

## BOOK REVIEW

### The Pennsylvania Updike

Adam Begley. *Updike*. New York: HarperCollins, 2014. 558 pp. Hardcover, \$29.99; paper, \$17.99.

Jack De Bellis with David Silcox. *John Updike's Early Years*. Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2013. 174 pp. \$65.

James Plath, ed. *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*. Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2016. 265 pp. \$85.

The centrality of Pennsylvania, and especially of his native Berks County, in author John Updike's life, literary achievement, and ultimate vision comes through vividly in Adam Begley's biography *Updike*, Jack De Bellis's more specialized study *John Updike's Early Years*, and James Plath's collection of Updike's Pennsylvania interviews, many of which were done in Updike's home county. Until he was eighteen and left for Harvard, Updike said, "there were hardly twenty days that I didn't spend in Pennsylvania," and while after that departure he no longer lived in Berks County for an extended period, he said, "though I left Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania has never left me. It figures in much of my work, and not just the earlier."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his early story "Friends from Philadelphia" and his first novels *The Poorhouse Fair*, *Rabbit, Run*, and *The Centaur*, are all set in barely fictionalized versions of his native Shillington, the nearby city of Reading, and other Berks County locations, which also provide locales not only for the early "Olinger" stories (the name refers to a town based on Shillington) but for some of the stories, poems, and novels written throughout a literary career of over fifty years and some sixty books including the massive *Rabbit Angstrom* tetralogy of novels,

arguably his greatest achievement. He even wrote a play about Pennsylvania's only president, James Buchanan.

Furthermore, many of the non-Pennsylvania novels and stories show the influence of Pennsylvania patterns. Ipswich, Massachusetts—the north-of-Boston town where Updike lived for many years and which is the model in the early, non-Pennsylvania novel *Couples* for his fictional Tarbox, Massachusetts—is another Shillington in many ways, with parallels including the small town named after a prominent family, the proximity of the countryside, the presence of a dominant church (Congregational in Tarbox rather than Lutheran in Shillington), and a close group of friends with a stream of erotic attraction running through it. In *Couples*, when countercultural youth gathering on the town green reject the dominant values of Tarbox, Adam Begley observes, “To Updike, Ipswich scorned was Shillington scorned” (322). Based in many of its aspects on Ipswich is Updike's Eastwick, Rhode Island, of *The Witches of Eastwick* and his last novel *The Widows of Eastwick*, and the Eastwick in these two books may be read, partially, as still another Shillington, but one beset by even darker forces.

John Hoyer Updike was born in Reading Hospital on March 18, 1932, the son of Wesley and Grace Hoyer Updike, a New Jersey father who became a math teacher at Shillington High School and a mother of Pennsylvania German descent with deep roots in Berks County. Both parents were graduates of nearby Ursinus College, although John's mother, an aspiring writer, also had an M.A. in English from Cornell. Living in straitened circumstances during the Depression, John's family included his maternal grandparents, John and Katherine Hoyer, and this close group of five occupied an ample white brick house bought in happier times in the town that remained a model of nurturing stability in John's mind. Even though the family was uprooted when he was fourteen by his mother's powerful desire to move about ten miles from Shillington to the farm and small sandstone farmhouse in which she had been raised, John continued to attend Shillington schools.

John Updike never tired of trying to describe the distinctive qualities of his Pennsylvania and how it differed from New England and elsewhere: “New Englanders are less giving, in a way, than the Pennsylvania Dutch.”<sup>22</sup> “People in that part of Pennsylvania are somehow more open. And there's a sort of warmth that got me through the Rabbit novels. That Pennsylvania—Lutheran or something, I don't know what it can be traced to—but there's

something about it that makes it easy to write about.”<sup>3</sup> Yet just as James Joyce had to leave Ireland to write about it in many of his finest works, Updike had to leave Berks County. Updike told one interviewer, “There comes a time when you must test yourself against the world,” and to another he said, “I think I couldn’t have had my writing career if I had stayed in Pennsylvania. On the other hand, I couldn’t have had my writing career if I hadn’t had all that Pennsylvania experience”<sup>4</sup>

