

Licks of Love, by John Updike

reviewed by [Ralph C. Wood](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

Whenever one thinks of John Updike's work, one thinks instinctively of its obsession with sex. His new collection of short stories, which includes a novella titled "Rabbit Remembered," confirms this response. The stories express Updike's conviction--first stated in *Couples*, his notorious 1968 novel--that, in the absence of God, we have "nothing but sex and stoicism and the stars to steer by." In that novel he depicts five marital partners swinging and swapping in nearly every heterosexual permutation possible. In his even better-known Harry ("Rabbit") Angstrom tetralogy, Updike traces the career of an ordinary Pennsylvanian through four decades, commenting along the way about the changing social and political character of America during the second half of the 20th century. Yet Updike's primary subject is Rabbit's "inner urgent whispers," his all-consuming sexual desires that, when acted out, bring both glory and ruin.

Readers and critics have often wondered how Updike could consider his erotomantic fiction a faithful chronicle of middle-class American life. Even in a sex-sodden culture like ours, is Updike right in portraying nearly everyone as caring about little else than sex? The answer lies, I believe, in an interior confession made in "Rabbit Remembered" by Janice Harrison, Angstrom's now remarried widow. First marriages are likely to fail, Janice reflects, because they are your first real attempt to try on "life and sex and making babies and finding out who you are. Second marriages [are] lighter. You just expect a little companionship, a little fun that harms no one else."

One could not ask for a more succinct expression of the American sexual ethos embodied by Updike's protagonists. Marriage is akin to an extended date, affording a harmless bit of companionate fun as long as it lasts. Whether conjugal or not, sex is mandatory. It proves our personal worth and provides our distinctive identity, according to Updike. The hunger for happiness it represents must be indulged despite the social and communal constraints that would starve it.

The dozen stories in this volume--all but two previously published in the *New Yorker*--express this radically erotic and individualist vision of reality. They possess the usual Updikean elegance of style and cleverness of wit, yet none is memorable. While their endings are often surprising, their message is entirely predictable: Life becomes repetitive and we become complacent unless we learn to live at the brink of disaster; and extramarital adventures afford the largest fulfillment of our dangerous need to feel ourselves individually important. In these stories, as in all of Updike's fiction, his characters repeatedly declare that their adulteries revitalize their marriages, restoring risk and excitement to otherwise stale conjugal arrangements.

Though Updike is generally regarded as our master novelist of adultery, he is in fact the chronicler of a world in which adultery has largely ceased to signify. Adultery connotes pollution, contamination, a wrongful admixture of categories: a mother who is a mistress, a husband who has a paramour. For adultery to be taken seriously, marriage must be regarded as sacred: a bond meant to be permanent, final, inviolable. Hence the Romans' definition of marriage as *omnis vitae consortium*, a lifelong sharing of lots (or fate). In *Adultery in the Novel* Tony Tanner reminds us of the once terrible consequence of a severed marriage: it signaled a collapse back into the chaotic state of feral nature, a forsaking of the sworn fidelities requisite for civilized life.

The adulteries we encounter in *Licks of Love* do not scandalize precisely because there is nothing to desecrate. When marriage is demystified into a mere human invention, something neither divinely ordained nor naturally required, then sex loses its ardor. Hence the mistake of moralistic readers who are offended by the cold brutality of Updike's language, his clinical descriptions of sexual congress, his analytic comparisons of genitalia. Their offense is misplaced. Gross anatomy and coarse speech are all that remain, once marriage and adultery lose their radical significance. There is no place for fiery passion and tender romance, but only for inconsequential couplings, "a little fun that harms no one else." In Updike's work, marital love is not undone by infidelity; the real threat to eros is thanatos. And now that his protagonists are growing older, they find it ever more difficult to live by sex alone.

"Rabbit Remembered" affectingly registers this threat. Here Updike deftly weaves all of the major characters and most of the major events from the four Rabbit books into a poignant account of what life is like after Angstrom. The man has been dead a

decade, and the world he once so vitally occupied is disappearing. Rabbit's aging wife and his 42-year-old son, Nelson, reflect on the import of Angstrom's life. They cannot bring themselves to judge this man who, at terrible cost, made his own happiness take precedence over the claims of both his family and his society. As they concede, he was only following the American dream.

Yet this novella does more than merely reiterate the familiar Updikean gospel of salvation through personal desire. Annabelle Byer, Angstrom's illegitimate daughter, suddenly appears on the scene, interrupting the nostalgia and offering an alternate angle of vision. She is an attractive woman who has never married, having had ample cause for distrusting men. Annabelle is a nurse who now cares for Alzheimer's victims. Though she is unable to blend herself into the Angstrom world as she had hoped to do, she has discovered ties stronger than blood. She finds kinship in her patients, whom she refuses to see as mindless heaps of worthless flesh: "Even at the very end, there's something in there," she explains, "a soul or whatever, you have to love."

Though Nelson is separated from his wife, Pru, he is no longer the wastrel he once was. He cares deeply for his son and daughter. This once-prodigal drug addict who squandered his family's wealth has now become a mental health counselor, trying to help suicidal psychotics and other dysfunctional people. Yet Nelson is no saccharine paragon of virtue. He knows that to commit incest with his half-sister would provide the ultimate frisson, a shivering violation of virtually the only taboo left. Yet he refuses to do it. Nelson glimpses a counter truth to his father's way of life, if only briefly. He sees that the greatest happiness lies not in fulfilling his own desires but in seeking the happiness of others. It's a vision that, though rare in Updike, could help redeem our broken society and restore marriage to its lost sanctity.