**Title:**
The upbeat poet.
By: Craig Brown, Mail on Sunday (UK), 05/24/2009

**Section:**
Features
**Endpoint** And Other Poems by John **Updike** Hamish Hamilton £ 12.99. £12.99 inc p& p (08451550713) *****

The cover photograph shows John **Updike** standing in the centre of a sun-dappled country lane, as though caught midwalk. His feet are pointing away, but **Updike** has turned his face towards the camera for what looks like one last wry smile before he sets off into the distance.
Updike died of lung cancer in January, aged 76. He was outrageously prolific. It was almost as if, for decade after decade, he had transmuted his every waking thought into the printed word. In order to squeeze the titles of all his various books on to a single page, his publishers have to print their titles in tiny italics. **Updike** is probably most famous for his short stories (17 volumes) and his 23 novels (notably the Rabbit series and Couples), but he also wrote five children's stories, more literary criticism than most fulltime critics ever manage, wonderful books on golf and fine art, a play, a memoir and, perhaps most overlooked, seven volumes of poetry.
'I have never been taken very seriously as a poet,' he once noted. I suspect that, in a field that values obscurity and pessimism, this is because his poems were too easy to understand and too cheerful. **Updike's** work, his fellow author Tobias Wolff wrote in a eulogy, is 'suffused with the pleasure of simply being alive'; his poems, in particular, are marked by this sense of celebration. They celebrate everything and anything, no matter how out-of-the-way: earthworms, telegraph poles, milkshakes, baseball. He once even wrote a poem in praise of household radiators, simply because he had never seen them praised in verse before.
He always seems to have been on the lookout for new territory, for the unnoticed and the unfashionable. 'There is a limit, after all, to what can be done with daffodils and sunsets,' he commented in an interview 30 years ago. In a brief reminiscence last year, **Updike** recalled a spring of water in the back yard of his childhood home. 'That icy water held an ingredient that made me, a boy of nine or ten, eager for the next moment of life, one brimming moment after another.' I think it is this eagerness for the next brimming moment of life that singles him out from all his contemporaries: that, coupled with an exhilaratingly exact descriptive precision.
Half of this volume is taken up with a series of poems dealing directly with his own impending death, yet, true to character, their overriding tone is not of doom but of curiosity. In a poem called, starkly, Needle Biopsy 12/22/08, written just a

month before he died, **Updike** describes going for a CAT-scan. Other writers in this position would doubtless have likened the machine to a coffin, but **Updike** remains buoyant, even fascinated: up a happy cul-de-sac, a detour not / detached from consciousness but sweetly part - / I heard machines and experts murmuring about me - / a dulcet tube in which I lay secure and warm / and thought creative thoughts, intensely so, / as in my fading prime. Plans flowered, dreams. The poem ends with the results coming through: the gland, biopsied, showed metastasis, but he does not let this fatal denouement staunch his relish for the peculiarity of the experience.

Another poem is called, equally forbiddingly, Colonoscopy, but is full of unforced humour. He describes, for instance, his doctor: pristine as a bride to the groom with his tools, / his probe and tiny TV camera / and honeyed words. He has a tan / just back from a deserved vacation / from his accustomed nether regions.

As death approaches, **Updike's** mind retreats deeper and deeper into childhood. In one poem he remembers losing his mother in a department store, and bursting into tears, so unforeseeably alone amid these aisles of goods, so unlike home; in another he eulogises his home town of Shillington, its Christmas carols, its cinema, the way it 'forgave me for existing'. I've written these before, these modest facts, he writes, apologetically, but their meaning has no bottom in my mind.

Rare among writers, he enjoyed childhood and loved his parents. 'Both of my parents were very encouraging by nature, and as an only child I reaped all the encouragement they had to give,' he once said. In a poem called Outliving One's Father, he remembers childhood walks with him: At his side ... I both sheltered and cowered. Older now than his father was when he died, **Updike** asks: Now where / can I shelter, how can I hide, / how match his stride / through years he never endured?

In a way, he uses words like rope, to rescue memories from oblivion: My parents seemed to sail ahead of me / like ships receding to destinations where / I'd be forgotten. 'Wait up!' I wailed, / those Sunday walks a faint pretaste of death.

Updike was always an extremely generous book reviewer, finding something to praise even in those writers whose talents his own outshone. But he once attacked the nihilistic French novelist Michel Houellebecq for the narrowness of his solipsistic vision. 'How honest,' he asked, 'is a world-picture that excludes the pleasures of parenting, the comforts of communal belonging, the exercise of daily curiosity, and the moral responsibility, widely met, to make the best of each stage of life, includ-inthe last?'

Now that this last stage has been and gone, the poems he has left behind are testimony to his determination to make the best of it. His own novels explore these same basic human virtues in a manner that is both celebratory and undeceived. His most enduring creation, Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom (the prototype, surely, for Homer Simpson), is a reprehensible character in virtually every way - philandering, deceitful, greedy, slobbish - yet **Updike** invests him with such an appetite for life that his eventual death is extraordinarily moving: it is as though

a part of us all has died.
Updike's poems about the imminence of his own death are, in the same way, both particular and universal: The world is blanketed by foregone deaths, / small beads of ego, bright with appetite, / whose pin-sized prick of light winked out, / bequeathing Earth a jagged coral shelf / unseen beneath the black unheeding waves.
The other poems in the book are as various as ever. They include a love poem to his left hand, now crippled with arthritis, and another to the 84-year-old Doris Day, a parody of Robert Burns and a reflection on a bossy sign in a Northern Ireland hotel (only a poet as avid and unpompous as **Updike** could begin a poem, Smoking in this room, a notice says, / In the Royal Court Hotel, can lead / to a deep cleaning charge of £50.
There's a country-and-western pastiche about Monica Lewinsky: Oh Monica, you Monica / In your little black beret / You beguiled our saintly Billy / And led that creep astray, a poem in praise of the durability of household tools, and another that imagines what it would be like to be a stolen Rembrandt.
Many are distinguished by the way they float freely between the ridiculous and the sublime, refusing to accept any clear distinction between the two. Throughout his working life, **Updike** was an advocate for the magical properties of light verse: 'Light verse precisely lightens,' he wrote, back in 1964, 'it lessens the gravity of its subject.'
One of the most powerful of all the poems in **Endpoint** is about his computer crashing. Anyone who has experienced such a catastrophe - and which of us has not? - will recognise the moment the screen starts to jig: It performed much as / a one-time lawyer in a senile fit / sprsings up to address the jury with / the trademark flourishes and folksy candor. / The pointing arrow then began to trail / black pixels like a painter's dripping brush. Soon the screen is awash with stripes and streaks, so he shuts the machine down - and then come the poem's final lines: May I, too, have a stern and kindly hand / bestow upon my failing circuits peace.
The Review Bookstore
All books reviewed on these pages can be ordered direct at the prices shown next to the telephone symbol. Free p& p on all orders. There is a ten per cent discount on titles costing more than £15. Call 0845 155 0713 or send a UK cheque, payable to The Review Bookstore, to: The Review Bookstore, Parc Menai, Bangor LL57 4FB. These and other great book offers are also available at www.mailbookshop.co.uk.
~~~~~~~~
By Craig Brown s
~~~~~~~~