Although John Updike attracted considerable personal interest and critical attention from nearly the beginning of his publishing career, he established early a pattern of making extensive use of his own life in his fiction, and he discouraged biographers from delving into it too deeply. As age and fame advanced, he may have attempted to forestall detailed biographical study with his own *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (1989). He wrote in his foreword, “I was told, perhaps in jest, of someone wanting to write my biography—to take my life, my lode of ore and heap of memories from me! The idea seemed so repulsive that I was stimulated to put down . . . these elements of an autobiography.”<sup>5</sup> Updike’s death on January 27, 2009, however, both renewed interest in all facets of his work and opened the gates to more extensive biographical investigation and publication. Of the three books under review here, Adam Begley’s *Updike* and Jack De Bellis’s *John Updike’s Early Years* are both biographies, and James Plath’s *John Updike’s Pennsylvania Interviews* contains material for future biographical work as well as commentary on his own writing by Updike, himself.

Begley’s biography appeared in 2014, was widely reviewed and praised, and introduced Updike’s world readership to many details of his personal and creative life hitherto known only to relatively few scholars and persons close to him. A central focus of Begley’s rich and complex study is Updike’s early expressed desire to ride a “thin pencil line” out of Pennsylvania and into a wider world but that the stability of that Pennsylvania point of origin never left him. Indeed, Begley’s first chapter is “A Tour of Berks County,” and he concludes his narrative, “Up until the last weeks of his life, when he was too sick to write, he was always that little boy on the floor of the Shillington dining room, bending his attention to the paper, riding that thin pencil line into a glorious future, fulfilling the towering ambition of his grandest dreams. ‘I’ve remained,’ he once said, “all too true to my youthful self”” (486).

The pattern of the firm Pennsylvania floor of experience and the artistic flight upward and outward driven by high if often carefully hidden ambition asserted itself early. An Olinger story called “Flight” concerns the intellectual

promise and prophecy of departure of a provincial boy, one among many Updike alter egos in his fiction. Unlike the biographical histories of childhood dislocation and slow, gradual development that characterize some American writers—the losses of a father and social position in the lives of Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain, for example—Updike's is a story of solid early support and development in his teens of larger artistic purpose. From the age of twelve first in Shillington and then in the old-fashioned Pennsylvania farmhouse without plumbing or electricity in Plowville, he read and studied the *New Yorker*, the sophisticated urban magazine that was to become his gateway to literary success. A childhood lover of Disney's cartoons, the teenage Updike was attracted as much to the *New Yorker's* famous drawings, as the cartoons were always called, as to the fiction or poetry. For Shillington school publications, Updike wrote numerous poems and prose pieces and contributed hundreds of his own drawings, activities he repeated for the *Harvard Lampoon*, which became his avenue to literary success in New York. Yet Updike's earliest significant published story, "Friends from Philadelphia," written at Harvard and accepted by the *New Yorker*, the venue for which he had trained for almost a decade, is set in a version of Shillington.

When Updike started at the *New Yorker*, his dream job, in his early twenties, he often wrote "Talk of the Town" pieces about New York, but he soon left the city for small-town and suburban Ipswich, Massachusetts. As Begley stresses, "He would not be a New York writer, and New York would not be his subject" (123), or, at least, not his central subject. As if to separate himself from New York and its literary world without forsaking literary use of experience and knowledge that would have been the envy of most young American writers of his era, Updike created Henry Bech, an alternative self who became the writer-protagonist in a number of books and stories and was a born and bred New Yorker. John Updike eventually ranged much farther afield in such books as *The Coup* (set in a fictional Islamic African country), *Brazil* (set in a Brazil interwoven with elements of the Tristan and Isolde myth), *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (ranging over four generations of a family and in settings from New Jersey and Delaware to New York City and Colorado), *Gertrude and Claudius* (a clever prequel to *Hamlet* and set, naturally, in Denmark), *Terrorist* (regarding an American-born Muslim teenager), and a trilogy of novels based on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, as well as volumes of poetry, a play, and many reviews and other prose pieces about an extraordinarily wide variety of subjects. Shillington never left him, however. Describing Updike's last days, Adam Begley refers to a very late

poem, “He assured us one last time that Shillington, ‘draped in plain glory the passing days.’ Distilled over the decades, his nostalgia was now as pure as sunlight in the dead of winter: ‘Perhaps / we meet our heaven at the start and not / the end of life’ (482), suggesting the centrality of Pennsylvania, first and last, to him.

