



Higher Gossip: Essays and Criticism

By John Updike

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A collection both intimate and generous of the eloquent, insightful, beautifully written prose works that John Updike was compiling when he died in January 2009.

This collection of miscellaneous prose opens with a self-portrait of the writer in winter, a Prospero who, though he fears his most dazzling performances are behind him, reveals himself in every sentence to be in deep conversation with the sources of his magic. It concludes with a moving meditation on a modern world robbed of imagination--a world without religion, without art--and on the difficulties of faith in a disbelieving age. In between are previously uncollected stories and poems, a pageant of scenes from seventeenth-century Massachusetts, five late "golf dreams," and several of Updike's commentaries on his own work. At the heart of the book are his matchless reviews--of John Cheever, Ann Patchett, Toni Morrison, William Maxwell, John le Carré, and essays on Aimee Semple McPherson, Max Factor, and Albert Einstein, among others. Also included are two decades of art criticism--on Chardin, El Greco, Blake, Turner, Van Gogh, Max Ernest, and more.

Updike's criticism is gossip of the highest order, delivered in an intimate and generous voice.

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Higher Gossip: Essays and Criticism By John Updike Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #980247 in Books
- Published on: 2011-11-01
- Released on: 2011-11-01
- Format: Deckle Edge
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.53" h x 1.55" w x 6.63" l, 1.97 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 528 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"For my money . . . the late John Updike was the best American belletrist ever, and *Higher Gossip* . . . confirms everything I've believed about his brilliance, his versatility, and his depth."—Larry McMurty, *Harper's*

"As [*Higher Gossip*] reminds us, Updike was that rare creature: an all-around man of letters, a literary decathlete who brought to his criticism an insider's understanding of craft and technique; a first-class appreciator of talent, capable of describing other artists' work with nimble, pictorial brilliance; an ebullient observer, who could bring to essays about dinosaurs or golf or even the theory of relativity a contagious, boyish sense of wonder."—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"A timely reminder of the graceful companionship that Updike offered to his readers—a presence that will be sorely missed."—*The Christian Science Monitor*

About the Author

John Updike was the author of more than sixty books, including collections of short stories, poems, and criticism. His novels have been honored with the Pulitzer Prize (twice), the National Book Award, and the Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Hugging the Shore*, an earlier collection of essays and reviews, received the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism. He died in January 2009.

Christopher Carduff, the editor of this volume, is a member of the staff of The Library of America.

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THE WRITER IN WINTER

Young or old, a writer sends a book into the world, not himself. There is no Senior Tour for authors, with the tees shortened by twenty yards and carts allowed. No mercy is extended by the reviewers; but, then, it is not extended to the rookie writer, either. He or she may feel, as the gray-haired scribes of the day continue to take up space and consume the oxygen in the increasingly small room of the print world, that the elderly have the edge, with their established names and already secured honors. How we did adore and envy them, the idols of our college years—Hemingway and Faulkner, Frost and Eliot, Mary McCarthy and Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty! We imagined them aswim in a heavenly refulgence, as joyful and immutable in their exalted condition as angels forever singing.

Now that I am their age—indeed, older than a number of them got to be—I can appreciate the advantages, for a writer, of youth and obscurity. You are not yet typecast. You can take a distant, cold view of the entire literary scene. You are full of your material—your family, your friends, your region of the country, your generation—when it is fresh and seems urgently worth communicating to readers. No amount of learned skills can substitute for the feeling of having a lot to say, of bringing news. Memories, impressions, and emotions from your first twenty years on earth are most writers' main material; little that comes afterward is quite so rich and resonant. By the age of forty, you have probably mined the purest veins of this precious lode; after that, continued creativity is a matter of sifting the leavings. You become playful and theoretical; you invent sequels, and attempt historical novels. The novels and stories thus generated may be more polished, more ingenious, even more humane than their predecessors; but none does quite the essential earthmoving work that Hawthorne, a writer who dwelt in the shadowland "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet,"

specified when he praised the novels of Anthony Trollope as being "as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case."

This second quotation-one writer admiring a virtue he couldn't claim- meant a lot to me when I first met it, and I have cited it before. A few images, a few memorable acquaintances, a few cherished phrases circle around the aging writer's head like gnats as he strolls through the summertime woods at gloaming. He sits down before the word processor's humming, expectant screen, facing the strong possibility that he has already expressed what he is struggling to express again.

