

~ *The Janus File* ~  
*A Look Back at a Writer for the Ages*

## John Updike at Rest...

*The Late Great Author on Writing About Sex, God...  
And A Rabbit Who Worried Himself to Death*

By Don Williams

*Of all the celebrity deaths of 2009, the toughest for NMW surely was that of John Updike, who died of lung cancer on Jan. 27, 2009. This genial man of flamboyant letters brought instant credibility to New Millennium Writings in 1996, when he agreed to be interviewed for our start-up literary journal. Here is that first-ever NMW interview/profile, anachronisms and all.—DW*

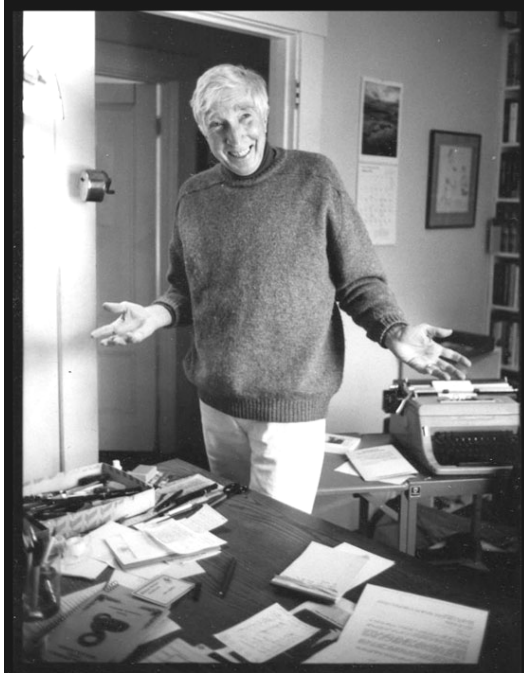
While researching *Rabbit at Rest*, John Updike made the long drive south to Florida that Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, his unruly protagonist in four novels would make just weeks before his fictive death.

“I drove a little farther than Harry. I drove down from Boston, through the Brewer Diamond County area in Pennsylvania, then south,” says Updike. “There isn’t an awful lot to see on Route 95. You’re in a tunnel of green. I watched the rivers I crossed and listened to the radio.” Recasting the journey in fiction, Updike used it to bring Rabbit closer to death and to set him reflecting upon the passages of his life as they were evoked by music on the radio.

Think of Updike’s career as a literary ride through four decades of American life and you get a sense of what may be his greatest achievement. He has chronicled, at times almost catalogued, the hopes, fears, sexual trends and pop artifacts of our times more vividly than any other writer.

His novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, (Knopf, 1996) extended Updike’s reach to embrace a century. The book begins with a Presbyterian minister waking up to the icy conviction that there is no God. He spends the next 100 pages avoiding hypocrisy by giving up his church,

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*Photo by Jill Krementz*

*‘When you come to the practice of your art you have to go with what thrills you. If you wrote some opposite way, you would get criticized for that. You have to please yourself.’*

**~ John Updike**

his home and social standing. His children and grandchildren fare both better and worse as the years march past. The book ends on an apocalyptic note reminiscent of the Waco inferno.

Updike has rendered a portrait of America busy losing its faith while embracing pop culture, especially the movies. The cast of characters is broad and vivid, ranging from the proud minister to a movie queen; from a fanatical Bible-quoting guru to a greenhouse attendant, and from Prohibition-era crooks to a warm-hearted mailman.

Rabbit may be the character closest to Updike’s heart, however, as if Rabbit were the person Updike might most nearly resemble had he stayed in Shillington, Pennsylvania, where he was born in 1932. Updike’s father taught high school math and his mother wrote with modest success. From these beginnings, Updike scaled greater heights than Rabbit ever imagined (and we know the things he imagined). Updike graduated from Harvard in 1954 and won a scholarship to the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, England. From 1955 to 1957 he was a member of the staff of *The New Yorker*, which published his short stories and poems. His first novels were *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959) and *Rabbit, Run* (1960), followed by *The*

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*Centaur* (1963) which won several prizes. Some 45 volumes of verse, essays, stories, novels, plays and autobiography followed. No year went by for more than five decades without his byline appearing. The books have garnered numerous awards, including two Pulitzers and the William Dean Howells Award. Of all this outpouring of prose and verse, the four Rabbit books have earned the greatest fame. Well, those and *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984), which became a popular movie.

