

## A RELAXED CONVERSATION WITH JOHN UPDIKE



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John Updike's distinguished career as a professional writer officially began with poetry when, in August 1954, *The New Yorker* published his poem "Duet, with Muffled Brake Drums". His first book was also a volume of poems, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*. In spite of this poetical beginning it is in fiction where John Updike won for himself an indisputable place among the major American artists. Moreover he has gracefully maintained this status for over three decades since the publication of *Rabbit, Run* in 1960.

This author of some forty books among which novels, short stories, poems, and literary criticism are included, lives in a beautiful secluded white house upon a hill in a charming country village in the state of Massachusetts. His appearance immediately strikes the beholder as youthful, so much so that his locks of pure white hair are not out of place topping and framing the youthful figure and features, contributing to, instead of destroying, his generally boyish appearance. This man also possesses the friendliest and warmest of smiles which instantly welcomes the interlocutor-forcing him, so to speak, to forget that he is in the presence of "the supreme archer of American literature", as he has been recently called. Mr. Updike has a wonderfully rich voice which is extremely agreeable to listen to. One of his charms is that, in spite of having sufficiently demonstrated that he is a master of the English language, or perhaps because of that, he is not in the least too proud to use all different registers of his language, including frequent colloquialisms that perfectly become his unaffected demeanour.

This interviewer was fortunate enough to hold a brief conversation with Mr. Updike which turned out to be erratic and desultory only because the author kindly suffered the shallow need of the former to satisfy her curiosity about some particular aspects of his personality and art. This opportunity was doubly appreciated because of Mr. Updike's long avowed dislike for interviews which he rationalises thus:

INTERVIEWER: Mr. Updike, it is a widely known fact that you have a strong aversion for interviews. What is it about interviews that generates such distinct dislike?

UPDIKE: Interviews are useful for other people. An author, a fiction writer, protects himself. He invents, he lies; people who write fiction are people who like to lie and would make up stories and when we are interviewed we are supposed to tell the truth. We are met in our own face, wearing our own clothes and we feel naked, naked suddenly, so that we have to produce in our own person. No, they make me uncomfortable and also I think the kind of thing you say in interviews is not exactly untrue but it is not as true as what you try to say in a poem or in a story. There is your truth! There is your attempt to describe the world.

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean to say that your literary universe is more real to you than your private everyday life?

UPDIKE: Yes, it is the valuable truth. Everyday life, my everyday life, is very much like anybody else's everyday life, and my opinions about many things are much like anybody's opinions and the only thing that makes me worth interviewing is the fact that I am to some

extent creative and can cook up a poem or a novel. But other than that I am very ordinary and I would not interview myself if I had a choice.

INTERVIEWER: I see your point about interviews, but I cannot bring myself to agree with your self-description. In *Memories of the Ford Administration* you cite Rousseau: "I am well aware that the reader does not require information but I, on the other hand, feel compelled to give it to him." Are you trying to capture the good will of the audience? Is this an apology to your readers, a kind of *captatio benevolentiae*.<sup>1</sup>

UPDIKE: [laughing] Yes, I suppose it is, especially in that novel. You know I am also speaking for my narrator, too, my narrator is not Updike but this Alf Clayton, an English professor like yourself, and somewhat erratic, who in answer to a questionnaire, a little interview as it were, he goes on and on and writes a 400 page novel. So yes, it is my apology in a way, but really his apology. Rousseau is saying that the writer writes not just because the audience needs to hear this, but because he wants to tell it. So Yes, I am in a small way preparing my reader for a real outpouring.

Interviewer: Are you then saying that it is mainly your own desire to give information and communicate, which you satisfy through your fictional characters, the *Raison d'etre* of your being a writer?

