



JEFFERSON LECTURE

On May 22, 2008, writer John Updike presented the 37th annual Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Warner Theatre in Washington, DC. His topic, “The Clarity of Things: What Is American about American Art?” wove a thread of ideas through the works of American artists from John Singleton Copley to Jackson Pollock. “Two centuries after Jonathan Edwards sought a link with the divine in the beautiful clarity of things,” said Updike, “William Carlos Williams wrote in introducing his long poem *Paterson* that ‘for the poet there are no ideas but in things.’ *No ideas but in things.*” He continued, “The American artist, first born into a continent without museums and art schools, took Nature as his only instructor, and things as his principal study. A bias toward the empirical, toward the evidential object in the numinous fullness of its being, leads to a certain liness, as the artist intently maps the visible in a New World that feels surrounded by chaos and emptiness.”

His pen rarely at rest, John Updike has been publishing fiction, essays, and poetry since the mid-fifties, when he was a staff writer at the *New Yorker*. “Of all modern American writers,” writes Adam Gopnik in *Humanities* magazine, “Updike comes closest to meeting Virginia Woolf’s demand that a writer’s only job is to get himself, or herself, expressed without impediments.”

Updike has had a sustained interest in art, beginning in childhood when he had his first drawing lessons. At Harvard he took art classes with Hyman Bloom, a painter who was associated with a style known as Boston Expressionism. Then a Knox Fellowship gave Updike the wherewithal to study for a year at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, England. Painting had taught him, he once said, “how difficult it is to see things exactly as they are, and that the painting is ‘there’ as a book is not.”

In *Just Looking*, 1989, and *Still Looking*, 2005, Updike gathered the impressions he’s been making over a lifetime of observing painting and sculpture. In an essay in the former he captures in limpid prose Vermeer’s achievement in paint in *View of Delft*: “an instant of flux forever held.” And in the latter, in a chapter on Jackson Pollock, Updike glimpses, and so we do, too, the essence of what Pollock’s drip-painting could accomplish—“an image, in dots and lines and little curdled clouds of dull color, of the cosmos.”

About his fiction Updike has said, “My only duty was to describe reality as it had come to me—to give the mundane its beautiful due.” When considering the entire scope of his work, readers of American fiction are most often put in mind of Harry Angstrom, the character from the Rabbit saga with whom Updike seemed for many years to be on closest, if often contentious, terms. Living in Ipswich, Massachusetts, from roughly 1957 to 1970, he published some of his best-known novels: *The Poorhouse Fair*, *Rabbit Run*, *Pigeon Feathers*, *The Centaur*, and *Bech: A Book*, introducing readers to his irreverent alter ego, Henry Bech.

In the half century Updike has been writing he has garnered many literary prizes, awards, and honors, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, twice each; the Pen Faulkner Award for Fiction, the Rea Award for the Short Story; and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is among a select few to have received both the National Humanities Medal and the National Medal of Arts. Albright College in Reading (the fictional Brewer readers first encountered in *Rabbit Run*) bestowed upon him an honorary Litt.D. degree in 1982.

Updike is known to many as an author of short stories, with dozens having graced the pages of the *New Yorker* before being published in collections. He is also an accomplished literary critic, whose reviews and essays frequently appear in *The New York Review of Books*. He received his second National Book Critics Circle Award in 1983 for *Hugging the Shore*, including such gems as the micro-essay “A Mild ‘Complaint,’” which skewers the misuses and ‘misusers’ of ‘scare quotes.’ He has also applied his habile wit to poetry, composing early on a collection called *The Carpentered Hen* in 1954. Three more tomes of verse followed.

Updike holds a deep appreciation of the reading life in general and a love of the book in particular. He has alluded to an imagined reader of his work: a teenage boy who happens upon one of his books on the dusty shelves of some library one afternoon looking for literary adventure. In a speech two years ago at the American Booksellers Association convention, he encouraged beleaguered booksellers to “defend [their] lonely forts. . . . For some of us, books are intrinsic to our human identity.”

—*adapted from an essay by Steve Moyer*