Updike once called the *Rabbit* quartet his “continental magnum opus,” exploring “the whole mass of middling, hidden, troubled America.” Yet Rabbit represents only one corner of the Updike oeuvre. In his novel, *Brazil* (1994), as in *Collected Poems, 1953 to 1993*, you see (or is writing actually *heard?*): A multitude of voices, a flexibility of tone, an extravagance of metaphor, a cosmic range of interests, all kept intelligible through a flowing syntax.

Updike has been accused of? credited with? elevating style above substance. He once described a character’s seething anger so: “A flamingo in her voice seeking to flaunt its vivid wings.” Thus Updike flaunts his vivid style. But when your major subjects are gratification of the flesh and the search for meaning in a world that people have rendered Godless, and when you plumb such themes in stories about midlife crises, infidelity and death, it’s hard to make the charge of stylistic frivolity stick. Updike fishes deep waters.

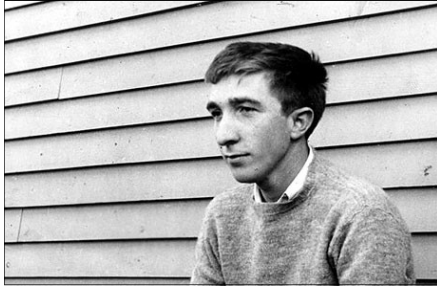
That may not be immediately apparent to those who show up for a personal appearance, such as the one I attended in Knoxville, Tennessee (ca. 1995—DW).

Dwarfed by the cavernous insides of a rococo movie house where he stood trim in a dark suit, his white hair neatly in place above straight teeth and that famous yam of a nose, Updike read and took questions. His voice is mid-to-low register and spiced by a tone of mild irony, so you have a hard time matching the laid back style of his delivery with THE STYLE in his books.

“I’ve been accused of being too wordy and colorful since the very beginning of my career, but the writers who excited me were like Proust, who was the master of metaphor,” says Updike. “The prolonged metaphors and similes in Proust thrilled me. When you come to the practice of your art you have to go with what thrills you. If you wrote some opposite way, you would get criticized for that. You have to please yourself.”

Asked to describe the major theme of his work, Updike demurs, “I’m not sure I’m the one to answer that, but, at a stab... the glory of the daily.”

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*'I think the loss of meaning we were just discussing affects literature above all. Without there being some point to human lives, why bother? What is the point of most of the fiction you read? It seems to have no point.'*

Understand, “the daily” can be as chilling as a baby’s drowning, as flamboyant as the sexual mores of the New England middle class, or as quirky as Updike’s distinct stutter that even now recurs in odd moments. It disappears when he gets rolling, for instance when he’s talking about *Brazil*, a magical-realism experiment about a young black beach bum and a wealthy white girl who meet on Copacabana Beach in 1966 and flee westward. The book is at once mystical, violent and sexually charged.

As evidenced by *Memoirs of the Ford Administration* (1993), Updike obviously preferred writing about sex in the Sixties and Seventies rather than the Nineties.

“My period of expertise is pre-AIDS,” he says. “The whole thing (AIDS) strikes me as terribly sad and a lot of clutter around what should be a rather pure act. Of course, there was always disease and unwanted pregnancy. That was the bane of sex in the old days. Maybe it’s never been as free an activity as it seemed in the 1960s, but the era between the advent of the birth control pill and AIDS was exceptionally innocent and...”

“Fun?” I suggest.

“Yes, fun,” he chuckles.

Updike’s chronicles of such fun brought him fame. *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the story of a young man’s botched flight from his wife and children, and of their eventual reconciliation, was daring in its day. Pages were cut from the manuscript that were not restored to print until later editions.

“John Cheever in some of his letters complains about my ‘sexual extravagance.’ And I had a terrible time at *The New Yorker*, getting certain expressions in, but I always thought it was healthy to see how far they would go. The late S.J. Perelman thought I wrote about masturbation too much.

