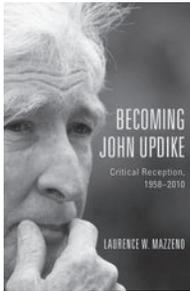
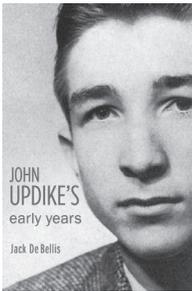


Review Essay

John Updike, Now and Then

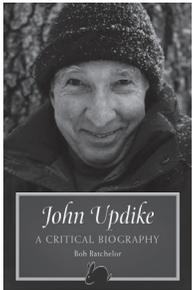
Wilson Kaiser



JOHN UPDIKE'S EARLY YEARS. By Jack De Bellis. Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press. 2013.

BECOMING JOHN UPDIKE: Critical Reception, 1958–2010. By Laurence W. Mazzeno. Rochester, NY: Camden House. 2013.

JOHN UPDIKE: A Critical Biography. By Bob Batchelor. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger. 2013.



With the passing of John Updike in 2009, the scholarly work of assessing his life's achievement has begun in earnest. For anyone familiar with the scholarly reception of Updike, this might seem like a strange claim, since critics and academics have been attempting to summarize and categorize his work since the late 1980s. Updike has been a notoriously uncooperative subject of study, however, mainly because he continued to write at his habitually breathless pace almost up to the end of his life. This extraordinary output seemed to hold open the possibility that he would develop in new stylistic and thematic direc-

tions (as some scholars have in fact argued). At the same time, this sense of development and experimentation in Updike's work is counterbalanced by his remarkable consistency, a reverberation of voice and thematic concern that make his oeuvre unmistakable and unique in twentieth-century American literature. These countervailing effects have generated starkly inconsistent evaluations of Updike's career and a continuing pressure, perhaps stronger now than ever, to make creditable definitive claims about his place in literary history.

The works I examine in this review, *John Updike's Early Years*, *Becoming John Updike*, and *John Updike: A Critical Biography*, share a commitment to solidifying their author's reputation and developing a synoptic vision of his career. While they take different approaches to this project, each of these studies struggles with what is perhaps the central difficulty of coming to terms with Updike: on the one hand, the writerly talent and sheer output of Updike's work would appear to warrant strong claims about the universality and enduring validity of Updike studies; on the other hand, Updike has just as often been accused of sacrificing content for stylistic brio and emphasizing commercial success above other considerations. The popular success of Updike's books has not always translated into prestige in the scholarly world or a general consensus among critics and reviewers about his merits. Whether this reflects more on Updike's work or the academy's assumptions still remains to be seen, but it is clear that today there is a renewed interest in the question of his literary legacy. Coming at the end of Updike's life, the three studies I look at here struggle with the paradoxical features of Updike studies and, while it is not clear that they are ultimately able to reconcile the tensions that have stubbornly persisted in the evaluation of Updike's life and work, they are important indications of the continuing promise of the field.

John Updike's Early Years opens with a frank meditation on the future of Updike studies. The book's central claim is that understanding Updike's childhood background will help the reader to evaluate Updike's importance as a mature writer. In an otherwise well-structured and interesting book, the connection between these two themes remains tenuous throughout this slim volume, however, and many of the most suggestive aspects of his early life are hinted at rather than fully explored. The author, Jack De Bellis, moves uncomfortably between psychology, archival history, and reportage, with the result that none of these approaches develops into a consistent interpretation of Updike's early life. Updike's childhood experience with psoriasis, his stutter, and his awkward appearance, for example, are introduced as psychological themes, but we only read the reported history of overcoming these difficulties. In these and similar examples, the book is plagued by the continuing mystique of Updike's success—that unshakable image of the wunderkind out of rural Pennsylvania who sprang fully formed onto the pages of the *New Yorker*. What is missing in this account is the depth that comes from a backstory. During his life, Updike was able to purvey an image of himself that was so blithe and natural as to seem almost naively two-dimensional. This ghost of happy simplicity haunts De Bellis' account

at every turn, shifting the conversation away from the uncomfortable themes of disability and angst that might give Updike some shading.