UPDIKE: I think so, not only me but everybody else. All these writers in this day and age when we have television and movies and MTV, and you can go to discos, and when you have all this alternative entertainment! Why do these writers continue to inflict all these books upon us? It's horrible, isn't it? And we do it because we think we have something important to say, and often that important thing is, you know, your childhood or the way the men in your home state wore their hats. There was an American writer, now dead, called Peter Taylor who went on and on about the way the hats in Tennessee varied from city to city. You know in Memphis they wear a certain kind of hat and in Knoxville another and in Chattanooga yet another kind of hat. He wrote pages about this. And it interested him! I think your own life interests you and to such extent that you cannot stop talking about it, in a way. But if you write fiction you are trying to disguise it, you make a moral and make an exciting story. But in a way yes, it is all this compulsion to express yourself.

INTERVIEWER: You have expressed your opinion that a writer has to sing his own song and deliver what strikes him as worth telling and you have also said that you try to write the best book you know how, rather than writing a best seller (Plath 1994, 82). Isn't it difficult in this materialistic society to be a professional writer without falling into the trap of "singing", as you put it, what the audience wants to hear or perhaps what the author can "sing" best? In other words, do you ever compromise and write not about what you feel you want to communicate, but what you suspect the audience wants to hear? I guess what I really want to ask you is if you find it hard to write without having in mind the sales of the books as many first class writers before you have been compelled to do.

UPDIKE: I don't expect to write a best seller the way Anne Rice or Stephen King do, but it is nice when people buy the books and you have a little money in the bank and you can live in a big white house on the hill by a pond and purple loosestrife. Also, it is not just the general public to worry about, but for many years basically I supported myself by writing for a magazine -and you have the editors, and you try to please the editors, and they to some extent are trying to please the readers, and it is not always easy to know when you are speaking fully honestly or when you are trying to please an imaginary reader. But surely all writers, even Kafka, even Gertrude Stein, try in some ways to reach an audience, a reader. It may be a very special reader, a very rare reader. This act of communication is, I

<sup>1</sup> Updike quotes this passage from Rousseau's *Confessions (Memories of the Ford Administration)*.

think, like a flirtation, a conversation. This wish to reach out and somehow touch another person is, I think, part of the writing impulse. You should not be too afraid of trying to get heard, but you must be careful that what you are saying is what you really want to say.

The other problem is that when you are young you read certain kinds of books. People agree on what a good book is. There are conventions. A novel does such and such and all the time you must fight received ideas about what makes literature. Yes, because you cannot write in dead forms, you cannot write Tolstoy again. Tolstoy did it! He was the best Tolstoy we are going to get so you have to, in a way, also free yourself from this kind of pleasing others, trying to write the classics of the kind that have already been written.

INTERVIEWER: The variety of your writings is overwhelming! You have successfully published novels, short stories, poems, literary criticism, and even a play. Do you think you can express yourself best in a particular genre?

UPDIKE: I think the novel is most me. I mean I'm most myself in a funny way. I'm least constrained by trying to please other people. It's your own kind of space. It's a big space, a novel: three or four hundred pages. If you cannot express yourself in the course of a novel you are not apt to be yourself anywhere else. I began to write short stories quite young. I sold my first one when I was 22 and they kind of came naturally to me and some people tell me that my short stories are my best work; perhaps that form and that length is good for me. The poetry: I am not considered an important poet in English and yet I think trying to write poetry and writing it now and then makes me a better prose writer because I am more attuned to what the language can do. I am aware of writing language instead of just gushing. So, I like them all, I enjoy them all in turn. I enjoy all of them because I can go from one to the other. I would hate to be like some writers and just write only novels. You finish one and then you have nothing to look forward to but beginning another.

INTERVIEWER: You are a superb literary commentator, and you have not mentioned that genre, are there any reasons for that omission?

UPDIKE: Yes, I did forget it because I am sort of ashamed of it. I never wanted to be a critic or a book reviewer but I did it because it was kind of easy money. *The New Yorker* paid well for reviews and I did not think their reviews were very good back in the late 70s.

INTERVIEWER: It seems to me that you do not exercise, when judging yourself as a literary critic, the generosity and sympathy that you openly squander on many of the authors you have commented on. Myriads, among whom I certainly include myself, find it a pleasure to read your criticism.