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“By 1960, when *Rabbit Run* appeared, that taboo business had sort of evaporated. *Lady Chatterly* was coming out and the Henry Miller books. He is not a writer I admire, but I did admire his frankness. He caught something of the real shameless power of the sex drive. The last chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, about Molly Bloom, is a model of sexual freedom. Frankness mingles with all kinds of other daily concerns. It’s really a very beautiful book. I was influenced by that and (D. H.) Lawrence’s courage in trying to write a book about sex, about what happens between men and women.

“And Nabakov’s *Lolita*. There’s not a dirty word in it, but he did try to show love and sex in what would be considered perverted circumstances. Surely his books are illuminating. Sex is not a simple nor always a healthy thing. It has a twisted side.”

Perhaps Updike portrayed that side most vividly in *Couples* (1968).

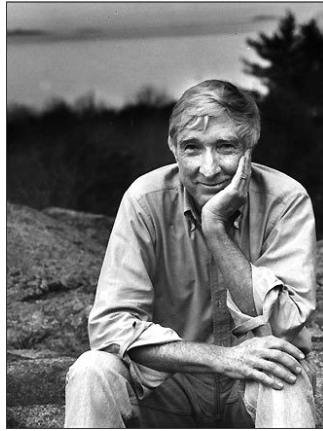
“*Couples* was written in the full flush of permissible freedom,” remembers Updike. “A few complained, mostly to my face or in letters. My attempt was to describe things as they are, with all the attendant embarrassment and awkwardness. It was sexual realism rather than pornography, part of being human. I try to make the books as good as I can and as honest as I can.”

*Rabbit Run* was shocking for reasons other than its sexual candor, however. Two-thirds through the book, there is a long stream-of-consciousness passage in which Updike portrays a young mother, Rabbit’s wife Ruth, drowning her baby girl. Reading it is like being tied to a railroad track and watching a train run over you. Few passages in modern fiction strike with such force, a result achieved in part by Updike’s switching voices, so that the account is from the mother’s point of view.

“In a novel of any length you should be able to enter some other character’s mind,” says Updike. “In part, the genius of the novel is to demonstrate different points of view. *Rabbit Run* does it more than any other book of mine. I was quite a young novelist at the time I wrote it. I wasn’t eager to kill off a character, even a tiny character like Little Becky. It was distasteful, a little like putting a pet down. I was in Vermont with my then-wife, trying to write a little each day. I stayed all day up in my room to write that scene.

“Getting into her head, well, you make a little jump and there you are. It’s kind of like jumping into cold water. It’s not so bad once you get used to it.”

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*‘Not to believe in God seems a terrible confession of meaninglessness.... Science isn’t very helpful on this, but you also have the datum of your own existence, your own inner being, which, as Kierkegaard and others pointed out, should be taken into account too.’*

Updike got used to it quickly. He made similar leaps in novels that followed. In *Rabbit Redux* (1971) the major characters are on drugs, and so Updike made the leap into altered states.

“In the Sixties there was quite a lot of pot around and even though I was a suburban father, householder and all that, the odd chance to smoke pot came along. I don’t think I ever got addicted to it, but there was enough around. Coke was not part of my generation’s experience, so I’m quite innocent about coke. It’s a fine line between what you have to experience and what you can imagine.”

*Rabbit Redux* imagines an America under siege from within. Rabbit’s home becomes a commune for his adolescent son Nelson, a runaway teenaged girl named Jill, and a black radical named Skeeter.

“I was trying to show Harry (Rabbit) as a kind of American Everyman being invaded by the most disruptive, scoffing and negative elements of the era. Skeeter was patterned on books more than people I knew. I suppose that Eldridge Cleaver of *Soul on Ice* must have been in there somewhere. It’s a little hard to remember, but the Berkeley *Barb* and other dramatically left publications were amply quoted in the press in those days, so that Skeeter’s kind of rhetoric was in the air.

“Jill and Skeeter are almost like nightmares Rabbit’s having. His little house there on Villa Crescent becomes a kind of clearing house for contemporary thought.

Chronicles of Rabbit’s travails and triumphs during the age of excess in *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) and the era of AIDS and political correctness in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) earned Updike his Pulitzers. The latter Rabbit books are longer than the first two, but the same techniques and obsessions pertain. Both novels climax, ahem, by way of

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sexual encounters—a wife-swapping episode in *Rabbit is Rich* and Rabbit's tryst with his daughter-in-law in *Rabbit at Rest*.

