

# Final volume: A poet to the end: John **Updike's** 'Endpoint' is at once an elegy and a resurrection

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**Source:**

Tulsa World (OK), 04/19/2009

**Document Type:**

Article

**Accession Number:**

2W61228557578

**Database:**

Newspaper Source

**HTML Full Text**

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James D. Watts Jr.

Apr. 19--"**Endpoint**" is the last book John **Updike** finished before his death earlier this year. Two final volumes of short stories, "My Father's Tears and Other Stories" and "The Maples Stories," will be published later this year, but those books were already prepared before **Updike** began assembling the poems that make up "**Endpoint**."

It's fitting that **Updike** -- lauded as he was as a novelist, short story writer and critic -- should have as his last book a volume of poetry. After all, his first published work was poetry -- "The Carpentered Hen," which appeared 51 years ago -- and he kept working at crafting poems throughout his life.

Many critics, and at times **Updike** himself, characterized his poetry as "light verse." There's even a section in "**Endpoint**" titled "Light and Personal," which includes items such as "Country Music," a sing-songy rhyme about Monica Lewinsky and President Bill Clinton, and "For Martha, On Her Birthday, After Her Cataract Operation," a sweet little ditty addressed to **Updike's** wife.

But even in the lightest of **Updike's** poetry is a strain of seriousness, just as he manages to inject moments of sly humor into the profoundly sad poems that make up the opening section of this book.

This section, which gives the book its name, is a series of self-examining poems written on successive birthdays from 2002 to 2007, and poems that comment on **Updike's** decay as cancer slowly took control of his body and ultimately took his

life.

These poems are meditations on age-old topics: the fragility and preciousness of life. "Age I must," **Updike** writes, "but die I would rather not," a line that, in some form or another, has occurred to most of us.

That line also echoes the refrain of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," and scrivening comes up often in these poems. "A life poured into words -- apparent waste/intended to preserve the thing consumed./For who, in that unthinkable future when I am dead, will read?" he writes in "The Author Observes His Birthday, 2005."

That poem can also be seen as a kind of melancholy autobiography, recalling his early love of drawing, his mother's intense yet futile ambitions for literary success of her own, seeing his stories in the New Yorker.

The last poem in the series, "Fine Point, 12/22/08," written just a month before his death, is about the comforts of faith:

"The timbrel creed of praise  
gives spirit to the daily; blood tinges lips.  
The tongue reposes in papyrus pleas,  
saying, 'Surely' -- magnificent, that 'surely' --  
'goodness and mercy shall follow me all  
the days of my life,' my life, forever."

After this, poems about baseball and Doris Day, doo-wop music and the paintings stolen from the Gardner Museum in Boston, the death of golfer Payne Stewart and the "death" of **Updike's** computer, seem almost as a kind of relief - an inky resurrection of the **Updike** who dazzled readers for half a century.

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