UPDIKE: Good! Thank you! I just finished a review, actually, and I thought of your kind words and I thought I must finish this because somebody out there in far-off Spain thinks I am a good reviewer.<sup>1</sup>

INTERVIEWER: Yes, indeed I do. Your empathy for the subjects of your commentaries is remarkable and, as it seems, consistent with your essential attitude as a fiction writer.<sup>2</sup>

UPDIKE: Well, you sort of get into them. It is like anything else. The book is fresh in your mind and you care. Well, there are several tasks involved in being a critic: one is trying to state what the author thought he/she was doing, to grasp the motive behind the book, and another is to give an opinion of whether or not it was a total success or only a partial success. So, I try to make the reviews, in a sense, creative and maybe even tell the writers more than they know about the book itself, what the real impulses behind it were. I do

<sup>1</sup> Updike is here referring to a previous conversation in which I expressed the same opinion on his literary criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Updike has asserted the opinion that it is necessary for a writer "to try to empathize and try to feel what it's like to be in some shoes other than your own." See *Conversations* p. 252.

enjoy writing the reviews as long as they don't interfere with what I think of as my important work which is the production of fiction and creative writing. But I have enjoyed being a critic, I mean so far as I am a critic, and have written as you know quite a lot of it, really; four big books of it and I could assemble another book without too much trouble. I feel it has taken a little too much of my energy in the last 20 years. I've just spent a little too much time at it. Maybe because it is relatively easy. You know somebody is going to buy it, because they have asked you to write it. You cannot go wrong, in a way. If you write a short story or a poem you can easily fail. You may entirely fall off the horse but with a book review how can you fall off the horse? No, it is always the other guy who can fall off. You are a reviewer. You are always right, always on top of the situation.

INTERVIEWER: In the "Spanish sonnets" you seem to have written about the impressions you received on a trip to Spain. would you mind expanding on that topic for your Spanish readers?

UPDIKE: You know it is funny because it was an odd trip and a touching trip now that I look back on it. My mother, as I said the other day, was a would-be novelist who was in love with things Spanish. And she took three trips to Spain: one with my father and it made him sick and he died not long afterwards. I don't blame Spain; he was sick before they went. My mother practised speaking Spanish but she did not speak it very well; she did manage to explain to the waiter: "está enfermo". He died not too long after. Then she went with an old school mate who got sick there and later died. In the third trip she asked me to come and although I was scared I thought I should do it as a good son. I took my daughter and the three of us were in Spain for a week visiting those places around Madrid where something historical had happened. Avila, for example, we went to. I looked at the poems today and we went as far south as Toledo and always in each place there was something historical. In Avila, as I remember, there was the convent of Saint Thomas, "el convento de Santo Tomás", and the one sentence I had to speak was "¿Dónde está el convento de Santo Tomás?" The Spaniard would look at me, squint, and try to figure out what I was saying and then a light would go on and he would say; "¡Ah, el convento de Santo Tomás!" The places I was asking for were always close by, as it turned out. We finally found it and inside there was a kind of sarcophagus for somebody. Ferdinand? No, it could not have been Ferdinand. It was his son, Don Juan. It was sweet, but I couldn't sleep at night somehow. I had just begun to live with my wife and the poems were sort of to her about how I missed her, and yet, I think they are among my better poems because there is stuff here, there's content. Every day there was something new to see. Every day a new experience and yes, I can see why my mother loved Spain. It is a lovable place.

INTERVIEWER: I am not sure whether these poems were ever translated into Spanish.

UPDIKE: I think some good soul translated them into Spanish, I forgot where they appeared but I have seen them in Spanish. They are probably better than they are in English, but it was a while ago. The poems came out in the late seventies. You were only a little girl then.

INTERVIEWER: You are awfully nice to think so and you have just won my everlasting gratitude. Tell me, are you happy with the translations that have been done of your works?

UPDIKE: Luckily I don't know any languages. You know, Nabokov, who did know at least French and Russian and a little German, was always correcting his translations and it seemed to be a terrible waste of time. You should write in the language you know best and not worry about translations.

