

Down the Rabbit hole

Adam Begley

Updike.

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reviewed by Carl Rollyson

Reading Adam Begley's book on John Updike confirms my beliefs that biography matters and that first biographies of major writers invariably leave more to be explored. Begley shows that while it may have seemed effortless for Updike to write sixty-odd books, this production took a lot of effort. Updike was more disciplined than almost all of his contemporaries, except for the likes of Philip Roth and Joyce Carol Oates. And like these two, he suffered at the hands of undiscerning critics, who think a major novel cannot be produced in less than five years. But as some writers know, the more you write, the more the words accumulate, eventually having an incremental impact that can sustain an author like Updike over a lifetime. Producing many books results in some being better than others, a truth that seems inevitable. Rather than a reason for us to deplore a prolific artist, a sizeable body of work affords an opportunity to admire a dedicated craftsman unafraid of failure. Begley writes as an Updike partisan, noting the writer's faults to be sure, but never breaking party ranks. He also gives Updike's critics—John Aldridge and David Foster Wallace, for example—their due. Begley is a good literary advocate, although he sometimes seems blinded, seeking only the

biography in the fiction. His verdicts are not surprising. The Rabbit novels are Updike's best fiction, along with, of course, his many short stories. Updike's light verse and poetry are less important but deserve more attention than they have received. He is given high marks as a book reviewer with a remarkable range, including art commentary—although Begley treats Updike like an amateur art historian who skillfully conveys his impressions but is not to be taken too seriously.

But Begley cannot show what the creative struggle meant to Updike when he was not writing, or when he was writing about not

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writing. Begley was denied access to much of Updike's personal correspondence because Updike's second wife, Martha, who controls the literary estate, would not cooperate with him. From my own research I can tell you that she thought Begley got off to an unseemly fast start too soon after her husband died. Whether Begley made a strategic error in not cultivating the widow, concluded that he would never secure her permission no matter how much he pandered, or did not wish to become ensorcelled by her is hard to say. Trying to appease a literary estate is usually a losing proposition—as Jonathan Bate, Ted Hughes's not-quite-authorized biographer, can tell you after having been excommunicated by the widow Hughes. Biographers have to find their own voices, and this Begley has done by producing a double-column biography, aligning what was happening in his subject's life with what Updike was writing at the time. Begley has done a diligent job interviewing Updike's friends and lovers and, most importantly, Updike's first wife, Mary. The result, for the first part of the biography, is splendid, since Mary is frank not only about Updike's virtues and faults, but also about her own. She verifies, in so far as any work of fiction can, the truth of the Maples stories, for example, and describes the kind of loving, if sometimes

literary critics like Menand want to live in willful ignorance of such information is mystifying—I suppose it messes up their fastidious desire to deal only with the fiction. Why such writers bother to review biography is a bigger question. Their ambition seems to be to cut biography and the biographer down to size, or in this case to extol a biographer who has done only half his job—although Begley should not be handled too harshly. He spoke with many of Updike's lovers with the understanding that he would not out them, perhaps the only way to get them to talk at all. But to suppose the biographer is doing anything more than making a virtue of necessity is to evince ignorance about biography, which is, alas, all too common among otherwise intelligent critics.

Begley's biography breaks apart in 1977, when Updike divorces Mary and marries Martha. The biographer, like an apostle obliged to rewrite scripture, has to rely on Updike's children, who clearly resented his second wife commandeering their father's genius, restricting access to the great man, and, in general, secluding him in the conventional life of a renowned author. But he continued to do fatherly things, while admirably letting his children go their own way even when he had misgivings. He was not merely a church-

disengaged, father Updike was to his four children. Mary was there to watch Updike grow as a writer during his Harvard years and his time abroad in London, when he still had some hope of becoming a first-class illustrator. And she was on hand to deal with his sexual antics during the era that made his novel *Couples* a four-million-copy bestseller.

In *The New Yorker*, Louis Menand commends Begley for being more scrupulous than most biographers in revealing few details about Updike's dalliances. But of course Menand is wrong. Readers of biography need to have the names and dates of a subject's lovers. Who were they, and what were they like, and how did the Updike they knew square with the fellow who wrote the stories, novels, essays, and poems? Was the private Updike noticeably different from the public one, from the one who wrote letters and interacted with his children? Why

goer, but an active participant in the life of his church. He had golfing buddies. Like most Americans, he did not take that much of an interest in politics and rarely made it the subject of his work. He was, however, a diffident supporter of the war in Vietnam, a stance that put him out of step with many of his contemporaries, such as Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and Kurt Vonnegut. In some ways, Updike did not feel qualified to pontificate on politics, the national sport. His demurral has been taken by some as evasive, but if he really hadn't given that much thought to politics, should he just join the dissenters? Perhaps what really upset his contemporaries on the left was his qualified respect for authority and unwillingness to stand on his own self-righteousness. Begley does not pursue this line of thought, but it has always seemed to me that Updike was refreshingly different from the herd of independent

minds who opposed the war—even if he was wrong about it.

Begley exhibits some momentum during the first half of the book, buoyed by his knowledge of his subject's ways and means. This information is one reason he suggests that Martha did what her husband could not. He did not abandon his four children, but he had reached a point where he wanted to remove himself (somewhat) from them. To his children—all mostly grown by then—Updike's departure may have seemed unfeeling. But to him, as a parent, was this such a poor choice? From Martha, Begley could have learned more, but as he revealed in an interview with *The Awl*, he never met Martha.