My word processor-a term that describes me as well-is the last of a series of instruments of self-expression that began with crayons and colored pencils held in my childish fist. My hands, somewhat grown, migrated to the keyboard of my mother's typewriter, a portable Remington, and then, schooled in touch-typing, to my own machine, a beige Smith Corona expressly bought by loving parents for me to take to college. I graduated to an office model, on the premises of The New Yorker, that rose up, with an exciting heave, from the surface of a metal desk. Back in New England as a free-lancer, I invested in an electric typewriter that snatched the letters from my fingertips with a sharp, premature clack; it held, as well as a black ribbon, a white one with which I could correct my many errors. Before long, this clever mechanism gave way to an even more highly evolved device, an early Wang word processor that did the typing itself, with a marvellous speed and infallibility. My next machine, an IBM, made the Wang seem slow and clunky and has been in turn superseded by a Dell that deals in dozens of type fonts and has a built-in spell checker. Through all this relentlessly advancing technology the same brain gropes through its diminishing neurons for images and narratives that will lift lumps out of the earth and put them under the glass case of published print.

With ominous frequency, I can't think of the right word. I know there is a word; I can visualize the exact shape it occupies in the jigsaw puzzle of the English language. But the word itself, with its precise edges and unique tint of meaning, hangs on the misty rim of consciousness. Eventually, with shamefaced recourse to my well-thumbed thesaurus or to a germane encyclopedia article, I may pin the word down, only to discover that it unfortunately rhymes with the adjoining word of the sentence. Meanwhile, I have lost the rhythm and syntax of the thought I was shaping up, and the paragraph has skidded off (like this one) in an unforeseen direction.

When, against my better judgment, I glance back at my prose from twenty or thirty years ago, the quality I admire and fear to have lost is its carefree bounce, its snap, its exuberant air of slight excess. The author, in his boyish innocence, is calling, like the sorcerer's apprentice, upon unseen powers-the prodigious potential of this flexible language's vast vocabulary. Prose should have a flow, the forward momentum of a certain energized weight; it should feel like a voice tumbling into your ear.

An aging writer wonders if he has lost the ability to visualize a completed work, in its complex spatial relations. He should have in hand a provocative beginning and an ending that will feel inevitable. Instead, he may arrive at his ending nonplussed, the arc of his intended tale lying behind him in fragments. The threads have failed to knit. The leap of faith with which every narrative begins has landed him not on a far safe shore but in the middle of the drink. The failure to make final sense is more noticeable in a writer like Agatha Christie, whose last mysteries don't quite solve all their puzzles, than in a broad-purposed visionary like Iris Murdoch, for whom puzzlement is part of the human condition. But in even the most sprawling narrative, things must add up.

The ability to fill in a design is almost athletic, requiring endurance and agility and drawing upon some of the same mental muscles that develop early in mathematicians and musicians. Though writing, being partly a function of experience, has few truly precocious practitioners, early success and burnout are a dismally

familiar American pattern. The mental muscles slacken, that first freshness fades. In my own experience, diligent as I have been, the early works remain the ones I am best known by, and the ones to which my later works are unfavorably compared. Among the rivals besetting an aging writer is his younger, nimbler self, when he was the cocky new thing.

From the middle of my teens I submitted drawings, poems, and stories to *The New Yorker*; all came back with the same elegantly terse printed rejection slip. My first break came late in my college career, when a short story that I had based on my grandmother's slow dying of Parkinson's disease was returned with a note scrawled in pencil at the bottom of the rejection slip. It read, if my failing memory serves: "Look-we don't use stories of senility, but try us again."

Now "stories of senility" are about the only ones I have to tell. My only new experience is of aging, and not even the aged much want to read about it. We want to read, judging from the fiction that is printed, about life in full tide, in love or at war-bulletins from the active battlefields, the wretched childhoods, the poignant courtships, the fraught adulteries, the big deals, the scandals, the crises of sexually and professionally active adults. My first published novel was about old people; my hero was a ninety-year-old man. Having lived as a child with aging grandparents, I imagined old age with more vigor, color, and curiosity than I could bring to a description of it now.

I don't mean to complain. Old age treats free-lance writers pretty gently. There is no compulsory retirement at the office, and no athletic injuries signal that the game is over for good. Even with modern conditioning, a ballplayer can't stretch his career much past forty, and at the same age an actress must yield the romantic lead to a younger woman. A writer's fan base, unlike that of a rock star, is post-adolescent, and relatively tolerant of time's scars; it distressed me to read of some teen-ager who, subjected to the Rolling Stones' halftime entertainment at a recent Super Bowl, wondered why that skinny old man (Mick Jagger) kept taking his shirt off and jumping around. The literary critics who coped with Hemingway's later, bare-chested novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* asked much the same thing.

By and large, time moves with merciful slowness in the old-fashioned world of writing. The eighty-eight-year-old Doris Lessing won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Elmore Leonard and P. D. James continue, into their eighties, to produce best-selling thrillers. Although books circulate ever more swiftly through the bookstores and back to the publisher again, the rhythms of readers are leisurely. They spread recommendations by word of mouth and "get around" to titles and authors years after making a mental note of them. A movie has a few weeks to find its audience, and television shows flit by in an hour, but books physically endure, in public and private libraries, for generations. Buried reputations, like Melville's, resurface in academia; avant-garde worthies such as Cormac McCarthy attain, late in life, best-seller lists and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

A pervasive unpredictability lends hope to even the most superannuated competitor in the literary field. There is more than one measurement of success. A slender poetry volume selling fewer than a thousand copies and receiving a handful of admiring reviews can give its author a pride and sense of achievement denied more mercenary producers of the written word. As for bad reviews and poor sales, they can be dismissed on the irrefutable hypothesis that reviewers and book buyers are too obtuse to appreciate true excellence. Over time, many books quickly bloom and then vanish; a precious few unfold, petal by petal, and become classics.