There is plenty of psychological material to explore in Updike's early life, such as his difficult relationship with his talented mother, or his apparently almost epically high school life. *John Updike's Early Years* tends to avoid these tenebrous byways, though, in favor of a more straightforward connection between the young Updike and his imago. This requires glossing the interesting fact that Updike's primary childhood interest was with cartoons rather than high literature. Before Updike picked up James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, his greatest desire was to work for Walt Disney. It would be intriguing to know more about the relationship between these early flirtations with high and low culture, and to consider how they may have been successfully combined in some of Updike's best works. Unfortunately, De Bellis does not go into these questions. Nonetheless, the fact remains that in small-town Pennsylvania, Updike's interests quickly outstripped his teachers and classmates. To its credit, *John Updike's Early Years* tantalizingly raises these perplexing and intriguing aspects of Updike's life, and yet it is not willing to depart from the official Updike narrative enough to address them fully.

One of the most promising aspects of De Bellis' investigation is his extensive interviews with Updike's classmates. Here again there would seem to be room for new insights into Updike's past, but more than anything these interviews perpetuate the Updikian myth that he was almost magically *sui generis*. Although he was class president and, De Bellis claims, popular with his fellow students, the interviews demonstrate that his classmates were almost comically nonplussed by Updike's career as one of the foremost American writers of the twentieth century. If anything, the disjuncture between Updike's childhood and his writing becomes more pronounced in the first-hand accounts of his early years. This is especially significant because it continues the divisive pattern that has shaped the critical reception and interpretation of Updike. In *John Updike's Early Years*, we get the image of a simple, homely boy who suddenly and mysteriously grew into a remarkable writer. What is missing is the unexpected connection between these two avatars that might highlight a more difficult and worthwhile quality in Updike's life and work.

As De Bellis argues at the outset of his study, the most promising avenue for connecting the mature Updike to his childhood is through his abiding fascination with Pennsylvania, what the critic Arthur Mizener called Updike's "irresistible impulse to go in memory home again in order to find himself" ("Behind the Dazzle"). Updike continually returned to his hometown of Shillington throughout his life, reportedly never missing a class reunion. The significance of Pennsylvania in Updike's life and writing is a relatively under-examined aspect of Updike studies, and one of the central claims of *John Updike's Early Years* is that it promises a thoroughgoing exploration of the early history of Updike's fascination with his home state. Pennsylvania provides the locale for many of his narratives, and in several of his autobiographical works, such as *Self-Consciousness*, Updike ties events in his narratives to memories of his life there. Surprisingly, *John*

Updike's Early Years does not follow these leads to elaborate the links between Updike's childhood and adulthood. Instead, De Bellis tends to emphasize the split between Updike's hometown life and the author's later life in the North East. While Pennsylvania is described in terms that evoke images of small-town values such as unaffected sincerity and honesty, the North East is depicted as a jaded and sophisticated media-savvy world in which Updike had to put on a "persona." It is not clear, however, that Updike had any less of a persona when he visited Shillington, or that he preferred one to the other. More importantly, this argument does little to forward the central premise on which *John Updike's Early Years* depends for its interest: the claim that there is an essential link, rather than a division, between Updike's early Pennsylvania life and his career as a writer. At the study's conclusion, it is no more evident what Updike's writerly persona was, or how it functioned in relation to his childhood experiences.

Despite these contradictory elements, De Bellis' research does add important details to the picture of Updike's life. Functioning more as a handbook than a studied argument, *John Updike's Early Years* provides substantial indices and an elaborated table of contents that make it a useful reference for the Updike expert. These merits are marred by what seems more than anything like an incomplete project. If, as the study claims, the youthful Updike showed signs of becoming the writer of his maturity, it is not easily deducible from what is presented here. This is a missed opportunity, in my estimation, because it would be very useful for a broad range of students of American literature to understand the early story of Updike's development into such a dominant figure in American letters from almost his first publications to his last.

De Bellis, along with the other authors I review in this essay, notes that Updike was an unusual figure in the second half of the twentieth century, that rare writer who was not born from what Mark McGurl has called the "program era," the period after the Second World War that saw the rise of professional writing "workshops." Toward the end of Updike's career, his ornate style of realism became increasingly incompatible with the teachings of sophisticated and self-conscious writing programs housed in universities across the country. Updike's chosen role as a professional writer undoubtedly changed the way he wrote, if for no other reason than for the sheer necessity of publishing on a regular schedule while appealing to a broad audience.

