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FT Books Essay **John Updike**

## Why time isn't up for Updike

The American writer's stock has slumped in the #MeToo era. But Diana Evans still finds inspiration in his acute depictions of domestic life





John Updike in Ipswich, Massachusetts, in 1962 © Dennis Stock/Magnum  
Diana Evans MARCH 16, 2018



“Rabbits and treacle are just not my scene.” So said a fellow writer to me recently when asked her opinion of John Updike. “I can’t get along with him,” she added with a huff of exasperation, “it’s like going through treacle.” The richness of his language was her main objection, but others have levelled more serious complaints, the pinnacle of which is probably the jibe related by David Foster Wallace, “just a penis with a thesaurus”. And that was 20 years ago. Now it’s worse. A fortnight ago the literary critic and novelist James Wood dismissed Updike as “unreadable” on account of his misogyny. Perhaps even worse than that, another fellow writer whose opinion I asked answered, “Who?”

John Updike has fallen from grace. As far as feminism is concerned, he was never in the vicinity of grace in the first place, what with his degrading portrayals of women and his helpless centralising of the (his) libidinous male ego. Artistically, though, his greatness has always been irrefutable, to those who like treacle at least. A longstanding darling of *The New Yorker*, he published reams of exquisite short stories capturing, like birds in flight, like real living, breathing things, the most prosaic yet sensuous details of ordinary life. Poems too, and essays, and reviews — words flowed from him at a steady rate of a thousand a day, filling around 60 books, most famously the Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom tetralogy, which Julian Barnes in 2009 described as “still the greatest postwar American novel”, and which won Updike two Pulitzers.

But things are different now. In this time of #MeToo and #TimesUp and harassment-shamed MPs and unbridled Hollywood penises and depraved charity workers and whatever’s coming up next week, our heroes are being questioned. The uncertainty is contagious. I worry about my daughter’s hockey changing rooms and what random pervert may lurk in wait. A harmless-looking man holds a lift door open for me at a station and I wonder whether he too is an opportunist pussy-grabber and whether I am going to be the one to meet his next irrepressible

impulse. Appearing before us is the historic and enduring reality of a widespread lack of male control over the male corpus, making it a pretty strange time to be appreciative of the lofty creative fruits of male narcissism.

Yet, on the corner of my desk, from the cover of *The Early Stories*, Updike's face looks softly out into an unknown middle distance, waiting to be read. On my bedside table among a pile of other books — Mary Gaitskill, James Baldwin, William Burroughs (yikes!), Virginia Woolf — he is walking along a beach in a white shirt on the cover of his biography, looking windswept and satisfied. Me, I like the treacle. I really like the treacle. Updike's sentences are like hot-air balloons drifting through a dazzling harlequin sky. They are life-affirming. They are, in fact, narcissistic, but in a good way, which is that they are interested in the achievement of their own beauty and aware of the responsibility of this beauty — of Updike's self-appointed task of giving “the mundane its beautiful due”.

Influenced throughout his literary career by an inclination towards drawing and painting (he spent a year at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford before becoming a writer), Updike approached the page as canvas, his vision rich and encyclopaedically precise, his clauses having the texture and specificity of carefully considered brushstrokes. How can we (or I at least) not be made momentarily happier by a sentence such as “Invisible rivulets running brokenly make the low land of the estate sing”, from the garden scene in *Rabbit, Run*? Or, from *Couples*, a novel in which it is admittedly harder to find wonderful sentences that are not encased by mentions of breasts, but still: “Shed needles from the larches had collected in streaks and puddles on the tarpaper and formed rusty ochre drifts along the wooden balustrade and the grooved aluminium base of the sliding glass doors”? This is acute sensitivity to nature and domestic realism merging seamlessly in a mastery of rhythmic description.

Virginia Woolf said in *A Room of One's Own* that books have a way of influencing each other, and it is certainly true that Updike's *Couples* was a prime impetus behind my novel *Ordinary People*. I remember clearly the moment that I read the opening page, in which Piet and Angela Hanema are in their bedroom changing after a party. I was in my own bedroom, in the late afternoon, which I also shared with a man in the usual and really quite oppressive marital tradition, and I could picture vividly the Hanemas' “low-ceilinged colonial” chamber, whose woodwork was painted “the shade of off-white commercially called eggshell”, and the “spring midnight” pressing in on the “cold windows”. Somehow the woodwork, the windows, combined with the “reddened fingertips” of Angela's hands and Piet's red hair, made them seem so acutely human, so manifest, so visible.