INTERVIEWER: But the hazard is that there being so many ambiguities in literature it just happens that a translator, even a good one, can actually spoil a literary work rather easily.

Maybe Nabokov could in this way avoid some horrible misunderstandings which are not too uncommon in translations.

UPDIKE: Oh yes, I know they can misunderstand. And I do know enough French to know the terrible mistakes. The French are fairly arrogant in their translations. They never ask me what a phrase means and, of course, there are tricky idioms in anything. The French never ask, they just put what they think whereas the Germans and the Japanese are very conscientious. They submit long lists of: "What does this mean and what does that mean?" Recently I got a new publisher in Spain, whether they are retranslating or republishing I don't know. When I was very young as a writer the book called *Rabbit Run* was going to be translated into Spanish. It had already been translated into French and I think into Swedish and I was still excited by the idea of being translated, when I was dismayed to learn that the Spanish translator, who was a woman, had committed suicide halfway through the book. But I was assured by the publisher that it was not my fault.

INTERVIEWER: Oh dear! It seems that you are not terribly lucky with Spain.

UPDIKE: No, not very lucky at all. That was not lucky! Of course it was worse for her than for me. It was still sad, and I can never think of a Spanish translator without remembering her. I don't know what her name was either. But then I think that the people who become translators are often young and sort of marginal and are probably aspiring artist themselves. They are probably not terribly happy people or they would not be translators.

INTERVIEWER: Peter Newmark seems to agree with you in that translators are would-be writers when he observes in his introduction to *Approaches to Translation* that "Those who can, write; those who cannot, translate; those who cannot translate write about translation." But I see this as a good thing. It allows us to see a literary translation as an attempt of a book lover to communicate his feelings for a literary work to others. Thus it would be the beauty of the work itself which would drive the translator to do the job. It seems to me a rather sound endeavour for a non-creative person to enter, or at least have a glimpse at, the world of creativity. I see it also as a kind of apostolate: contributing to the diffusion of a creative work so that it may be admired and enjoyed by a wider range of people.

UPDIKE: Good! There must be more people like you who are thrilled to be translating. The strange thing is that nobody ever reads the book as carefully as the translator. The author and the translator are the only ones who read the book word by word. The translators find the things that are wrong that I did not know were there. I like to meet my translators because they tend to be very clever people. My Brazilian translators, two of them, took me out to dinner when I was in Rio some years ago and both told me they did not especially like being Brazilian. They spoke beautiful English but they had nothing but complaints about their lives.

INTERVIEWER: It is difficult to understand how anybody can complain about his own nationality, isn't it?

UPDIKE: I had never met that before. No, but being an American you are always being told what a wonderful, great country it is so you naturally are proud. But, as you can see, it does happen.

INTERVIEWER: It is strange! Love for the soil you have been born on seems so natural! Sort of innate and instinctive in human beings.

UPDIKE: Yes, because you have all that wonderful history: El Cid, Cortés, Cervantes. You have a rare country though, you see. Many countries have a very sad history, countries that have been colonised, for example.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. No doubt that particular situation must give them a different perspective towards their native land. Talking about American culture, you said once that American writers do not age well, do you think this has something to do with the deifica-

tion of beauty and youth prevalent in this country? Of course this is only the impression of a foreigner. But I remember that when I first came to the United States and was teaching at a University here I thought: "Oh dear, in this country you've got to be young, you've got to be beautiful, you've got to be rich, otherwise you are doomed."

