she married Updike's father, 'the results would be amazing'. She was not exaggerating.

Those results were longer coming than you might think. Updike entered Harvard on a scholarship and remained a hard-working student, but often felt out of his depth among the rich, privately-educated boys who formed the bulk of the studentry. His repeated submissions to the New Yorker came back with depressing regularity. Applying for Archibald MacLeish's creative writing class, he was rejected twice; homesickness struck him dysentery. Somehow, as if by magic, things suddenly began to go right. Updike met a girl, continued to produce and send out cartoons, poems and stories, and saw his humourous pieces published in a college periodical. A publisher, keen on those student pieces, asked him if he'd care to submit something to them for publication. A short story first written in the classroom, submitted to the New Yorker largely unchanged, netted him not only an acceptance but, four months after its publication, a job offer at the magazine. The jammy sod married the girl, too.

Begley wisely focuses much attention on Updike's short stories, not just for practical reasons. (The New Yorker's 'whale sized' cheques financed Updike comfortably for the length of his writing life, ensuring he would never need a publisher's advance.) At their best, the stories are matchlessly sharp and poetic, but they also form a running commentary on Updike's life, from dreamy, precocious teenager to happily married father, from not-so-happily-married father to serial adulterer and beyond. Fiction isn't life, of course, but it's hard to deny that a great deal of life provided the blueprint for Updike's fiction. Like all literary biographers of merit, Begley does a tactful job of tying his subject's characters to the people that inspired them. (Sometimes those ties were too close: one of the husbands from the time Updike was writing *Couples*, who also happened to be a lawyer, very nearly sued him.) Updike asked for some of his rawest stories to be 'banked' by the New Yorker for publication years into the future, and the novel *Marry Me*, first written in the mid-sixties, was shelved for over a decade before seeing publication. Although 'the vessel of circumstantial facts is all invented', Updike wrote, 'the liquid contained may, if spilled soon, scald somebody'.

On the novels that follow, Begley makes a qualified case for *Marry Me*, and gives considerable space to *Couples* (which, we learn, made Updike over a million dollars, and saw his annual income rise from around \$50,000 in one year to \$410,000 in the next after the sale of the film rights). As is only proper, ample space is given to the Rabbit novels (though, oddly, little on *Rabbit At Rest*: a mistake, since it's the tetralogy's crowning achievement). Canny readers will have spotted Rabbit's predecessors in Updike's work, notably in the poem 'Ex-Basketball Player'. Now, we know Updike's editor, Katharine White, actively discouraged him from writing about people the New Yorker of the time looked down upon. She also told a friend, somewhat acidly, that fiction wasn't Updike's best vein, and wondered if he was 'too versatile for his own good'. Far from being a New Yorker 'creation', Updike's greatest fiction was created almost in defiance of it.

Begley knows when to trust the details, especially the small ones, and has room for the illuminating anecdote. For his first New Yorker story (out of 136) Updike was paid \$490, \$612.50 for his second and \$826 for his third, at a time when his Father's annual salary amounted to \$1,200. We may have noticed that *Rabbit At Rest* ends in Florida (where Rabbit was unsuccessfully trying to escape to at the end of *Rabbit, Run*), but we now know the real-life city where he dies is named for the hero of one of his mother's unpublished novels. A celebrated piece on the famous baseball player Ted Williams was written only because Updike had called on a nearby mistress who wasn't at home.

To his credit, Begley doesn't indulge the biographer's vice of hagiography, but I think he is unduly harsh in places. Having established that Updike wanted to leave New York to avoid narrowing his fiction, Begley then snaps the verbal ruler on Updike's hand, then claiming instead that he did it solely to be 'a big fish in a small pond'. Writers, I think Begley will find, are a competitive lot, and often have grumpy spells, not just Updike. I doubt Updike actually did carry out a malicious act of literary vandalism when he described his Mother as an author on the dust jacket of one book, then called her 'an aspiring author' on its inside cover. I am not convinced by Begley's case for Updike's poetry, and I think he gives too little space to Updike's personal and professional relationship with John Cheever, and on the last three decades of Updike's life. (Admittedly, given his often unsparing depiction of Updike's second wife, there may be a good reason for that.)

I also wish that a man keen on overseeing a surge in Updike's posthumous reputation had used the most powerful weapon in his arsenal more often: namely, his language. A few sentences from the short stories, although unpacked well, simply won't do. Whether describing what passes through Rabbit's mind while jogging, the scratch of a key in a lock, the texture of human flesh or even a row of condoms at the local drugstore, Updike's writing makes you look at things as if they have never existed before. When people say Updike was a poet moonlighting as a novelist they pay him a sincere compliment, for his best work celebrates the ordinary, richly fulfilling its creator's aim of 'giving the mundane its beautiful due'. There will be other lives of Updike, but they will have to run fast to overtake this one.