And it struck me, with a hint of anger — when was the last time I had seen a black man or a black woman doing something in a book that did not have anything specific and/or tragic to do

with racism, migration, slavery, poverty, injustice, knife crime or exotic food? How often do middle-class black people in books just get to live in their damn houses and open and close their wardrobes and be aware of each other's fingertips? I desired visibility on a most basic level. It seemed incredibly important, all of a sudden, for the purposes of the humanisation and normalisation of what Lauryn Hill might term "my men and my women", that some brown person in a novel should be witnessed experiencing an ordinary domestic irritation such as Rabbit's problem with his coat hanger not being accessible enough for him to hang up his coat neatly when he gets home from work; and in the careful, specific rendering of such an irritation are embedded the modern manifestations and legacies of what black people have experienced throughout the history that has left us invisible as whole and sentient beings.

I am grateful to Updike for that moment. I am grateful also to Richard Yates for *Revolutionary Road* and James Salter for *Light Years*, novels that likewise posit the domestic realm as a valid site for literature (if "Great Male Narcissists" come in threes — Wallace aligned Updike with Philip Roth and Norman Mailer — these were mine).

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As for female writers, I could not have done without the work of Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Jhumpa Lahiri and Rachel Cusk in finding the courage to write about what are typically and disparagingly considered "feminine" themes: when a woman writes about marriage, she is writing about a marriage; when a man writes about marriage, he is writing about Society, which in the

case of Updike is interesting because he seemed so incapable of seeing clearly beyond his own viewpoint. Angela Hanema is sentient only through Piet's randy, disappointed eyes, his preoccupation with his diminishing quota of life's sex.

What is missing from much of Updike's work is a convincing female consciousness. In *Couples*, women are frequently described in animalistic, inanimate or juvenile terms. Angela is "a fair soft brown-haired woman, thirty-four, going heavy in her haunches and waist yet with a girl's fine hard ankles". Georgene, with whom Piet is having an affair at the start of the novel, has "a strangely prominent coccyx", "the good start of a tail", and is "more bone than Angela". And how could any feminist or indeed any woman not be offended by a sentence like, "As she struggled, lamplight struck zigzag fire from her slip and static electricity made its nylon adhere to her flank"? Her *flank*? Never mind the fancy fire and the nylon and the giving of the beautiful due to the mundane, don't cows have flanks? In Piet's world — that is, his mind, which within the system of patriarchy is the world as well — women are at once childlike and bestial, intellectually shaded yet viscerally more potent, arousing the male urge simultaneously

to conquer and be mothered.

It's hard for a female reader to go along with this and feel nurtured or recognised in her reading experience. The thing is, though, Piet and Rabbit are ridiculous. They're big, salivating, calamitous boys playing out the lost fantasies of youth in the bodies of faltering men. They're sad, and I think on some level Updike knows this, the inadequacy of men, their weakness in the face of their given power.

Or maybe I'm giving him too much credit. "My duty as a writer is to make the best record I can of life as I understand it," he once said, "and that duty takes precedence for me over all these other considerations." It's so easy for men to say things like that and get away with it, to stand firmly on the solid ground of their obliviousness. But he kept to his duty, which is less easy for the artist to do. Oblivious to his myopia, he painted his wordy pictures. Are we to discard him because he got so much wrong? Should we take the pictures down? Burn the books? Turn off the music? Leave all the sexists lying by the side of the road clutching their beautiful art while we walk on towards cultural purity? Am I not allowed to have treacle any more because of Donald Trump?

The other day I was in my kitchen with my feminist older sister, a silver-dreadlocked mixed-race woman of vegan diet and staunch politics, and I decided to show her the video to Kendrick Lamar's "Humble" because I had just seen him in concert and was still high. I knew straight away it was a mistake. We wear our feminism differently. My feminism runs so deep that I have always felt reluctant to name it as if it were something extra to myself. It is an assertion of my feminism that I do not see why I should be deprived of the world's dopest beats just because the lyrics or the images do not please my feminism (within reason — William Burroughs's shooting of his wife and then hardly even acknowledging her as a human being kind of spoiled *Junky* for me). Anyway, my sister was offended by the video's cleavages and waving buttocks. Lamar was myopic to think that women would appreciate real stretch-marked buttocks over the usual unattainable airbrushed ones. Better no buttocks at all, or at least male ones as well, for balance? There is still a long way to go. My sister's mouth pursed. I was no longer nodding to the beats, but continuing to enjoy them in secret.

*Diana Evans's new novel 'Ordinary People' is published on April 5 by Chatto & Windus*

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