UPDIKE: Yes, in America you have to be all that or you are a loser. It is a cruel country. There cannot be all winners and we don't have much use for losers. Also as a young country or what used to be a young country, the virtues of youth and energy and bravado are valued. In a writer like Hemingway, that great Hispanophile, you can very much see writing as a kind of athletic feat, sort of a feat of the mind, like a young athlete. And in fact he did write best when he was young and he did not make a graceful middle-aged writer; he did not even let himself live to be an old writer. He shot himself. Take his career versus that of Thomas Mann or any one of a hundred Europeans who gracefully age into more and more honours and beautiful silver heads of white hair. There is a whole style of existing there. As a foreigner in Europe, I cannot help but notice that men, especially men, preen. That is, they are 60 years old, but they are not worried about aging. They are proud of their lives, of their wives, of their suits, of their shoes, of their mistresses, of the food they are about to eat. There is a whole way of enjoying adult life in Europe that Americans have been very slow to learn. The only American novelist who really had a good old age was Henry James, and of course he moved to England to give it to himself. Yes, it has been hard. But I think it is less true now. I think American characteristics, including the worship of youth, are fading away. We are becoming globally united. But it has been very true. Also, there is in this country a kind of Puritan emphasis upon purity, upon the pure truth, as if the written word is not so much a construct of wisdom and meditation but something which you seize with the intuition and energy of youth. Scott Fitzgerald did not really learn anything after he was 25. He wrote a certain amount that was good after 25 but all the experiences that mattered to him happened early.

INTERVIEWER: Perhaps we in Europe, and particularly so in Spain, still have a tendency not to believe in extreme youth as much as we are inclined to believe in maturity, quite the opposite of what seems to be true in America.

UPDIKE: Yes, possibly.

INTERVIEWER: Do your works pass any kind of test before being sent to the press? You know, like Hawthorne used to do with his wife, for instance?

UPDIKE: I used to read to my first wife when I was newly married, and I was married quite young; I was 21. I would show her the things and she would read them and give an opinion, a very gentle opinion, and usually very shrewd, very tactfully expressed. But then as we lived together more and more I showed her less and less so in a way we became artistically estranged. I am not even sure she read everything I published. Then with my second marriage again I was very confiding and she was very interested and I showed her things. I still show her some things but no longer show her everything. I have editors whom I trust pretty much. In the end, though, you have to really trust yourself, I fear. Not even a beloved spouse can be the final word. Some writers get very involved with their agents, and this seems to me to be a very immature thing to do. You have to make your work as good as you can. I mean you read all the reviews; you've read the bad reviews, you know what they say about you and you have a kind of literary superego in operation as you write. In the end you have to do what feels right to do.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the current avalanche of visual stimulation on television, on the streets, etc. may have sort of benumbed the reader in a way that he cannot any longer respond emotionally to literature? I sometimes feel it is happening to us.

UPDIKE: Well, you think of the tale teller in the primitive tribal society. In the Amazon jungle there are travelling tale tellers who go around and they tell stories and this is about the only outside artistic input that these people get. And how exciting to hear! And even in my childhood, you know, the way the old people, my grandparents, would talk; they'd just sit on a sofa and talk and tell stories. The spoken word was an amusement, an entertainment then. And a writer like Faulkner and all of the medieval writers, including a writer like Cervantes, all came out of an environment where the spoken narrative was entertainment.

Now we find we get almost impatient. It's a little too slow, the spoken word. You want the person to hurry up because the brain can assimilate this faster, and you are so used to the flashing of electronic imagery that you almost don't have the time. And I think this is true with the young people. I am told that the kids now cannot really read Hawthorne. He seems to me to be a writer of very lucid prose. It is a little 19th century, leisurely, but not very, and yet even with that degree of leisureliness, of spaciousness, the kids cannot wait for it. Yes, there is just something about all this visual imagery from the movies and now on TV that hardened us more and more. You get callous. It is like the first time you kiss somebody. It's a great thrill then and you kiss them again and it is a little less of a thrill and so we must "up the ante". And now in terms of additional stimulation we are bored almost before it starts. Certainly, the written word cannot compete with this kind of imagery.

INTERVIEWER: It is sad! Do you think this might explain an experience I had at a lecture delivered by Saul Bellow. It was in the Kennedy Centre of Government Studies, at Harvard; isn't Harvard your alma mater?

UPDIKE: Yes, I went to Harvard, but the Kennedy centre was built after I left. When I was there it was all trolley or street cars, a kind of parking lot for trains; very different now.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, it must be. Anyway, I was new from Spain and so excited about the opportunity of listening to the great Saul Bellow and was trying hard not to miss anything he said but unluckily most of the public had, what seemed to me, an awful attitude. They were either drinking or talking or even half sleeping. I could not believe it!