At the same time, both are rich with musings about God and time and death, subjects that turn up one way or another in all of Updike's novels, perhaps most notably in a trilogy he based on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* comprised of *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger's Version* (1986) and *S* (1988).

"I'm very interested in religious issues," says Updike, a church-going Episcopalian.

"Do you believe in God?" I ask.

"Sure. Not to believe in God seems a terrible confession of meaninglessness. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* is an investigation of faith that flickers in and out. I confess I don't think too much about the details, like the Virgin Birth, although there comes a crunch time where you really should make up your mind about those things. The articles of faith were hammered out by thinking men. They're sort of a piece, but I'm not very rigorous, not being a theologian.

"Science isn't very helpful on this," Updike understates, "but you also have the datum of your own existence, your own inner being, which, as Kierkegaard and others pointed out, should be taken into account too.

"Kierkegaard spoke of the Leap of Faith. Faith is faith. You're not going to be able to repose in it because if it were obviously true, it wouldn't be faith. If God were provable, he would be kind of an oppressive tyrant who would always be there. There's no getting around it; you have to believe, even against the grain of reason."

Rabbit might be speaking for Updike when he observes, "Somewhere behind all this... there's something that wants me to find it." Mostly Rabbit's search for spiritual fulfillment involves unorthodox pilgrimages into sexual experimentation and other activities not generally thought of as religious. He reaches an accommodation of sorts between spirit and flesh in *Rabbit at Rest*, although readers have been reluctant to accept the character's untimely demise. Updike doesn't share their distress.

"I don't much miss him really. It's true he was a lovable character once I settled on writing about him. And he was always there for me every 10 years. But what more was left for his particular pilgrimage, after all? It seemed he had about gone the limit of his own capabilities. He is a man and all men are mortal, and therefore Rabbit is mortal. He was pretty young, but men of 56, especially overweight former

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athletes, die young. You see it every other week. In a way, he always lived hard and everything came to him a little too soon.”

To anyone who stands across a book-signing table from him, the differences between Updike and Rabbit are immediately obvious. Unlike Rabbit, who died of too many cheeseburgers and malted milk shakes—balm for his many worries—Updike is trim and fit. He obviously has taken care of himself. Like many another writer, he has used the lives of other authors to pattern his own, but often in an inverse way. For instance, Updike is highly complimentary of Ernest Hemingway, but he claims to have deliberately set out to live and work differently from the esteemed novelist, saving his mental abilities for a stretch run in his senior years. Updike eschews strong drink, and he still puts in his hours as if he were a draftsman going to work every morning.

Noting that Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* had staked a claim to a vein in American life that said *get out, get away, make a life on the lam*, Updike consciously set out to chronicle an America that mostly stayed home and took jobs. He has not always wrestled the demons of domesticity with particular grace. He has referred to the divorce with his first wife and leaving his children as “the worst thing I ever did.”

Still, he seems more at ease than his creation, the nervous, frightened Rabbit, who always has one foot out the door. In fact, Updike may be America’s most well adjusted serious writer. He is mostly happy with life in America, and despite the messiness of Rabbit’s pursuit of sex and wealth and other things Rabbit can’t articulate, we shouldn’t regard his troubles as a larger indictment of the American Way, says Updike. He thinks Rabbit’s attitude, a sort of scruffy, flippant patriotism, is about right for an American Everyman (or an American writer) despite the spiritual malaise he senses.

“There has been a loss of cosmic meaning but not specifically American,” Updike explains. “I think everybody to some extent feels it. Europeans, Asians, Africans too. The old gods and old verities have been questioned.

“One is living in a world where there are very few authoritative directions as to what is right and wrong, so you have to improvise, but I’m not sure even T.S. Eliot would have wanted to change his citizenship in America in the 20th century for citizenship in say, the 13th century. There was trouble there too and tremendous loss of private freedom. I don’t think we realize how constrained most of the people of the past have been, how little freedom they had and how much fear

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was in their lives. Fear of the monarch, fear of goblins. All kinds of terror has been eased away from modern life and we shouldn't be sorry about it.

