

Seek my Face

J. Updike

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Updike is not only a writer but also an accomplished artist. Both vocations have in recent years been combined as he has been acting as a kind of art critic on modern art in the pages of the New York Review of Books. In this short novel he gets another outlet for his interest in visual arts. It is a fictionalized potted history of Abstract Expressionism, as it unfolds during an interview with a surviving widow - Hope, in her Vermont home. Hope is of Quaker Pennsylvanian stock (like Updike?) having had a wild time in New York during the war as an art student. She eventually takes up with a certain Zack with his drip-paintings, surely to be based on Jackson Pollack. After his death in an traffic accident she moves in with a certain Guy, whose real-life provenence is harder to pin down, some of it points to Oldenburg, even more to Warhol, neither alone making much sense as a model. Children are born, one a daughter turning Lesbian. Eventually she is dumped for a young 'tight-assed' woman (a man with a cunt as she dismisses it) and in older age takes up with a stockbroker and Art dealer, living comfortable off her sales of Zack (Pollack) surviving paintings. The story is told with many a digression and artful repetition in an effort to give the versmilitude of a real interview. Concurrently with the interview the young woman with a buzzing tape-recorder (only once cut off, during the revelation of the Lesbian career of the daughter) is being scrutinized by Hope with a mixture of strong disapproval and a desire to please and get to know. In vain she tries to feed her, induce her to open up, but the young woman refuses.

Much of the novel is a so called 'key-novel' where the game is to guess hidden identities. Some are easy, apart from the main artist - Pollack. But also de Koonig is a straightforward call. Others require a more thorough knowledge of the scene. One also suspects, like with the character Guy, that many are simple improbable amalgams. Much of the art-talk is no doubt lifted from contemporary memoirs, and although much of it may sound clever, it is not very illuminating.

Updike gets an opportunity to word-paint. Minute details of contemporary living are indulgently described, like the view out of the Vermont house, the implements in the kitchen, the furniture in the room. It is supposed to be a celebration of Old age and its concomitant infirmities. Updike in his eight decade is also walking slowly into that night, and he paints his protagonist a comfortable ten years ahead of his own age, as if trying to get used to the inevitable himself.

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