Begley does not reflect much about how Updike's status as an only child might have affected his own parenting. Did having four children fill a need? Did his interaction with his writer mother—who did so much to encourage him, but who was also sometimes domineering—contribute to the aloofness he displayed when dealing with his own children? The patterns are there to be read in different ways, and perhaps Begley thought it better not to force interpretations. Or perhaps Begley did not have the kind of evidence that would permit more extensive interpretation. A second Updike biographer with access to the personal correspondence that Begley did not see may fill out and enrich this part of the story.

Like a good biographer, Begley dispels many of the shibboleths that saddle Updike. Although he wrote for *The New Yorker* all of his professional life, Updike was not, in key respects, a *New Yorker* writer. He only lived in the city for about two years and rarely made it the subject of his fiction. In fact, he did not like New York much, preferring to live in New England and to write about it when his home ground in Pennsylvania did not preoccupy him. A world traveler, Updike also set his fiction in Africa and South America, and created his own version of the literary life in his stories about Henry Bech. Although Updike received some excellent editing at *The New Yorker*, he hardly took his cue from the staff there, for example, ignoring Katherine White's advice to steer clear of a novel about

an ex-basketball player. Had he been in thrall to her, there would be no Rabbit novels.

So much has been written about Updike and sex that it is refreshing to see Begley return often to Updike's treatment of religion and religious feeling—its place in his life, in his work, and in the lives of others. He was a man of faith who always had his doubts. His freethinking stance is a manifestation of a man who was marvelously open to experience, to registering the quotidian, and to intimations of immortality in the ordinary. A case in point is "Pigeon Feathers." Begley suggests the story is about Updike's "adolescent crisis of faith"—although to put it in purely autobiographical terms unnecessarily delimits the reach of this masterpiece. Begley almost too dutifully builds up his biographical perimeter. Thirteen-year-old David Kern is Updike's stand-in. Together with a mother and father who also resemble Updike's parents, David is boxed up in a farmhouse in Firetown, a fictionalization of Plowville, the natal home Linda Updike insisted on moving back to despite her son's and husband's resistance. They did not want to be removed from Shillington, Updike's beloved hometown, which becomes Olinger in his fiction. While it is good to know that Updike's parents were the starting point for the story, Begley does not seem to notice that the characters Updike creates seem harsher and less nuanced than Linda and Wesley Updike. Begley paraphrases the story's exquisite opening, and as a result much is lost in the translation. Here are the first three sentences:

When they moved to Firetown, things were upset, displaced, rearranged. A red cane-back sofa that had been the chief piece in the living room at Olinger was here banished, too big for the narrow country parlor, to the barn, and shrouded under a tarpaulin. Never again would David lie on its length all afternoon eating raisins and reading mystery novels and science fiction and P. G. Wodehouse.

Updike has often been accused of writing precious prose, of emitting perfect sentences that do not amount to much more than an expression of elegant style. But as an analysis

of Updike at his best shows, such dismissiveness is nonsense. This beautifully measured beginning is about more than David and Updike. It is about deracination and its disturbing consequences for the human psyche.

The material world, in this case, is solidly observed in a succession of objects that help the boy own his existence. When those objects are disarranged, David feels as banished as the sofa and is dead to this new world. He might as well be living under a shroud. He is disoriented as he looks at his books, “stacked, all out of order.” But rather than discourse on his character’s feelings, Updike shows us David’s world. We can see it for ourselves, instead of being told about it. The eclectic, casual, and comfortable world of David’s adolescence has been disrupted, as Begley says, but “Pigeon Feathers” is also about a rage for regularity that helps us situate ourselves in the reality we have built. So David’s sets about “to find a new place” by arranging his books. In its quiet, unassuming way, the story’s opening paragraph is reminiscent of the moving scene in *The Sound and the Fury* when Benjy wails because Luster is going the wrong way around Jefferson’s square, quieting only when Luster turns the wagon around so that to Benjy everything appears “each in its ordered place.”

David’s mother cruelly demands that he shoot the pigeons his grandmother says are fouling the furniture in the barn. A reluctant David, goaded by his father who, in effect, calls his son soft, shoots a whole mess of the birds, feeling like a “creator,” clever at seeing and shooting “these little smudges and flickers.” To this theological conceit, Updike adds a warrior mentality that looks upon the carnage as dead enemies, “falling with good, final weight.” Dead, the birds are to be admired as beautifully engineered specimens: “And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless

mechanics of the feathers played idle designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him.” Begley rightly concludes that David’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).” The god who “lavished such craft upon these worthless birds” could not refuse to “let David live forever.”

The notes to the Library of America’s new *Updike: Early Collected Stories* provide the author’s own 1996 gloss on this story he wrote in 1960 as a reconstruction of his “adolescent trauma of religious doubt mixed with the trauma of being moved from a small town to an isolated, unimproved farm.” Even a single word like “unimproved” takes us deeper into the story, into David’s and our own increasingly atavistic feelings. But Updike doesn’t leave off where Begley’s biography begins. Instead, Updike makes the theological/philosophical thrust of the story paramount: “The notion that killing other creatures relieves the fear of death owes something to Hemingway. At the age of sixty-two, I can scarcely improve on the vision and affirmation of the last paragraph.” And, it must be said, any biographer or critic would be hard put to improve on Updike’s characterization of his work.

Begley’s book has only so much room to discuss individual works—his discussion of “Pigeon Feathers” is accorded two substantial paragraphs—and perhaps to say much more is to defeat narrative in favor of analysis. But for Updike’s best work, more of a buildup might have been preferable to cataloguing both his achievements and his failures. Even so, Begley has done the good work of a first biography destined to be superseded—not by jettisoning his adumbrations about Updike the man and his work, but by building upon them.