Joe says

I Review Adam Begley's "Updike," a Biography.

By the time "Rabbit" hit the bookstores Updike was 'falling in love, away from marriage.' After *Rabbit, Run*, sexual elements became stronger in his fiction, and if the Brewer of "Rabbit" was really Reading, Ipswich was really Tarbox, despite Updike's denials — especially his denials after *Couples* appeared in 1968. Updike wasn't the first in his Ipswich crowd to commit adultery, and possibly not the first in his marriage, according to Begley. Mary liked to flirt at parties, and she took a lover in the early '60s. "With one or two exceptions there was no actual wife-swapping," no key parties or orgies, but Updike admits in his memoirs he was a "stag of sorts."

Go to my blog:

Have Words-Will Write 'Em>

and then to the Chicago Tribune's Printer's Row.

Joe

--Joe

Tony says

UPDIKE. (2014). Adam Begley. ****.

Towards the end of his writing career, John Updike suffered a decline in popularity among his readers. There was a time – early on – when any new book by the author was eagerly anticipated. Then came the slump. It was not because the writing quality declined, it was simply that his readers began to tire of his stuff. I don't know if Mr. Begley intended his biography as a way of revitalizing Updike's image, but if it was it fell short because the last twenty years or so of Updike's life were not covered at all. Begley spends most of his time on Updike's life from his youth onward and how his writings mirrored his experiences growing up in Pennsylvania, just outside of Reading. Most of his early novels and stories are based on his life in Shillington and Plowville. In his writings, Plowville became Firetown, Reading became Alton (or Brewer in the Rabbit tetralogy), and Shillington became Olinger. Begley outlines Updike's life there and follows him on to Harvard and his subsequent move to Massachusetts. Updike's two marriages also provided source material for his works – including a variety of adulterous affairs while he was immersed in his new circle of friends. Begley used a combination of interviews and hard copy research to produce this work, and I came away believing that I knew more about the writer and his inspirations than I did before. It is a very readable biography that should be welcomed by Updike's fans. Recommended.

Malena Barzilai says

John Updike is my favorite writer, so how could I not love such a well-done biography of him?

Mike says

Fascinating reading for this Updike fan.
Bears revisiting often.

Notes

- 31..why was i so comfortably situated?
- 43..life had given my father a beating.
- 44..avenging the slights and abasements visited upon his father
- 78..monotonously triumphant career
- 167..effortlessly industrious

224..religion enables us to ignore nothingness and get on with the jobs of life.

240..The courtly love conceit is ingenious but limiting, the characters diminished rather than enhanced by their role in a medieval tragedy (Tristan and Iseult) reconfigured as contemporary farce.

335..Redux is U's most powerful work

407..BBC doc "What makes Rabbit run?"

447..Perfection Wasted

nitpick: small fonted asterisks makes them hard to find

James Murphy says

I've been a fan of John Updike's work for a long time. I read this first biography eager to learn more about where the fiction I admire came from. I was a little surprised to learn that it came from his own life. For the most part he recast his own personal experiences into his writings. From the early short stories to the first novel, *Of the Farm*, to the magnificence of *The Centaur* to *Marry Me* and even to the racy, notorious *Couples*, Updike was telling his own story. The famous characterizations of Henry Bech, Richard Maples, Peter Caldwell, and Piet Hanema were all portraits of the author himself while other characters in the novels were based on his family and friends more or less, particularly his wife Mary. Equally surprising to me was learning that Rabbit Angstrom of the well-regarded tetralogy bears little resemblance to Updike.

The way Updike recycled his own life and the lives of family and others around him determined the shape of Adam Begley's biography. Writing a critical biography was almost necessitated by that important trait of the fiction. I was pleased that the fiction received such detailed analysis. I also felt it appropriate that a man who put so much of himself into his stories and novels should have a biographer who relates his subject through that fiction. Almost every event of Updike's life has some fictional parallel. Whether a boy contemplating pigeons in a barn, the death of his mother, or adultery in Ipswich, Massachusetts, events of his life are inserted and interpreted in the work. Begley tells the biography in that way. For that reason it's all slightly non-linear, but it is fascinatingly full of descriptions and facts of how Updike lived, worked, and thought, including material sensational and tabloid-like as well as artistic and philosophical. It's almost seamless. In essence, the life is explored as how it relates to the writings. The happy result is that both life and the life's work receive comprehensive analysis. The happy result is thoroughly satisfying as a biography that's slightly eccentric but which is well organized and well written and runs like a well-oiled machine.

