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GOLF DREAMS: Writings on Golf

By John Updike

Alfred A. Knopf. 201 pp. \$23.

When a St. Petersburg minister asked his congregation how they envisioned heaven, one man responded: "A place where you can play golf all day long."

For those equally enthralled by this most arcadian of sports, gliding along fairways on the seraphic wings of John Updike's new collection of his writing on golf will provide a heavenly experience.

The opening sentence, with its sleepy long vowels and iambic rhythm describing Updike's "golf dreams," begins a rhapsodic paean to the game: "They steal upon the sleeping mind while winter steals upon the landscape, sealing the inviting cups beneath sheets of ice, cloaking the contours of the fairway in snow."

In "these thirty written evidences of an impassioned but imperfect devotion" to golf Updike's tone varies from the festive amiability of "The Camaraderie of Golf" to the curmudgeonly "Big Bad Boom" to unconcealed exultation as Updike describes the wedding of his two great loves, literature and golf, in "Golf in Writing."

Updike's most purely amusing moments confess the humility golf forces upon him and all who dare it, the irrefutable evidences of our imperfection. No one since Fitzgerald has penned such elegant prose, yet Updike would clearly trade a host of heavenly sentences for a consistent fairway shot. In "The Pro," Updike stands before his instructor, trying to execute a 5-iron: "I assume my stance, and take back the club, low, slowly; at the top, my eyes fog over, and my joints dip and swirl like barn swallows. I swing. There is a fruitless commotion of dust and rubber at my feet. 'Smothered it,' I say promptly."

Updike admits that "in a foursome, I do best if my partner is steady and excellent, and if our opponents are physically handicapped in some way; bad backs, arthritic knees and hands, emphysema, newly bought bifocals, spells of dizziness, and sand that has worked in behind contact lenses are among afflictions in others that give me a sense of strength and ease."

Among the more indelicate but amusing moments is the reprinted passage from Updike's novel *A Month of Sundays* when 41-year-old minister Tom Marshfield, banished to a resort for errant clergymen, comments on the golf game of Jamie Ray, a Tennessee preacher and pederast: "Jamie Ray swings miserably but putts like an angel; I sometimes wonder if buggery hasn't made the hole look relatively huge to him."

Ironically, but not surprisingly, Updike often sounds at his most playfully wry when dealing with organized religion and at his most reverent describing golf. Golf approaches for Updike other realms of ultimate concern, such as marriage and war: "Many men are more faithful to their golf partners than to their wives, and have stuck with them longer.... But, unlike marriage, golf is war from the start: it is out of its regulated contention, its mathematical bloodshed, that the fervor of golf camaraderie blossoms and, from week to week, flourishes. We slay or are slain, eat or are eaten: golf camaraderie is founded on the solid and ancient ground of animal enmity, pleasantly disguised in checked slacks and small courtesies."

Yet this same writer later notes, "It is hard to dislike a man once you have played a round of golf with him"? Yes, for Updike golf can even contradict itself; it is large and contains multitudes.

To Updike's Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, whose fear of and hostility toward women has alienated millions of female readers yet who is among literature's most fully realized characters since Hamlet, golf emblemizes sport's masculine honesty, what Margaret Mead (in a cogent essay on parenting that grazes the hazards of oversimplification and blatant sexism) identifies as paternal love, the kind that candidly lets you know how you're doing, as opposed to the maternal, unconditional variety. For Harry in *Rabbit at Rest*, "It's total uncritical love, such as women provide, that makes you soft and does you in."

The jaded, beaten old Rabbit finds all of life tired and drained, "except, strangely, the first fairway of a golf course before his first swing. This vista is ever fresh." Here he can almost reenter his youthful paradise lost. "But then he gets human and tries to force it," forgetting that golf, like art and love, is best lived by Taoist principles, and too much striving for control can put you at odds with its natural flow.

Ultimately, this sportive recreation, whose clear put-the-ball-in-the-hole simplicity even a four-year-old can understand, makes Updike again as a child. Watching his ball "clear across an entire copse of maples in full autumnal flare, is to join one's soul with the vastness that, contemplated from another angle, intimidates the spirit, and makes one feel small."

Golf's vastness eradicates the border of even this venerable author's ego. Like that member of a St. Petersburg congregation, Updike might even agree that golf is heaven writ small, and there it is, in the midst of us.