An aging writer has the not insignificant satisfaction of a shelf of books behind him that, as they wait for their ideal readers to discover them, will outlast him for a while. The pleasures, for him, of bookmaking-the first flush of inspiration, the patient months of research and plotting, the laser-printed final draft, the back-

and- forthing with Big Apple publishers, the sample pages, the jacket sketches, the proofs, and at last the boxes from the printers, with their sweet heft and smell of binding glue-remain, and retain creation's giddy bliss. Among those diminishing neurons there lurks the irrational hope that the last book might be the best.

A DESERT ENCOUNTER

In our fifth winter in the Southwest, my wife discovered that her gardening skills could be turned to xerophilous plants. All afternoon, she had served as my assistant and directress in pruning some ocotillo, and was enough exhilarated by the results to turn my attention to our overgrown hedge of mixed olive and oleander. Ocotillo is a tall, wandlike candlewood with vicious thorns and a feathery orange flower at its tip; handling it, even with thick leather gloves, requires the concentration of a bomb squad.

The electric trimmer I had borrowed for the massy hedge was dull and noisy. Further, the electric socket on our porch was distant, a hundred-foot extension cord away. I had to keep crawling on my hands and knees through gaps in the hedge to take the trimmer, trailing the gnarling extension cord, to the other side. And then there was the spindly aluminum stepladder that I had to keep shifting and leaning against springy branches to gain access to the hedge's overgrown top. Our condo sits on a slant, in the foothills of a pink-and-tan mountain range, which made moving the ladder one-handed and then balancing my weight on its higher steps feel heroically precarious.

My sense of triumph when my wife and I agreed that the job had been completed was marred by a mysterious circumstance: my hat had disappeared. Repeatedly getting down on my hands and knees to search beneath the hedge and circling the stony area of caliche where I had labored, I failed to find it. At this latitude, the elderly need to shelter their heads against the intemperate desert sun, and I discovered within myself an agitating grief in regard to the disappearance of the hat, a simple, brimmed floppy affair bearing the logo of an organization of which, years ago, I had been pleased to be elected a member.

Even as the shadows were deepening in the saguaro-studded mountain clefts, and the sun was lowering over the blue range to the west, I, with the circular compulsions of an aging brain, kept wandering out of doors, convinced that one more search in and around the hedge and the ocotillo would produce my missing headgear.

A breadth of paving passes close by the hedge. There, on the slanting asphalt, part parking lot and part side road, a curious confluence arose: an ancient man, brightly dressed in white trousers and a striped, starched shirt, made his ragged way downhill with the help of a cane, while, nearby, a Roto-Rooter operative in a khaki uniform was packing up his truck at the end of his workday. Oleander roots work their way into the clay drainage pipes of our aging complex and obstruct flow.

The gentleman in white trousers greeted me as if we had often met before, though we had not. "What are you doing?" he asked, tilting his head to receive the answer.

I decided to be honest, however foolish it made me seem. "I'm looking for my hat."

The Roto-Rooter man overheard us. "Hat?" he echoed. "There's a hat over here."

By "over here" he meant the curb on the far side of the asphalt, where it had never occurred to me, in all my peering around and under the hedge, to cast a glance. The hat must have fallen from my head in the course of my awkward, preoccupying struggles, and the desert breeze that springs up in the late afternoon had moved it twenty feet away.

"My hat!" I exclaimed. "It is!" I hurried over and, as if to prove my ownership to my two new companions, put it on my head. "Thank you, thank you," I said to each.

The man in khaki smiled, his share of my pleasure appropriately moderate, as he coiled his rooter and distributed the last of his tools to their places in the back of his truck. The older man, however, bent and bowlegged as he was, made my happiness his own. Quizzically beaming, he came closer to me, the shadow of his cane elongating to the east, where the last golfers at the local country club, calling to one another like birds at dawn, were finishing their rounds before darkness fell. "What does it say on your hat?" he asked me.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jose Brummitt:

What do you concentrate on book? It is just for students since they are still students or the idea for all people in the world, exactly what the best subject for that? Simply you can be answered for that question above. Every person has distinct personality and hobby per other. Don't to be forced someone or something that they don't want do that. You must know how great and also important the book Higher Gossip: Essays and Criticism. All type of book would you see on many solutions. You can look for the internet resources or other social media.

Loretta Faria:

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