

Interview of John Updike for 'Politics'

WHERE THE *COUPLES* ARE TODAY

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Famous American writer John Updike, guest of the Writers' October Meeting held this year visited our newsroom the day before yesterday and on that occasion he had an exclusive interview that we are publishing today. The interview was led by our associates, members of the column entitled Culture of the newspaper 'Politics' – Milka Lučić, Milan Vlajčić and Dušan Simić.

Three of your books are translated into our language, collection of short stories *Pigeon Feathers*, novels *Centaur* and *Couples*. Is your entire work well presented by that?

- I am glad that such a number of my books is translated here. It is a good choice, but mainly from my earlier work.

What is missing to complete the impression concerning your work?

- I think that I am most famous in the USA for my two novels about *Rabbit – Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux*. The first book is being translated here as far as I know. Concerning the other one its title is difficult to translate and I think that the translation of the whole book would be quite difficult for a translator. Generally speaking, some of my books that I love so much are very difficult to be translated, they contain many word plays that cannot be translated.

SIMILARITY OF YOUNG AND OLD AGE

You have said that our translation misses your later work. How much is it different from your earlier work that we are familiar with?

- I was born and I grew up in Pennsylvania. I lived there till the age of twenty and I continued to write there till the age of 35, so my complete early work is related to the life of that environment. *Couples* is my first novel from New England and all of my subsequent books as well. Besides this geographic determination, my later work is the work of an older man, it is less innocent, which might be both good and bad; and also it deals with the issues of middle-aged people. Yet, I think there is no significant turning point in my life and in my work. I try to follow one course.

Your first novel *The Poorhouse Fair* (1958) was highly praised in America and Europe. In which way is it created, since it appears that some of the topics of that novel you haven't abandoned later?

- Actually, that is my second novel. Before that I wrote a quite comprehensive novel *Home* for which I thought it was not mature for publishing. As a matter of fact no one

was interested in publishing it. Then I wrote short stories and *The Poorhouse Fair*. I think that for a young writer topic dealing with the life of old people is quite convenient, since both young and old age contain a sort of innocence. It is a very short novel, shorter than *Centaur*. The plot takes place in the future and it is about crisis and deterioration of America. That is a visionary novel, similar to Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*.

According to numerous critics that novel is your perception of hell; hell occurs in your later work as well, for example in *Couples*?

- Both are the visions of an unsatisfactory society. The word hell itself is a bit too strong there. Yet, both novels depict a dreary life. You are right since these are the two most socially conscious novels of mine. I am trying to describe the society that has lost many ideals. *Couples* is the novel in which personal relationships are completely imposed and in which the faith in all institutions is lost. Similar losing of faith occurs in *The Poorhouse Fair* as well. There is a certain connection between these two novels, but I wasn't thinking about it while I was writing them.

MARRIAGE HAS CHANGED

Ten years after publishing *Couples*, will you tell us how America lives today in 1978 and how would the characters from *Couples* live?

- *Couples* are ten years older now, lots of them are divorced and remarried. Their children are in their twenties now, *Couples* are worried about them and they behave in the manner that *Couples* cannot understand. I am at the same age as the characters from *Couples*, and I have entered a phase in which I am mostly satisfied with my life. Generally speaking, I think that America is an easier place for living nowadays than in the time of *Couples*.

Has the lifestyle that you are describing in *Couples* significantly changed during these ten years?

- I think that nowadays people of that age have less children, they are more educated, they get married later and less expect from their marriage. People from *Couples* have expected too much from their marriage, family; that has been the only dominant aspect of their lives. Then they have understood that this is not enough. Ten years later people know more and expect less. Women in particular are more conscious of themselves as personalities, of their qualities, rights. Old form of marriage has died to a large extent. That old society was very obsessed with marriage and its destruction was considered a tragedy. Now, society has moved from that small, limited world, from family as a nucleus. People from *Couples* have never gone through any sort of revolution, or any phase of reconsideration. They grew up during World War II, during cruel years of war, and the people ten years younger than them grew up in America that experienced severe turbulences, when all values were brought into question so they had to change their

attitude towards those values in their youth. People from *Couples* reconsidered some of the key questions very late in life. For example: what indeed a good life is, what America should be, what people should be. Thus, what we see in *Couples* is a kind of ‘an amateur revolution’, the revolution that people completely dedicated to their city lifestyle try to conduct.