As Laurence Mazzeno argues in his highly competent study, *Becoming John Updike*, the unevenness of Updike's critical reception tends to center on the fact of his popularity. *Becoming John Updike* is the most substantial review of Updike criticism to date, and it is likely that it will continue to prove interesting and useful reading for anyone working on Updike far into the future. One of the reasons for the study's success is Mazzeno's willingness to go beyond summary to link the development of Updike reception to an axial thesis centered on the challenges of interpreting his work. The easy flowing grace of Updike's signature style, Mazzeno argues, has just as often been deemed an impediment to serious writing as it has been lauded for its accessible poetry. These complexities

are encapsulated by Updike's status as an outsider to the program era, a status expressed in the perceived tensions and contradictions of his career as a figure hovering between popular and intellectual culture, the summer beach and the air-conditioned classroom.

Becoming John Updike takes the reader through an impressive range of critical reception, from Updike's first publications to his last. Although it is an impossible task to fully summarize the great accumulated mass of fifty years of Updike studies, Mazzeno succeeds in providing a sense of the arc of Updike's fate in the American intellectual culture. This is not an account of a life in letters, but rather a snapshot of the debates and interpretive movements through which Updike's works were understood over his long career. What Updike often encountered as the frustratingly arbitrary hypertrophy of academic criticism slowly coalesces through Mazzeno's culling into an intelligible narrative of Updike's relationship to the intellectual trends of the program era. In the process, *Becoming John Updike* quietly but insistently makes the argument that the inconsistencies of Updike's reception are in actuality a product of the critical climate in which he wrote, rather than an essential quality of his writing.

Mazzeno's summaries reveal the drama of interpretation beneath the calm exterior of the massive Updike publishing industry. Each chapter covers roughly a decade of criticism, and opens with epigraphs alternately expressing extravagant praise for and harsh denigration of Updike's writing. Tellingly, much of the early reception is occasional, written for the moment, without much concern to locate predominant themes or develop a consistent approach. The acclaim for Updike often seems just as subjective and unfounded as the dismissals, but the reader can locate some key tendencies within this initial encounter. Even those who defended the merits of Updike's writing, such as Frank Kermode, seemed to be more in a state of respectful attendance as they waited for Updike to fulfill what they regarded as his innate promise. Especially during the 1960s, each new Updike bestseller was attended by a wistful sigh of complaint that this was not yet *the* definitive Updike masterpiece.

The sense of unfulfilled promise sets the tone for subsequent defenses of Updike's work up to the present, leading Mazzeno to the same question that shadows the other recent studies of Updike's oeuvre: "Will he last?" In other words, aside from the rather arbitrary responses occasioned by Updike's constant publications, is there a body of work rich enough to sustain careful scrutiny into the future? This question gets to the heart of the contradiction that also troubles De Bellis' study, a contradiction that Mazzeno neatly summarizes in the following formula: "Because Updike is so facile with language, he sometimes lets wit take precedence over insight" (12). In other words, the belletrism that made Updike so palatable to his audience may have also prevented him from translating that popularity into a high literature that the academy could recognize for its enduring value. More than anything, *Becoming John Updike* convincingly demonstrates that, after the 6,000 studies that comprise Updike criticism, it is still not clear that this contradiction has a straightforward solution.

Even as Updike collected some of the most prestigious awards in the literary world, and wrote one bestseller after another, critics from across the political and social spectrum, including Norman Podhoretz, Leslie Fiedler, and Michiko Kakutani found common ground in their harsh evaluation of Updike's work. In Norman Mailer's memorably derisive phrasing, Updike's writing was judged "imprecise, flatulent," incapable of addressing the larger themes of American life. *Becoming John Updike* takes the reader through Updike's response to these charges as he transferred his themes and concerns to the questions of the day. Perhaps the most formative of these shifts was Updike's expanding exploration of American sexual mores. Beginning in the 1960s, Updike made sex into a topos for investigating American middle class life. In his *Rabbit* series (1960–2001), as well as other works, such as his three-part rewrite of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (*A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger's Version* (1986), *S.* (1988)), Updike employed his fluent style to describe the private, intimate side of American life.