Adam Begley was an insider. He's the son of the novelist Louis Begley (*Wartime Lies*; *About Schmidt*). We're told the Begleys also lived in Ipswich, which became the bedroom community of Tarbox in the novel *Couples*, and that they were friends of the Updikes. The biographer gives the impression he has a deep understanding of Updike and even knows more than he can tell. But the only door to the man and writer he uses is the work. His knowledge of both is convincing, satisfying.

As neighbor, son of an Updike family friend, Begley knows all the players of the legendary Ipswich years. One charge against him is that he shows favoritism toward the 1st wife, Mary, friend of the Begleys, while painting an awkward portrait of Martha, the 2d wife. She's depicted as being a controlling influence on Updike, a gatekeeper who protected him from distractions which might affect the work and who also limited access, even from the children of his 1st family. Reviewers are aware of more than I can be, but it seems to me Martha's protective reactions are more normal than not, understandable given Updike's fame and the public demands on his time. As Begley himself explains, Mary began her life with him before he'd had even his first success, and she lived with him as he evolved. It makes a difference that when he married Martha he

was already fully-formed as a prolific, prize-winning man of letters. Why is the question of Mary's and Martha's treatment so important? I suppose getting it wrong can be seen as a flaw of perception that might prompt arguments about other perceptions in the biography. Each reader has to come to his own satisfaction.

As for myself, I was riveted by this biography. I learned quite a bit about where the individual works came from and why they took the shape they have. I learned a lot about an author who's always interested me. The detail of the subject's life and thought provided goes very deep. From the philosophical underpinnings of a novel like *Roger's Version* to relating the family crisis caused by a cuckolded husband confronting John and Mary, it's all here. But this is just the first of the Updike icebergs to float by. There will be other biographies. In addition, Begley tells us Updike was a busy letter writer and that he corresponded with many close friends in the literary world, Joyce Carol Oates and Ian McEwan among them. We can look forward to what's still to come. In the meantime we have Adam Begley's fine biography. I imagine Updike would've liked it.

Grady says

'You have to give it magic'

And magic is just the descriptor for this immensely informed and intelligent biography of John Updike by the gifted author Adam Begley. It goes so far beyond where biographies usually tread, giving us insights into a great American author as a man, an original thinker, and as one of the finest novelists of the last century. A quick glance at the facts from Wikipedia, 'John Updike (18 March 1932 - 27 January 2009) was an American novelist, poet, short story writer, art critic, and literary critic. Updike's most famous work is his Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom series (the novels *Rabbit, Run*; *Rabbit Redux*; *Rabbit Is Rich*; *Rabbit At Rest*; and the novella "Rabbit Remembered"), which chronicles Rabbit's life over the course of several decades, from young adulthood to his death. Both *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit At Rest* (1990) received the Pulitzer Prize. Updike is one of only three authors (the others were Booth Tarkington and William Faulkner) to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction more than once. He published more than twenty novels and more than a dozen short story collections, as well as poetry, art criticism, literary criticism and children's books. Hundreds of his stories, reviews, and poems appeared in *The New Yorker*, starting in 1954. He also wrote regularly for *The New York Review of Books*.' Impressive to recap the facts, but what Adam Begley has accomplished in this brilliant biography is placing flesh on these skeleton-like facts and offers up the enigmatic Updike better than any writer has accomplished.

As Begley writes, 'John Updike wrote about himself copiously. That's arguable and modestly neutral, but too vague. John Updike wrote about himself reflexively...."imitation is praise," he wrote. "Description expresses love.' He also wrote about himself lucidly.' And this is the style of writing that fills this lengthy but always enthralling book. Begley has done his research, interviewing as many people close to Updike (whether family or colleagues) and thus is able to present as true an image of the Updike we all have read. Begley spends time at the end of the book with the feeling we are at bedside as Updike dies of lung cancer. He includes some of Updike's final poetry:

My wife of thirty years is on the phone
I get a busy signal, and I know
she's in her grief and needs to organize
consulting friends. But me, I need her voice;
her body is the only locus where
my desolation bumps against its end.

This is the complete Updike and there is far more in this illuminating biography than the life of a gifted writer: there is a lot of us in there, too.

Grady Harp

Stephen Hoogerhyde says

A very interesting literary biography. I had not realized that Updike put so much of his own life experiences into his stories and novels. However, that should not be surprising, given his expressed desire to, in his own words, "give the mundane its beautiful due." Updike published more than 60 books in his half-century career: novels, short stories, poems, book reviews, other prose pieces. He loves the feel of typewriter keys (as opposed to the PC), and the tactile pleasure of a book. And he never owned a cell phone!

Now I want to reread the entire Rabbit Angstrom tetralogy!