Over many years, Jack De Bellis has written extensively about John Updike and, with help in gathering material from Updike’s Berks County contact David Silcox, published in 2013 a very different kind of biography from Adam Begley’s more comprehensive study. De Bellis’s more specialized account in *John Updike’s Early Years* covers less time in Updike’s life than does Begley’s, but it includes unique records of many memories and observations from Updike’s Pennsylvania friends and acquaintances, material that is simply not available elsewhere. Three of Updike’s closest classmates, including one who dated him during his senior year of high school, died before De Bellis began the interviews from which much of this unique testimony is drawn, reminding us of the urgency of De Bellis’s project and how it soon would be impossible to repeat. This biographical study conveys a richness and immediacy of experience, and the testimonials included are especially important in critical analysis of a writer so much of whose material was so close to incidents in his early life. As De Bellis notes of the “two dozen interviews” in his “Introduction,” “the same voices that spoke to Updike spoke to me” (xix). De Bellis argues even more strongly than Begley for the influence of the physical and cultural Shillington—and especially for that of Updike’s high school classmates—on his work, uncovering numerous parallels between persons and places in life and art. Especially useful in this regard is material in the chapter, “Inspirations and Models.”

John Updike was a deeply ironic and often humorous writer, and students of the comic in his work will be delighted by a whole chapter in *Early Years* on clowning, including many school pranks. Updike became such a distinguished gray eminence in his later public appearances that we need to peel that back to recover the impishness, irreverence, cool comic distance, and even the ludic daring that was part of his life and is central to his complex vision. In his clowning, John Updike took after his extroverted father rather than his more withdrawn and sometimes moody mother, whose interest in writing inspired his creativity. Updike was a bookish and sometimes eccentric youth, but he was also a prankster and a risk-taker. He liked to drive dangerously, spinning his father’s old Buick on gravel, driving without his hands on the wheel, and sliding from the driver’s seat to the running board

and eventually into the back seat in an elaborate steering exchange (62). *Early Years* cites numerous reflections in Updike's works of this clowning and daredevil streak such as the dramatic schoolroom pranks in the opening chapter of *The Centaur* (64). Updike has been the victim of a certain amount of dour moralizing and simplistic moral judgment, partly because he was sometimes seen and envied late in life as a too-successful establishment writer, partly because of adventurous and transgressive sex in his art and life (especially during the Ipswich years), and partly because he often created flawed, compromised, and fallible characters such as the erratic Rabbit Angstrom. De Bellis's material on clowning and daring reminds us of the fundamental nature both of his comic vision and of his defiance of convention.

Although De Bellis's book focuses on Updike's early days, his knowledge of Updike's whole life and literary output is copious and detailed, and he provides numerous instances of later manifestations of the qualities and habits he describes in *Early Years*. For example, De Bellis has uncovered many instances in Updike's later life of his love for drawing even though he veered away professionally from this kind of creativity after his post-Harvard year at Oxford's Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. De Bellis's detailed research has resulted in fifty-seven pages of useful appendices including an Updike chronology and listing of Updike's numerous published writings set in Pennsylvania, early contributions to his elementary school paper *The Little Shilling* and his high school continuations in *The Chatterbox*, and brief descriptions of Updike's high school administrators, teachers, and schoolmates before, in, and after his class of 1950, as well as elementary and junior high school faculty. The one thing missing is a map of Shillington as it was in Updike's youth, which would be useful to Updike's many readers not familiar with Berks County. Nevertheless, in its profusion of detail, *John Updike's Early Years* gives us an unparalleled view of Updike's Pennsylvania roots and contexts, and it provides valuable information and insights into the later literary consequences of the Pennsylvania Updike.