“Surely one of the most fascinating spectacles in the late 20th century is the developments in science. What will the Hubble Telescope tell us about deep space?” he asks rhetorically, then answers his own question. “I think it deepens the impression you already have of a ridiculously large universe from which no clear message emerges. Maybe it's a kind of primitive searching-for-God kind of mentality, but I do follow the more spectacular developments of our time with great interest. I was struck by that part of the Hubble where they trained it on a piece of blank night sky, and it turns out that the number of galaxies is almost infinite. They raised the number of galaxies to 50 billion (since then much higher—DW), a figure hard to wrap your mind around.

“We're kind of dulled to it by now. The exciting time was when Galileo put forth his theories. That was really shattering. Now we've kind of put astronomy into a corner of our minds and don't let it worry us, but it is worrisome; it does worry me. You would think that something more coherent would come out of this immensity.

“I'm interested in the Hubble Telescope and I've been trying to think of some way I could use it. In the days when I wrote more light verse it would have been a good thing to write about.”

Updike all but stopped writing light verse when markets dried up in the 1970s and 80s. He had always used poetry as a tool for honing language and for chronicling less weighty events in American life. Still, critics have been praising *Collected Poems, 1953 to 1993*, for lines such as these from “Academy.”

*The naked models, the Village gin, the wife  
whose hot tears sped the novel to its end,  
the radio that leaked distracting life  
into the symphony's cerebral blend.  
A struggle it was, and a dream; we wake  
to bright bald honors. Tell us our mistake.*

Even Updike's light verse has inspired high accolades. Take “Painted Women.”

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*All lilac and cream and pink self-esteem  
Young Madame Renoir made the sheer daylight dream;  
In boas of air, without underwear,  
She smiles through the brushstrokes at someone still there.*

Writer X.J. Kennedy has called that Updike's best poem.

"I can't quite agree," Updike demurs. "but you're not obliged to be judgmental about your own work if you're a writer. You're only obliged to make each thing your best and exhaust all possibility of improvement as far as you can see, and then put it out there and let other people decide."

That applies to fiction as well. Most good writing is composed in part before the writer puts pen to paper, he adds, and he tends not to exhaustively rewrite.

"From what I know of other writers' habits, I would put myself in the middle of the rewriting league. I certainly rewrite more than John O'hara and Jack Kerouac and there's nothing too wrong with that. Shakespeare was another first draft writer. Ben Johnson has been alluded to as having said Shakespeare told him he never blotted a line. It might be apocryphal. I can't claim never to have blotted a line. Neither have I strenuously revised over and over again the way that Raymond Carver described himself as doing. Scott Fitzgerald was a tireless writer.

"But the structure of a thing should be complete in your head or come fairly easily. I don't think you ever revise a piece of fiction by adding characters or taking them away. You get too many rough ends or wrinkles. I believe when the inspiration seems to have stopped, you stop with it until you get charged up again. On the other hand, I'm willing to spend quite a lot of effort to get the phrasing a little better. I try to keep revising until the last proof is taken from me."

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Updike has said story is more important than style to a work's shelf life, but he worries that writers are turning away from well-wrought coherent narratives in order to capture the dispiritedness of the times.

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lives, why bother? What is the point of most of the fiction you read? It seems to have no point. As recently as the 19th century there was a sense of importance to being human. A kind of Providence was supposed to be watching and shaping our ends. Tolstoy and Dickens have a wonderful sense of fatedness about them, the sense of something big grinding away. It's hard to produce that now. A lot of the big writers—for instance Fredric Barthelme comes to mind and Bobbie Ann Mason—seem to be saying life is just a series of blips on the TV screen. There's a funny kind of shallowness to our experience now that it's hard to write your way around."

Still, Updike admires those who succeed. He hails the 1993 Nobel committee for recognizing Toni Morrison's fiction.

"As far as a choice goes, it was quite brilliant. It was somewhat surprising, since I've never seen Toni Morrison mentioned even as a contender. But when you think about it, she has tried to show aspects of the black experience with the kind of integrity and artistry that deserve recognition and admiration, so I don't think it's a bad choice at all. It wakes us up to the fact that there are more than just white males around."