UPDIKE: Maybe it was Saul Bellow's fault. Maybe his speech was dull. But also, yes, people cannot listen, people have lost the art of listening.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, it seems so and that must bother you enormously as the lover of words that you are, as must the standardisation of language that we are experiencing and is so much talked about. I am referring to the loss of national, regional, and local colour.

UPDIKE: It is happening. But maybe it is much slower than we think, actually. I know this is much worried about. But in one way it is healthy. You could say that people from one end of the United States can speak in a language that on the other side of the country they understand perfectly. You would not want to go back to a situation where in every valley a different dialect is spoken and people cannot understand each other. On the other hand you do lose something. Yes, you lose a kind of richness of local expression, but I think that in the homes of people across the world there is a principle of verbal conservation. You speak in the way your parents did, and they the way their parents did. If you listen now that you are in this country you can still hear southern accents and southern ways of talking and midwestern accents. There is a little bit left, but it is inevitable that as the world grows smaller there will be fewer regional accents.

INTERVIEWER: It is rather comforting to learn that an expert on words, as you are, thinks there is a good side to it. I had never looked at it in this light before.

UPDIKE: Yes, I often think that it is amazing that I am able to meet a person from California and we have no trouble, and we'd like to know where we are from because our pronunciation does not give any indication. It has gotten so standardised that it is almost

impossible to tell. I mean, it would take an expert to detect it. You are now surrounded by the New England accent. I don't have it, I am from Pennsylvania. But it's a very slight accent, and charming. I can also say that it will make for world peace. When we all speak the same language, we won't be as distrustful of each other. If the Germans and the French had spoken the same language we might not have had War World I, I don't know!

INTERVIEWER: It is highly encouraging to contemplate the possibility of a global language in that way.

UPDIKE: In Spain of course you don't use the same language, Catalan is quite a different language from Spanish, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, it is true, although they are both Romance languages and therefore similar to the point that a Catalan and a Spanish speaker can sort of communicate with each other after a period of adaptation. I attended the University of Barcelona and I remember being able to understand classes taught in Catalan by the second month.

UPDIKE: Oh! I see.

INTERVIEWER: You have said that you chose to remake *The Scarlet Letter* because Hawthorne struck you as the only American classic author who wrote about sex. Have you any other comments to make on this choice?

UPDIKE: I cannot claim that I've always loved Hawthorne. I only began to read him when in my 20s. I don't know why I started to write these sort of parodies of Hawthorne except that the situation he presents: Hester and Chillingworth, the husband and the lover, etc. It is so interesting psychologically, and so perverse and so modern in a funny way. There is this way in which Chillingworth, the husband, controls the affair. There is a way in which in any affair, in any *ménage à trois*, there are all kinds of energies flowing not just between the two lovers, but between the betrayed and the lover and rival. And also I've been struck by how differently we now treat our ministers who sleep with their parishioners. It was terrible! They sent them back to England. They had to die of remorse. Now they are just sent down to some pleasant sanatorium to graze among the sheep.

INTERVIEWER: In view of the studies of your "*Scarlet Letter* Trilogy" written by Samuel Chase Coale, Donald J. Greiner, James A. Schiff, and others, it is easy to conclude that there are far more similarities between Hawthorne and yourself than first meet the eye. Schiff also finds these remakes trickier than your other works, and I can say that I subscribe to his words. (Schiff 1992)

UPDIKE: My first wife was always asking me why my novels had to have something tricky about them. Why didn't I just write about life like other writers?

INTERVIEWER: But life is tricky! Why should not literature be tricky too?