To the charge that he was incapable of writing a great modern epic, Updike responded by retrenching into the most banally quotidian frustrations and fantasies of his characters. As the critical reception of his mature period demonstrates, however, over the years he parlayed this limited focus into a richly nuanced expression of American culture at the height of the sexual revolution. If, as Kakutani and others have rightly noted, Updike explored sexuality almost exclusively from the perspective of white middle-class males, he also managed to chronicle the painful anomie of an entire generation of Americans living in the wake of a cultural liberation they were ill equipped to manage. Like Philip Roth, Updike made the frank exploration of sex into the hallmark of a richly creative anti-epic mode of writing. His writing was able to capture this cultural moment through surprisingly poignant details of everyday life.

With the introduction of a strong theoretical sensibility into the academy in the late 1970s, Mazzeno recounts, interest in Updike's brand of realism gave way to broader concerns about representation and subjectivity. As the critical sensibility shifted around him, Updike increasingly recapitulated his earlier themes and concerns. The 1980s was a period of sequels in which he elaborated the leitmotifs that had come to characterize his writing in the 1960s and early 1970s. In what must have seemed like a cruel twist of fate, Updike's commitment to describing the sexual revolution that had reshaped American culture two decades earlier now became the mark of his outmoded status among critics, academics, and writers of the next generation. Feminist critics were quick to point out that his image of sexuality was laced with sexist and misogynist assumptions that demanded unpacking.

Undoubtedly, one of the most useful aspects of *Becoming John Updike* is its willingness to slow down the summation of Updike's reception at key points. The late 1970s may well turn out to be the most significant transitional moment in Updike studies because it introduced such a wealth of heterogeneous, even conflicting interpretive modes into the academy. This welter of approaches has, not coincidentally, paralleled the growing uncertainty about Updike's position

within the field of literary studies. The introduction of feminism and continental philosophy into Updike reception was accompanied by a more reactionary tone, perhaps best characterized by John Gardner's strange polemic *On Moral Fiction* (1979), which singled Updike out as a primary example of the degenerate representation of life that Gardner wanted to replace with a new cultural ideal. "Real art," Gardner argued, "creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths" (126). In just a few short years, Updike's insistently descriptive realism found itself suddenly and uncomfortably situated between feminist critiques of his one-sided presentation of sexual life and a reactionary turn back to the eternal verities of myth. At the same time, his lyricism was frequently contrasted unfavorably with the playful experimentalism of postmodernism and a growing body of literature committed to exploring racial and sexual identity in terms that were foreign to Updike's vocabulary.

Despite the critical reaction against Updike, the juggernaut of his publishing and the industry of reception that had grown up around it continued to roll forward on its own momentum. By the 1980s, *Rabbit Run* (1960) had become a common part of the high school syllabus across the nation, and his works were considered in numerous college courses and university-published monographs. In many ways, Updike's publication of *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) bookended the decade and dominated the field of Updike studies. They brought the chronicle of Harry Angstrom's life to its conclusion (although Updike would later publish a related novella, *Rabbit Remembered* (2000)), and garnered numerous awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes, a National Book Award, and a National Book Critics Circle Award. Updike's ability to move both critics and his fellow writers was a powerful testament to his talent, but this success was strongly laced with the impression that Updike was nearing the end of his career. One of the critical landmarks of Updike studies, for example, was Harold Bloom's edited volume of essays on Updike (1987), in which Bloom notoriously discounted Updike as "a minor novelist with a major style." Between the extravagant accolades for the Rabbit series, and Bloom's dismissal of Updike's writing *tout court*, we glimpse once again the confusing extremities that have made it difficult to assess Updike's career.

Most importantly, Bloom's volume signaled that by the end of the 1980s critics were willing to attempt a full summary of Updike's trajectory well before he had completed his creative arc. The 1990s was a period of expansive and creative experimentation for Updike, a period that still awaits full critical attention. Works such as *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992), *Brazil* (1994), *Toward the End of Time* (1997), and *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) can be understood as latecomers to the postmodern tenor of an earlier era. In these works, Updike demonstrated that he was willing to play with ideas such as historiographical metafiction and mixed-genre writing. Despite these attempts to shift into new territory, however, Updike's persistent voice—the quality that had once made him such a success and now seemed to present a liability in his critical reception—pervades these narratives, giving the impression that they

are less a departure than a variation on a constant refrain. The long twilight of Updike's vast literary career was thus characterized by the growing critical sense (at least among his detractors) that his belletrism had fully come to dominate his writing, that he was in fact a "a minor novelist with a major style."