Do you think that that kind of lifestyle occurred outside the boundaries of America as well?

- I think that in Western Europe after World War II, people began to a large extent to return to their ‘private life’, to create large families, to become closed within them, which made potential dissatisfactions. However, it is for certain that there are significant differences. America is young and it has to discover many things for itself. For example, a mistress in Western Europe is a kind of institution. In America such an institution doesn’t exist. There is a tendency that she should be one best friend’s wife. That creates a social conflict. We Americans are stupid and we always try as children to discover everything by ourselves individually what the others have already discovered. Accordingly, my *Couples* try to discover the world for themselves.

Is your new novel *Marry Me* a kind of continuation of *Couples*?

- I want to discover you a little secret. *Marry Me* is the novel that I wrote before *Couples*, but I didn’t publish it immediately, I waited and published its revised edition. In this way *Marry Me* is a childish, innocent version of *Couples*. While in *Couples* I try to describe the whole one segment of society, *Marry Me* deals with only two couples. One doesn’t perceive that characters from *Couples* are in love with each other. They seem somehow rigid, while in *Marry Me* there is a certain gentleness, though the plot takes place in the same ‘territory’ of marital relationships. Additionally, many of my short stories deal with it.

CRUEL DISCRIMINATION

In your early short stories, characters are young people, poetic personalities similar to Haulden Caulfield from Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. Then your characters in your later work get older together with you and they change...

- I am different from Salinger, a highly remarkable writer, since I don’t think that youth is such a magical part of life. I believe that Salinger truly thinks that young people are better than old ones. I wrote about young people when I was young – excluding certain exceptions such as *The Poorhouse Fair* – and I wrote about youth in the way that I felt and perceived it. Perhaps the stories from *Pigeon Feathers* are the best that I have written. There is a specific freshness in youth, everything is new to a man, the feeling that is impossible to repeat in the middle age. Then I have been getting older and I have discovered that there is something known in America as the middle age crisis. Several of my latest books are actually dedicated to that crisis which is reflected in the first place in the fact that a man realizes that he is closer to the grave

than to the cradle and he usually makes one last attempt to change his life. My books are actually dedicated to that.

Is it more difficult to write about young people that grow up and change than about the old ones that are like in *Couples* bound by old moral?

- It is difficult in literature to take young people for serious. In a European novel there is the concept of legal age that occurs approximately at the age of twenty; I am not familiar with the age of Julien Sorel from Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, but that is nearly the age when a man starts to create moral dilemmas for himself and when he becomes as a personality useful for literature. Before that people are children, they belong to the scope of literature for children or they ask themselves serious questions without right answers, and they seem sometimes a bit funny. I wrote about people at that age when they were the part of my life. However, I believe that if Salinger had continued to write, he would have written about young people even today, since he likes young people only because they are young. There are lots of people in America that like young people only because they are young and I consider that a cruel discrimination. Since that would mean that only young people are full of life while the others are garbage that waits to be picked up and taken to the dump.

You have followed *Rabbit* throughout his life by writing the second novel about him. Do you have the same plan for *Couples*?

- I've been thinking about these cycles in my work. I have now the *Rabbit's* cycle that might get the third novel. In short stories some characters have also returned. If I return to *Couples* I will write then about the divorced women. Almost all marriages from *Couples* are divorced. Women remain in large houses and thus you get the whole quarters in which women live alone as bewitched personalities, as witches, bewitched by their loneliness, obsession with themselves, with their relationship towards other women. Accordingly, if I continue to write about *Couples* that will be the story about women that reach the new crisis, the crisis of loneliness. That is a cruel period in American life cycle.

CHARACTER OF A MODERN WOMAN

At what age will you meet them again and will they be reconcile with their lives or more anxious than in *Couples*?

