

Updike's passions: Religion, sex, art

by [Jeffrey Johnson](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

As John Updike's readers know, he was haunted by death, but he lived in hope that his words would live and speak to other children of earth. "I think of [my] books on library shelves, without their jackets, years old, and a country-ish teenaged boy finding them and having them speak to him."

Shining in every dust-jacket photograph are the eyes of a country-ish boy from Shillington, Pennsylvania—the shy high achiever who could learn anything and who would gladly tell the rest of us everything he knew. He tapped out at least three pages every day. When he died this year of lung cancer at age 76, that daily discipline had amounted to over 60 volumes of novels, short stories, poems and essays. At least one more collection of stories is scheduled for publication in the spring.

Joyce Carol Oates wrote that she "never knew how serious John was about his Christian faith," but she noted that "some sense of the sacred seems to suffuse his work like that sort of sourceless sunshine which illuminates an overcast day."

Updike was a Christian and a churchgoer. This biographical fact meant a great deal to certain Christians in search of high-brow endorsement. It might have been an embarrassment to conservative Christians who judged the sometimes sexually explicit content of his work to be vulgar or immoral. The urgent awkwardness of sexual activity was to Updike a fascinating feature of creation. He described it without shame. Literary scholars with an interest in religion and theology probed and examined his work for clues to the overall shape and personal shades of his faith.

Only those closest to Updike (and maybe not even they) would want to suggest how serious Updike was about his Christian faith, but on the basis of his writings one can conclude that the seeds of faith were planted in his childhood experiences and adolescent impressions. In a 1999 essay, "The Future of Faith," Updike recalled what it was like to be in church with his father:

I remember . . . taking collection with my father at Wednesday-night Lenten services, as a scattering of the especially dutiful occupied the creaking Lutheran pews. . . . I was fourteen or so, newly (and uncomfortably) confirmed. . . . I felt tall with my father as we walked together down the aisle to receive the collection plates. . . . Although my head at the time brimmed with worldly concerns (girls, cartoons, baseball), it was nice, I thought, of this church . . . to cast the two of us in this responsible, even exalted role.

That memory of doing a serious thing with his dad was a reservoir of fuel that kept a flame of faith burning in Updike. Later he tried to stoke the fire by reading Barth and Kierkegaard, but he knew that faith distilled into ideas would not have remained without the memory of those early church services. He wrote in that same essay, “It is difficult to imagine anyone shouldering the implausible complications of Christian doctrine . . . without some inheritance of positive prior involvement.”

In addition to sex and religion, art inspired John Updike. One can imagine these three human passions working together in the young Updike as he fidgeted in the back pew before the offering, half listening to the sermon but soaking in the sacred spirits of the service, his hands busy sketching on the bulletin, his mind on sex. It may not be overreaching to say that Updike knew a personal acceptance—from his parents and the church and, yes, from the gospel—that freed him to illustrate in words anything at all without fear of divine censor. In another essay, *On Being a Self Forever*, he wrote: “Having accepted that Shillington blessing, I have felt free to describe life as accurately as I could, with special attention to human erosions and betrayals. What small faith I have has given me the artistic courage I have.”

Updike’s words first reached me as an adolescent. His poem “Superman” was included in a textbook my junior high school classmates and I worked through in our little town on the Minnesota prairie. The poem begins, “I drive my car to the Supermarket, / the way I take is superhigh, / A superlot is where I park it, / And Super Suds are what I buy.” As a kid I must have enjoyed the snappy wordplay, the easy cultural commentary, the brashness of the author.

In the late 1980s, I wrote three fan letters to him. Each was answered within a week or two with a neatly typed postcard. Updike replied briefly to the substance of my comments, adding a few sentences of reflection on his own state of mind and affirming the simple human connection between author and reader. “It’s good to be

reminded that one writes for *readers*, somewhere, somehow,” he wrote in one of them. “Such a letter serves for me the useful purpose of reminding me of why I put forth these essays, since by now, and after the muffled clamor of the reviews, I have quite forgotten.” I received those postcards as thoughtful tokens of encouragement from a generous author and as drops blown my way from the flood of Updike’s prodigious flow of words.

In an essay written a few years before the end of his life, Updike described a Sunday morning after Christmas on which he walked out for the paper in his church clothes: “I experienced happiness so sharply I tried to factor it into components.”

Factoring happiness into components might be a fair high-level summary of Updike’s achievement as a writer. The familiar details, the ordinary moments, were seen and known by him against the backdrop of an eternal narrative. In his words: “The self’s responsibility . . . is to achieve rapport if not rapture with the giant, cosmic other: to appreciate, let’s say, the walk back from the mailbox.”