James Plath is the founding leader of the John Updike Society, which was organized soon after the author's death in 2009. Plath has done much to promote the enhanced interest in Updike's life and work following his death including assisting in the establishment of the *John Updike Review*. *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews* does invaluable service to other scholars in combing through and gathering together many of Updike's thoughts and others' impressions of him as expressed in regional sources such as the

*Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Reading Eagle*, possibly fugitive and transient publications such as *Berks County Living* and a college student newspaper, and transcribed speeches and radio broadcasts. Here we have the questions and concerns of Pennsylvania interviewers and interlocutors, and we also have Updike as he chose to appear and respond in his home territory. Most numerous are the nine interviews by National Public Radio's Terry Gross; she is also the most skilled and aggressive interviewer. Among other matters, she is the most forward in pressing Updike on sex in his work, which he is more than willing to discuss but which was often minimized by more reticent interviewers and readers in his home territory. Also noteworthy are Updike's numerous comments on his youthful Lutheranism and its influence on his later life, for as a regular churchgoer, he was somewhat unusual among recent major American writers.

Although Plath lists himself as "editor" of *Pennsylvania Interviews*, he is a major Updike critic and scholar, and he supplies a perceptive and useful "introduction and conclusion in which he synthesizes some of the material in this anthology of interviews. He is particularly good at identifying common denominators in Updike's comments on Berks County and Pennsylvania in a larger sense. Quoting others, he includes a "Pennsylvania knowingness" that "the truth is good" but a respect for the "tolerant" and "amiably confused" and an appreciation for the "inevitable conflicts" in life and that "humans weaken." He notes Updike's identification of the "Pennsylvania essence" as a "doughy middleness" that signifies more than middle-class values in a middle-states location and doughy Pennsylvania Dutch food but rather an emphasis on kneading as the means to the end of a blended and molded whole, which in turn is related to the Pennsylvania "sense of community" (247–48, 251).

Begley's *Updike*, De Bellis's *John Updike's Early Years*, and Plath's *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews* complement each other and can profitably be read together both by scholars and general readers seriously interested in Updike. Among many instances of this is Plath's inclusion of William Ecenbarger's June 12, 1983, article, "Updike Is Home," a Shillington interview Begley also uses in his first chapter as illustrative of Updike's artistic method of turning his own experience into art, in this case a July 4, 1983, *New Yorker* story called "One More Interview" published less than a month after Ecenbarger's article, and both the interview and Begley's treatment of Updike's story are enhanced by the Shillington detail in De Bellis's book.

The original results of Adam Begley's research and reflection on John Updike's life and work are too numerous to list, here, and his biography is truly groundbreaking, but one especially illuminating aspect is detailed information on John Updike's world traveling—which was very extensive, especially later in his life—and its literary consequences. The boy from Shillington and Plowville traveled a long way in many senses, but Begley, De Bellis, and Plath agree in seeing John Updike's deepest commitment, wherever he traveled, as expressed in the statement that Pennsylvania, "is where the self I value is stored."<sup>6</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Dorothy Lehman Hoerr, "In the Limelight: Shillington Native, World-Reknown[ed] Author John Updike." *Berks County Living*, November 2004, 48, with added text from the original tape-recorded interview. Reprint in Plath, ed., *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*, 222. Chuck Ungar, director, "Profiles in Excellence: John Updike," Pennsylvania State University: WPSU-TV video segment, May 3, 1983; printed in Plath, ed., *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*, 67–69.
2. Marty Crisp, "Defrocking the Muse." *Lancaster Sunday News*, February 4, 1996, H1, H3; reprint in Plath, ed., *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*, 157–60.
3. Hoerr, "In the Limelight," 231.
4. Terry Gross, "Fresh Air with Terry Gross: John Updike (S.)," *Fresh Air*, Philadelphia: WHY Radio, February 9, 1988; printed in Plath, ed., *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*, 100. Carlin Romano, "The Playful Literary Legend," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 10, 2007, H1, H9; reprinted in Plath, ed., *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*, 240.
5. John Updike, *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989), xv.
6. Updike, as quoted in De Bellis, *John Updike's Early Years*, 23.