Becoming John Updike tracks the development up to this critical juncture in Updike's fortunes with admirable balance and equanimity, especially given the harsh polemics that have surprisingly tended to accrue around the mild-mannered author. Mazzeno's opening question, whether Updike will last, in many ways comes down to the central problem of style as it emerged in critical debates that began in the late 1970s and matured during the late 1980s and 1990s. This was the turning point at which readers of the younger generation—many of whom had been following Updike's work closely—moved away from his oeuvre to look for other directions and inspiration. David Foster Wallace's 1997 review of *Toward the End of Time* is especially revealing of the problems in Updike studies, because it expresses a deep ambivalence about its continuing relevance for young writers.

I would like to have seen much more attention than the cursory paragraph Mazzeno devotes to Wallace's harsh and funny review, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One," because it neatly summarized the broadly felt frustrations of Wallace's generational cohort. Although Wallace incorporated a broad array of literary approaches into his capaciously complex and synthetic style, we find not a trace of Updike's influence in his work. A careful look at Wallace's review helps us to understand why he and a generation of his fellow authors shifted away from Updike so strongly. For Wallace, Updike was one of the "great male narcissists," whose obsessive concerns about sex and aging no longer spoke to younger readers. In Wallace's words, Updike was "both the chronicler and voice of probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV" (51). Implicit in this attack is Wallace's impassioned hope for a new mode of writing that might go beyond what had come to seem like the unimportant and self-involved concerns of a previous generation. "The young adults of the nineties," Wallace wrote, "many of whom are, of course, the children of all the impassioned infidelities and divorces Updike wrote about so beautifully, and who got to watch all this brave new individualism and sexual freedom deteriorate into the joyless and anomic self-indulgence of the Me Generation—today's subforties have different horrors, prominent among which are anomie and solipsism and a peculiarly American loneliness: the prospect of dying without even once having loved something more than yourself" (54). If, in Alison Lurie's memorable formulation, Updike played the "Chekhov of suburbia" for a generation, by the 1990s Wallace and his peers were demanding more than Chekhovian honesty from their literary predecessors.

Wallace was not alone in his rejection of the "great male narcissists." Most of the literary readers Wallace knew were under forty, and while "none of them were big admirers of the postwar G.M.N.'s [i.e., great male narcissists], it's Mr. Updike in particular they seem to hate" (52). The reason, Wallace explains

in the course of the review, is that in the 1990s the young literati wanted more than a description of the anomie and solipsism they had inherited. Updike's graceful prose offered beauty without redemption, whereas Wallace's generation wanted—or desperately needed—new ways of connecting, and new aesthetic forms through which to connect. Perhaps the strongest proof of this argument outside of Wallace's own claims is the fact that so few young authors have followed Updike or developed his style in new directions. Updike appears as much now as he did during his life as a *sui generis* phenomenon, an extraordinary writer who may well continue to provoke scholarly interest, but who has failed to inspire literary imitators.

In some ways, John Gardner anticipated this situation when he singled out Updike for attack in *On Moral Fiction*. Taken as a whole, the moral claims this new generation makes on the reader are very different from those made by Updike. As Mark McGurl argues in *The Program Era*, the generation of writers growing up in the 1990s largely passed through writing programs like the Iowa Writers' Workshop where they took in the "dirty realism" of Robert Coover's tense short stories rather than the expansive flowing form of an outsider like Updike. Unlike Gardner, however, the younger generation of writers also refused the endless formalistic play of postmodernism. Circumventing the twin pitfalls of postmodern irony and lyrical realism, Wallace and a host of authors from Colson Whitehead to Jonathan Lethem have shifted the spectrum of concerns away from the earlier dichotomies running from John Barth to Updike. Mazzeno's otherwise replete and balanced study misses the opportunity to fully explore this part of the history of Updike reception, ignoring the role that young writers (many of whom grew up and through academic models of reception discussed in *Becoming John Updike*) have had in deciding Updike's fate.