- I think to meet them in their fifties when people are – after turbulent forties – as if by the rule reconciled with themselves. The period of home creating, of giving birth to children, of that which mostly justifies existence, I talk about America – it is probably different here – has passed and those women ask themselves: what next? Some of them try to return to their careers that they abandoned in their twenties. There are other issues, the issues mainly dealt with by women novelists in America. In the first place I am interested in the aspect of a bewitched woman. I read the book of the French novelist Michel about witches. I find that puzzle quite intriguing, that element

of the conflict between man and nature reflected through the character of a witch. Yet, I am not sure that I will ever write that book.

You often write about eternal problems of moral and love, that is in its own manner the topic of *Couples*. It seems that in that aspect you are similar to Denis de Rougemont?

- When I went through some love crises I was proposed to read Denis de Rougemont, which I did. My impression about that novel was that it brought the love suffering to the extreme, which Rougemont linked to one specific moment in the development of Christian civilization. Actually, all of us in the West suffer from that complex of love as heresy. Due to that we expect too much from it. Thus, *Couples* is the novel about people that expect too much from love. I haven't read Rougemont lately and I haven't thought about that, even my latest books haven't deal with that any more. Yet, I have been obsessed with that for the entire ten years, and in the certain way I return to that in the novel *Marry Me*.

In that novel I deal with one cruel aspect of love. When one loves someone very much, he stops feeling sorry for him, he stops understanding that the other one suffers as well, so the love relationship gets something unreal. That is after all one permanent topic in literature. There are always writes that depict women in some manner dry and cruel.

Hemingway always depicts women somehow cold, man loves them, but because of that he doesn't see them; they seem very pale in comparison to Tolstoy's depiction in which women are magnificent or to any other valuable European writer. In their work you see a woman as a whole, the woman with whom you could sympathize. Few American writers succeed in that. Henry James maybe to some extent in one of his novels. I am not familiar with the reasons, but it seems that it has been difficult for the Americans to create a personality of a woman.

Let's return to Rougemont. I have read him a lot. I think he is interesting even if one doesn't agree concerning his Christian premises. Lots of his messages remain even nowadays.

TIME BURDENED WITH HISTORY

Moral issues are in the centre of your literary research. From where does the need come to present them sometimes in the form of myth?

- We live in the time that is quite burdened with history and we cannot pretend that we stand at the beginning. Numerous stories are behind us – Homer, the Bible and the classics of many literatures – and it couldn't seem to a man that these stories aren't told before him. Myth is one instrument to introduce past experiences to modern literature. On the other hand, I think that a writer should include in his writings something that will occur beyond narration, something that will be recognized by a careful reader. There is for example in *Couples* some far away echo of the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. For certain, that is not in the first place. My essential idea is to enlighten one new situation, one new type of behaviour of society.

How do you feel about current American literature particularly in comparison to its 'golden age?'

- The past always seems better than the present. Generally speaking, American literature of the twenties was extraordinary, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis were great writers and the twenties were 'the golden years' of American literature. Yet, that was the time when literature was significant all over the world, when the master pieces were created all over Europe. Fifty years later, a writer is a relatively less important personality in a general cultural climate, even writing is a less lucrative profession. Painting is for example more lucrative and attractive. There is no writer that would make fortune today as Picasso. In one word, I would say that writing has lost to a large extent the place that it had. Yet, there are still good writers although of a different kind. During these fifty years Americans have found out lots of about the world, so that a certain naïve strength that Hemingway and Faulkner had wouldn't be so popular today. The strength of other kind is needed, for example that of Saul Bellow that is supported by wisdom and education. There are other great writers and there is the audience that longs for reading. Besides Bellow, there are lots of urban Jewish writers. It is a pity that Salinger doesn't write any more.

Do you include into those urban Jewish writers this year's winner of the Nobel Prize Singer?

- Singer is more a Polish writer who lives in America. However, the tradition of Yiddish literature in which Singer writes has significantly enriched American literature especially by its own magic element. American Jews have enriched American literature as a whole by adding some more general value to their own life experiences. That is important in literature. Generally speaking, I think that writing is less a matter of talent, it is more of a wish to say something, to present the experiences of many people by describing personal experiences. At least I have the illusion that I do that.