For a self-described small town boy, Updike has proven himself capable of absorbing big time change. For instance, you won't hear him lamenting new directions in *The New Yorker*, the magazine most often associated with his name.

"*The New Yorker* is a different magazine in some ways. It's less dignified and less of a reader's magazine now. I admired its cool. You know, *You want to read? Well, here's some writing*, and they would put in these long articles without subheads or anything.

"But the editor and editors continue to print wonderful articles. There are occasionally some things now that seem quite skippable, but the poetry hasn't changed. There's more of it. I'm sorry to see the fiction reduced to one story a week, but Tina Brown had a tricky job of resuscitation. To make this magazine's charms apparent to younger readers can't be easy. *The New Yorker* that supported me for many decades is gone, but the person I used to be has changed too. Things change."

One constant in American letters has been Updike's ubiquity. He is very unlike his character Henry Beck, a Jewish writer who battles a gargantuan case of writer's block in *Beck, A Book* (1970) and *Beck is Back* (1982).

"Knock on wood," says Updike. "The fact that I write in a variety of forms helps. I can always write a book review. Certainly there's a bit of a

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block every day. I tend to begin the day by answering the previous day's mail, which can take a half hour. When it's at its worst however, I advise you to put down one sentence. One sentence seems to breed another and another."

In Updike's lifetime they have added up to thick layers of literary strata forming the bedrock on which his reputation lies.

He once said his short stories would be his major contribution to American letters, and collections such as *Too Far to Go: The Maples Stories* (1979), which describes the arc of a marriage, do capture the times succinctly and tellingly. But these days, Updike points to the novels as having outpaced all his other literary entries. Which of those will survive?

"Everyone else mentions the Rabbit books, so I tend not to. I have a special fondness for the trilogy and *The Centaur*. I have a soft spot for that."

Still, Rabbit is the character who comes to mind in the ordinary reader who hears the name Updike. Neither *Memoirs of the Ford Administration* nor *Brazil* received the praise or popularity of say, *Rabbit at Rest*, and one wonders at the advisability of killing Rabbit off before what might have been a show-stopping appearance at the beginning of the new millennium in 2001. Alas, we will never know Rabbit's take on American society at the century's end unless Updike somehow resurrects him. One can imagine a magazine piece solicited for just such a purpose, but don't hold your breath.

"I don't think Rabbit would be terribly interested. I know I'm not. There's nothing quite as involving for me now as the Sixties and the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam and Nixon's tortured fall. All that was dramatic in a way we don't see much of now. I think we're in a rather placid time which is not a bad thing. We may look back on this decade as paradise someday not too far in the future. I think Clinton is a very able president. I don't know what Harry would think about it, but I do."

Rabbit's demise, however, isn't the biggest force working against his creator's cultural significance. Updike worries that with the advent of the computer and video age, no one will be reading his books in 50 years.

"The world as it exists now is less and less print-centered. I find it hard to imagine a reversal from the trend toward electronic brainlessness. It's hard to see a return to a Gutenbergian world, although there are valiant attempts.

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On the other hand, it isn't likely Rabbit will be leaving the American consciousness anytime soon. He may be through as a literary protagonist, but Hollywood has been calling. It is not the first time. *Rabbit Run* was made into a movie when it was the only Rabbit novel in existence. The *Witches of Eastwick* was a huge success, and there have been television plays, including *Too Far to Go*. Now it could be Rabbit's turn for another screen appearance.

"They've bought the rights and written a script. Whether or not it sees the screen, I don't know," says Updike. "It would be nice I guess, or would it? The money in these things isn't as great as it used to be." But there are other advantages. "If you look at the bestseller lists, especially paperback, half of them are books that there are contemporary movies out about. It's not easy to make films out of the Rabbit material. He's kind of ornery and the books pretty much depend upon the verbal envelope.

"*Rabbit Run*, made in the late Sixties sometime, came and went with tremendous speed at the box office. It was not a success, although I thought parts of the movie were very fine. It starred James Caan. His physique was not quite Rabbit's, but his face had that worried look that was good for Rabbit."

Updike smiles as he says it, the way people smile who are used to letting someone else do the worrying.