It may well be that *Becoming John Updike*'s central guiding question—"Will he last?"—will depend more on how Updike's graceful style is taken up and transmuted by future authors into the major forms that Bloom and others have judged to be missing in his work. While Mazzeno's compendium convincingly demonstrates that a solid body of work exists on Updike's oeuvre, the leap into the future of Updike studies seems far less certain if it is based solely on the direction taken by previous criticism. With Updike's death, the force of creative energy that repeatedly carried him to public attention is now absent, leaving a vacuum that neither Mazzeno nor De Bellis give full consideration in their works, despite their shared concern for the future of Updike studies. The larger claims about Updike's merits may still be locked up in the creative future of American letters, rather than in the evaluative process of academic interpretation.

The third and final publication I discuss here, Bob Batchelor's *Critical Biography*, approaches the questions we have been exploring through a wide-ranging mixture of cultural history and literary analysis. Batchelor's study is probably the most accessible work out of the three and holds a great deal of interest for a general audience as well as the Updike specialist. The author opens with a confessional tone that attests to the importance of Updike's work in his

own life: “Nothing is as close to my heart as John Updike,” Batchelor writes, giving personal testimony to the powerful effect of Updike’s fiction and poetry on countless readers. The difficulty for Batchelor comes from the critical process of connecting style and content within his overarching claims about the value of Updike’s work. Updike, more than most major American authors, seems to be caught between the individual and the social dimensions of literature. As though to refute Bloom’s witty contention that Updike is ultimately more of a wordsmith than a writer, Batchelor’s *Critical Biography* sets itself the difficult task of connecting the affecting experience of reading Updike with a sense of his broader social import. At stake in this assertion is once again the nagging uncertainty about Updike’s posthumous literary longevity.

Despite its title, there is little biography in Batchelor’s study. This is not necessarily a significant problem, except that the absencing of a continuous line of personal or historical development makes the chapters seem somewhat haphazard. While brief, even cursory chapters are devoted to Updike’s poetry and his prose essays, the *Critical Biography* gives extensive attention to the Rabbit series, but ignores large parts of Updike’s fiction. There is hardly a mention, for example, of important works such as *Couples*, *The Coup*, or *The Witches of Eastwick*. The closing chapters focus almost exclusively on a single work, Updike’s controversial late novel, *Terrorist* (2006). This unevenness comes in part from Batchelor’s effort to establish claims about Updike’s continuing importance. Arguing that Updike “perfectly captures our post-9/11 society within the broader landscape of the contemporary United States,” Batchelor’s study is at times forced into an unbalanced perspective with respect to Updike’s larger body of work (x).

The *Critical Biography*’s claims about Updike’s cultural relevance lean heavily on Updike’s own assertion that “the desire to portray reality faithfully drives style” (125). Batchelor seizes on this statement because it suggests a reversal of the predominant criticism of Updike’s work (paradigmatically voiced by Harold Bloom) that he is an author driven by style. The value of Updike’s realism would thus originate in the descriptive force of the narrative, rather than in Updike’s facility with language. For Updike, however, this realism consists of a universalizing perspective that has come under increasing critical scrutiny. Batchelor approvingly cites Updike’s self-proclaimed desire to give the impression of “perfect transparency . . . selfless as a lens,” but it is just such a “transparency” that has come to seem unreal for the critics and writers of later generations. As we have seen in Mazzeno’s *Becoming John Updike*, the 1980s marked a shift in the assumptions about representation that have put Updike out of step with parts of the literary world.

If we compare the claims of the *Critical Biography* to the reception of Updike in the recent decades, the need to critically unpack Updike’s model of realism becomes unavoidable. In Michiko Kakutani’s review of *Terrorist*, for example, she notes that Updike fails to move outside his “perennial themes” enough to create a sufficiently believable portrait of a radical young jihadist.

As the chronicler of the “middle-class mundane,” Updike expresses a limited point of view that may not, Kakutani suggests, be capable of reaching outside its own set formulae (“John Updike’s *Terrorist*”). In his review of *Toward the End of Time*, David Foster Wallace anticipates Kakutani’s quarrel, arguing that Updike “has for years been constructing protagonists who are basically all the same guy” (51). At the root of these criticisms is the abiding sense that Updike’s “transparency” is far from an unproblematic universal realism. Batchelor is quick to dismiss Wallace’s description of Updike’s limitations as “the aggressiveness of the subsequent generation, essentially fighting for media space in a cluttered, information-overloaded society,” but he thereby misses the opportunity to address the lingering sense—a sense that haunted Updike throughout his career—that he was a writer whose perfectly honed descriptive techniques encompassed only a small portion of experience (23). In the quickly mutating American landscape of the past decades, Updike’s world has come to seem less and less self-evident, with the result that, as Kakutani, Wallace, and others have argued, his realism has come to resemble a self-involved fantasy rather than a mirror of contemporary society.