UPDIKE: I did not say that, but that's true. When I conceive a novel I feel the need for an abstract scaffolding. Something in my mind that makes it just more than a slice of life. Yeah, in that way I guess I am like Hawthorne. There must be this invented something, the something that makes it a romance. Hawthorne talked about romance versus novel. He admired, as we both know, Trollope because Trollope just grasped pieces of the Earth and put them in the book. Trollope did not mess around with this kind of dreaming. This is part of being an American. It is not only a cruel country, but a country built on ideas. It's not built on soils that we all share back to the cave like you have in Spain. We are all immigrants! We all came because of an idea of some kind. Yes, I will plead guilty to that although I think it is not one of Hawthorne's real strengths. In some of his stories, and in every novel except *The Scarlet Letter*, the ideas in a way take life from the actual flesh and blood. *The Scarlet Letter* is the one book in which the people are really alive per se. They are not just ideas in clothes. They are naked people. You can feel the sexual energy in Hester Prynne. Marvellous! Marvellous stuff! I guess that is what makes it such a unique



book out of the American 19th century, which are otherwise sort of boys' books. It's a man's world; Twain and Melville both did not really write much about women, they wrote about men.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, but, at least in Melville's case, it's a man's world for a reason, and we might also find here "all kinds of energy flowing" too.

UPDIKE: Yes, I know! Now it's very fashionable to talk about Melville's homoeroticism. He is greatly loved by the gays because he is a great gay writer. Proust wasn't enough! Now we have Melville too, and Henry James. Perhaps it is possible that all writers who are great are really gay down deep inside. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: I suppose being gay is just a matter of degree, and perhaps possessing the degree of homosexuality held by those we denominate homosexuals gives a writer a more complete understanding of the different facets of the human soul. Talking about Melville, in *Hugging the Shore* you mentioned "Monody".

UPDIKE: Yes, "Monody", as I remember, it was published with a long poem called *Clarel*, that few people have read. Maybe you have read it.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I have read it although I must confess I could not thoroughly enjoy it. I found it somewhat impenetrable, at times.

UPDIKE: Yes it is. Yet, it is a very interesting idea. It's about being saved. It's about going to the Holy Land and finding it very unreinforcing of your faith, very disturbing to your faith. It is such an awful place, you know, the Holy Land. It should be pleasant, right, like the Wizard of Oz land. The Land of Oz, or something magical, but instead it is a dump; a multi-racial, hot dump. At any rate, Melville was a very effusive warm man who loved Hawthorne. And Hawthorne, though you may think he had a nice smile, was in fact a rather cold fish who did not respond to overtures of any intensity.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, certainly he seems to have been a very reserved individual. Melville in this poem straightforwardly contemplates poetry as a kind of consolation for his sorrows. To what degree has literature served you thus, to ease your march through life, so to speak?

UPDIKE: As a consolation?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, as a consolation for what you haven't got. For example, in writing the "Rabbit" novels you might have been giving yourself the opportunity of being what you have not been in your own personal life, let's say a sportsman.

UPDIKE: Right! right! I think the practice of literature, the practice of writing is very therapeutic and healthy in that way. In that everything we have not been, everything we have been inadequate at, every mistake we've made we can patch up and fix by writing about it in a new way, so that yes, having not been especially tall ...

INTERVIEWER: But you are tall! It is not just that I am looking up at you from my smaller size, actually you have often been described as being tall.

UPDIKE: Not as tall as Rabbit, certainly. He is 3 inches taller than I am. I am in the strange position of being shorter than my father. Most Americans are taller than their fathers.

INTERVIEWER: That is what auxologists keep telling us lately.

UPDIKE: They have eaten more food. My father was 6 feet two I am 6 feet and my sons are all shorter than I am. I am a member of a shrinking family!

INTERVIEWER: You have a fine sense of humour!

UPDIKE: That's not funny, it is tragic!

INTERVIEWER: Yes I admit that if what we were saying about the demands of American society is true, it may get to be tragic for an American not to be tall. Fortunately in my country, as far as I know, it does not matter so very much whether a person is tall or short.

UPDIKE: Oh really! I think in this country being tall is everything. What were we saying? The compensatory effects of literature. It is true that you are able as a writer to adjust your life, make it better. Well, sometimes you can make it worse, but at least you are able to clarify your life and to some extent live the various lives that you did not get to live.

