

Villages

J. Updike

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Updike is the American chronicler of the nations lower upper middle-classes. As such he does in the present book go over much old ground previously covered in books like 'Marry Me' or 'Couples'. The life of the suburbanite is pleasant and charming, with home-making and comfortable careers, but ultimately shallow and hollow, and the transcending grace is supplied by adultery (preferably serial), around which the entire oeuvre of Updike may be said to rotate.

In many ways the book is autobiographical, at least superficially so. The protagonist of the story, the computer nerd Owen Mackenzie is born the same year as the author himself, and like the latter grows up in a small town in Pennsylvania only to spend his twilight years in the Boston area. But the main character is not a writer of prose but of computer-code. Updike has read up and throughout the narrative he gives knowledgeable hints of the hidden progression of computers, how the idea of the PC already took hold in the seventies to become a reality ten years alter. How much of this is accurate or simply misunderstood is hard for the uninitiated reader to access. He endows the wife Phyllis with an MIT college career as a math major, a career she has to abandon for the conventions of house-wifeing in the fifties. Updike has read up on math too, dropping some names and undigested facts that do not quite make sense, at least not to the professional. Something you do not understand you cannot creatively develop, it remains like grist in the system, separate and non-interfering, its hidden metaphors unreleased providing no nutritional stimulation.

This kind of novel is realistic, in fact that is its very rationale. Updikes mission is to evoke as accurately as possible a sense of time and place, starting with small-home-town Pennsylvania in the thirties, through Boston college life in the fifties and middle-class suburbia in Connecticut in the sixties and seventies. To anchor the narrative intermittent references are made to the reigning Presidents. The upbeat optimism of the innocent Eisenhower years to be succeeded by the disillusion of Johnson and Nixon; maybe meant to parallel the degeneration of domestic propriety into the cynicism of loveless extra-marital exercises. Updike is a painter on the side (and yes indeed the protagonist also takes up oil-painting at the end, if not very successfully) and as a writer he is a word-painter, striving very hard to engender vivid visual scenes by a smooth well-trodden prose. He does not shy away from the graphic when it comes to sexual encounters, and only veers away from the purely pornographic by allowing himself to be carried away beyond arousal to a state not that different from detached disgust by the absurdity of bodily obsessions, objectively not that different from defecation.

But Updike possesses great skill, this cannot be taken away from him. His deft pacing and suspense reveals a master of the craft. The reader is probably as excited as the neophyte Owen himself at his initiation into the exciting world of other mens women standing whispering into the receiver in a telephone-booth. What is Owens attraction?

A puzzle as much to himself as to the reader (and author?). Nature may have blessed him with an attractive physique and the charms of reticence that tends not to interfere with romantic projection. Maybe he also performs well in bed, if so more by accident and distraction than passionate design. Clearly though as a male he is passive, touchingly grateful to be the object of desire, yet totally unable to initiate anything by himself. As Thackeray long since remarked, in any relationship there is one who loves and one who merely allows love to be made.

The longest marriage, the one that succeeded and from whose vantage point the novel is viewed, gets relatively little attention, except from the snatches of tender everyday bitching that for want of option tends to be sentimentally exalted. The second wife is always the best, yet his time with her is foreshortened as the concluding years of a life pass by very quickly and adds very little to the toto, so dying comparatively young is not such an unmitigated calamity the young may think. But a marriage contracted over the dead bodies of preceeding ones has the pressure to succeed, especially so when it is of yet a unique experience. Given the passivity of the protagonist it is not clear whether he would have been able to go through to the bitter end. Not only the entreats by the future but the accidental death (through a car-crash a device of the plot used before by Updike), an intervention by providence if any, is needed to enable him to make the necessary transition. (And of course it testifies to the skill of Updike as a narrator to give no inkling of this resolution until the very end of the narrative.)

A deft book, intermittantly titillating, giving the reader what is expected. The cover of my edition incidentally shows a painting by Ingres, the infamous 'Turkish Bath' with its circular frame, a delightful reminder of my own early adolescence when it formed the most laviscious of images to be found in my fathers art books.

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