Like the limited scope of Updike’s own writing, Batchelor’s *Critical Biography* does not range widely enough to prove its claim that “Updike chronicled the bounds of this era by probing what it means to be a citizen of this confounding world” (ix). *Terrorist* bears too much of the weight of Batchelor’s claim that Updike evolved as a writer and, in the end, this unbalanced approach to Updike’s oeuvre prevents this study from answering Updike’s critics convincingly. Batchelor’s final section, “Updike Forever,” is a questionable battle cry for the future of Updike studies given the continuing difficulty of putting to rest the sense that Updike was above all a craftsman and professional publisher, rather than a central figure of broad import for the canon of American letters.

As Batchelor notes in his final remarks, the founding of the John Updike society in 2009 is undoubtedly an important landmark in Updike studies. Whether, or to what degree, the society will impact on the broader conversation about American letters depends, I am arguing, on the ability to resolve or at least move beyond the persistent notion that Updike wrote minor works. The conclusion of the *Critical Biography*—that “style matters”—does not resolve this conflict, if for no other reason than the fact that it is still not clear what value Updike’s style carries for the future of American literature. In the three books I have reviewed in this essay, there is almost no mention of Updike’s influence on contemporary authors, with the notable exception of Batchelor’s unsupported claim that Michael Chabon is beholden to Updike. This is a surprising and provocative claim that deserves more attention, although it is hard to imagine Updike’s influence on a novel such as *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, with its fluid conception of history, and its emphasis on adolescence and magic that feels remote from the themes that fascinated Updike.

Taken as a whole, the work of *John Updike’s Early Years*, *Becoming John Updike*, and the *Critical Biography* demonstrate that Updike studies is a healthy field at the moment without convincing me that, at this critical juncture, it has

many pathways open to it as a meaningful area of study within the larger field of American literature. If the craftsman-like quality of Updike's work has often been perceived as coming at the expense of intellectual and cultural insight, the three studies I examine here do little to displace that sense. On the other hand, these works also contain hints of future directions that continue to hold promise for the study of Updike. The shared emphasis on Updike's quotidian description of American life offers possibilities for non-specialists. What, for example, might food studies, theories of everyday life, or cultural history make of Updike's minutely detailed depiction of five decades of life in the United States?

There are also important paths for continuing scholarly work within the field of Updike studies. For instance, the growing emphasis on the specificity of his Pennsylvania context has the potential to situate Updike's work within less universalizing claims, a critical move that may offer a more believably bounded perspective with which to encounter Updike's description of American culture. Another avenue of investigation comes from the growing understanding that Updike developed his style in a way that was uniquely independent of the program era of university creative writing programs that have come to dominate the production of American fiction. Updike's unique position in American letters provides a valuable way of assessing questions of knowledge formation and the professionalization of literary studies in contrast to Updike's insistence that he was a stylistic craftsman. This retrospective look at Updike's career promises to give us new tools for understanding him as more than a *sui generis* phenomenon in American letters.

These questions—questions of Updike's identity, and questions about his place in the history of American literature—come to a focus in the problem that I have insisted on in this essay: Updike's relevance for contemporary authors. Updike was undeniably masterful at capturing the intensities of quotidian life, but without thereby opening out onto the broader cultural questions that would connect his work to the concerns of writers today. Updike's death in 2009 was met by a virtual silence on the part of contemporary writers, or it tended to evoke a strangely perplexed (rather than celebratory) reaction. Jonathan Lethem's short remembrance is symptomatic in this respect, praising Updike's "feel for tangible life" while also depicting the aging author as befuddled by the strange new world of contemporary American culture. His only encounter with Updike, Lethem writes, was across a crowded lobby on the day of the September 11 attacks. They never spoke, but Lethem remembers Updike "looking just as despondent and damaged as we felt." Throughout his career, Updike was a master chronicler of this confusion, but the relevance of that chronicle has become increasingly uncertain for a younger generation that needs a new cultural imaginary.

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