INTERVIEWER: I sometimes feel that the difference between a good writer and the rest of humanity is that the former can perhaps articulate the feelings that the majority of us share. In that way you are probably aware that because you have this gift you can provoke a kind of awe in people. A person talking to you, in spite of your unpretentious sympathy, must surely feel your superiority in the field of literature the way I do ...

UPDIKE: You say you feel that but you should not feel that, though. The fact is I am not very clever or observant. Almost any woman walking down the street observes more, feels more, in a way knows more about the human condition. It is just that they haven't set themselves to learning how to put it down on paper which is kind of a trick, you know. It is like juggling. It is not everybody that can do it. It's like playing the piano. There are certain moves, certain exercises. Having learned the trick and being able to sell the products of it, then you certainly should try to be as honest and frank as you can because, as you say, it turns out that in trying to tell your intimate facts you do speak for many. Some of them even write and say: "Yes, that's just the way I feel". It is very gratifying. Beneath the language differences and the skin colours and so on, we all have a great deal in common.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a writer who ever gave to you this awe we are talking about?

UPDIKE: Much of what you feel towards a writer depends on when you read him. Some writers you read when you are too young, and others you read when you are too old. I really began to read Scott Fitzgerald when I was too old. I just could not get into that youthful thing. I couldn't say I read Shakespeare too young, but it's possible, too. Shakespeare is so deep that maybe he is wasted on college students. A writer who really greatly filled me with awe was Proust whom I read when I was 23 or 24. I just could not believe these things were being said in words-that this man was getting it down. He was so fine, so amusing. Yes, he is funny. A funny writer! And such precise and wonderful images that come together. But a lot of the observations, all that just blew me away and I thought that it was as if I just have taken off blinders and I could suddenly see. Yes, there are writers like that; but it did not have to have been Proust; it happened to be Proust for me. It could have been Tolstoy for somebody else. It's wonderful but I did not get that sense of meeting myself, you know of coming around the corner and meeting myself, the real me. That is the way I read Proust

INTERVIEWER: Is it tough being a public figure in having to measure and calculate every comment or statement that you ever make?

UPDIKE: Luckily I am not asked to make many statements. I used to be very frank when I'd give an opinion. I've gotten more cautious because some of your opinions come back to bother you, and I am not a public figure the way a politician or an actor or musician is. Really, there are not too many people who care what I say but occasionally I get asked, and I get involved. What is the point of living in America if you cannot say what you think? I try to be fairly frank and not get too bothered by criticism.

INTERVIEWER: Since this interview is intended for a magazine read by most professors of American literature in Spain would you be kind enough to tell us which of your works would you recommend for teaching John Updike in an American literature course? Which one is most representative of your work?

UPDIKE: Well, I would recommend a book called *The Centaur*, which is a youthful book. It's about a teacher. It is about being a student as well and it has a little trickery, too, but it is fairly easy trickery. It is in many ways an innocent book. It is not about adult experience in all of its dark erotic qualities, but it is about being young and watching your father die, or so it seems to the young hero. But now, let me think! Another book (I don't know if this is a crazy idea) that might speak to students is *The Coup*. I like *The Coup* because it was about the world- a global novel. *Rabbit, Run* was a hot book to me, urgent when I wrote it, all about feeling imprisoned in your life, but it's the one most taught in this country, and maybe more accessible than I know. I was horrified when I learned that people were teaching it, and I said: "Have you read this book that you are teaching? Aren't the children offended? I mean they are just 16 years old?" But they said: "Oh no, they are not offended." So, sure, *Rabbit, Run* may be the correct answer.

INTERVIEWER: Might the students gain a better perspective by reading the entire tetralogy?

UPDIKE: Possibly, but it is okay to read the first one, and then if you want to read more, you can. As you know, they were written every ten years and they were not strictly sequential in that you can pick one up and understand enough.

INTERVIEWER: Well, Mr. Updike I want to thank you very much for your time. Your ideas and explanations have been extremely enlightening. I am sure your Spanish readers will greatly benefit from them. I do hope you can visit our country again some day and perhaps write on the experience.

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