

Applause Nov. 1990

*Rabbit at Rest*

By John Updike

Alfred A. Knopf. 512 pp.

We knew for a long time that John Updike's fourth and last Rabbit novel, *Rabbit at Rest*, was coming. As early as 1981 Eliot Fremont-Smith in *The Village Voice* predicted its exact nature. By 1981, Updike's pattern was clear: each decade began with a new, longer novel showing where the previous decade had brought Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom and America.

The surprise in 1990 lies in Updike's having managed after the universally acclaimed *Rabbit Is Rich*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, American Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award, to make this wrenching final part of his Rabbit tetralogy an even more auspicious literary event than we'd anticipated.

A decade ago in *Rabbit Is Rich*, we last saw Harry holding a new granddaughter, happier than at any point since his heroic days on the high school basketball court. Harry and his wife Janice had reached a kind of friendship. He was growing rich in Brewer (based on Reading, Pa.) managing Springer Motors, his late father-in-law's lot of fuel-efficient Toyotas, while America was running out of gas.

As the 1980s close, *Rabbit at Rest* finds Harry himself running out of gas. He and Janice have semi-retired near Ft. Myers, Florida, leaving their car dealership in the irresponsible hands of son Nelson. Self-indulgent years of fats and pastries have left Harry's heart "tired and stiff and full of crud."

But by January, 1989, when Harry lies recovering from his first heart attack, his is "a typical American heart." The country too is tired and stiff and full of crud. It has been a decade of mounting national deficits, AIDS, terrorism. Bush has replaced Reagan, whom Harry misses: "You never knew how much he knew, nothing or everything . . . With this new one you know he knows something, but it seems a small something." Dignified heroes like Mike Schmidt disappear, leaving the headlines to the callowness of Deion Sanders and shame of Pete Rose.

The novel begins after Pan Am 103 explodes over Scotland. "There has been a lot of death in the newspapers lately," Harry thinks as he waits in the opening scene at a Florida airport for Nelson and Pru and his grandchildren. He suspects that his own death approaches too, for as Updike told us this summer in a front page essay in the *New York Times Book Review*, this is to be "a depressed book about a depressed man."

In part, that's what it is. Now 56, Harry is sinking under "the great heaviness of being." Since their moments of renewed closeness and comfort in his forties, he and Janice have drifted into separate shells. Both remain haunted by images of their baby

daughter drowned 30 years earlier. Janice looks younger than her age. Harry senses Janice turning her back and preparing to start an independent career. Harry cannot stand his spoiled son, "human garbage" who steals huge sums from the car agency and turns the family wealth into cocaine debts. He watches a devoted former mistress give up and die. Life seems all anticlimax, a colorful parade with him "limping and falling behind." Harry's "image of himself has changed, he speaks of himself almost as if he's somebody he knew a long time ago."

His physical deterioration intensifies his malaise. Laughter makes his heart hurt. Harry feels the "terror of being trapped inside his perishing body." He is disgusted by things he once loved because his appetite for them has sunk under the "saddest loss time brings, the lessening of excitement about anything." The air he breathes is "swept by a universal devaluation; . . . he sees his life as a silly thing it will be a relief to discard." He can picture the world going on without him.

Though his pace falters, Rabbit is still running. At 56, he has ever but slenderly known himself. Updike builds the Rabbit novels on an increasingly solid foundation of wisdom he grants Harry little access to. Yet Harry does gain flashes of awareness. With tubes streaming out of his body in a Brewer hospital, he realizes, "I've walked through my entire life in a daze."

At such moments, he can sense and blame, if neither understand nor control, the pattern of his life. It has been impulsive, more a series of tropisms than conscious decisions. His emotional reflexes have always pushed him toward self-absorption over compassion, momentary freedom over responsibility, isolation over commitment. He fears love. He has almost never loved without an element of scorn. He runs but has nowhere to go, always bringing what he runs from along within him.

He has lived with Janice "in a world of mostly missed signals." Before an unpardonable sin makes Harry run one last time, Janice tries to talk with him about their failure to be happy. She has tried to love him, she says, but he never let her. Rabbit runs even from her overture, leaving her embarrassed for attempting intimacy.

Harry needs women desperately but views them with the defensive contempt we employ with that which has the most power to hurt us. He is never closer to the self-image he craves than when Janice looks to him for answers or Pru tells him, "I don't see you as an old guy, Harry. I never did." He believes, after all, "We are each of us like our little blue planet, hung in black space, upheld by nothing but our mutual reassurances, our loving lies." But he cannot understand women's selflessness, "that strange way women have, of really caring about somebody beyond themselves." When at the airport he buys candy for his grandchildren, he eats it himself. He distrusts "total love, like women provide," fearing it would make him soft.

He guesses that what has kept him with Janice so long "must be religious." Perhaps it is. She has been an agent of grace and an organizing principle in his amorphous, egoistic life. In Florida, Harry reads history books at bedtime to place his

existence coherently into its particular time slot. In Brewer, where he returns because he "needed to stay where they remembered him when," he thinks of the Jews he's met in Florida, envying their acceptance and "grip on the world." He's grown estranged from the conservative principles that once provided him structure. He believes "without God to lift us up and make us into angels we're all trash," but God has become "like a friend you've had so long you've forgotten what you liked about Him." His life has become a series of losses of faith in everything he'd once hoped might sustain him.

Ironically, this story of a contemporary pilgrim running from darkening chaos closes a tetralogy of superb clarity. Harry Angstrom is among the most fully realized characters in contemporary fiction, and his story is told in some of the most masterful prose of our era.

Among art's contradictions, few more inherently frustrate the artist than knowing he or she can possess a virtue to such a degree that it will be called a fault. For three decades, John Updike has shaped language so picturesque and musical that its perfection has invited attack: too classically polished, some charge, lacking the gothic blemishes that allow a reader in; so good it distracts us; such devotion to style must mask a paucity of substance.

Those charges could not fit here, even if *Rabbit at Rest* were unflawed, which it's not. Whenever Nelson comes center stage, the prose trips haltingly. Nelson's dialogue, too, feels artificial, as if Updike can never get comfortable in Nelson's skin. But Nelson scarcely detracts from Updike's extraordinary mix of waves of poetic description and richly refracted inner experience. Updike paces the narration with a balanced tension, slowing it with a close eye and elegiac tone yet creating the feel of a more rapid flow by using present tense and never allowing Rabbit to hold a moment long enough to understand it. Consistently, Harry has the experience but misses the meaning. Many times we must slalom to the heart of Harry's reaction through language so sonorous it should be accompanied by a lyre, yet the reaction hits harder for our having been mesmerized along the way. Updike's cardinal stylistic virtue is that however Orphic his voice grows it remains at the service of his matter.

A depressed book about a depressed man, *Rabbit at Rest* is also Updike's most profound exploration of the prices paid and value sown and reaped over a lifetime, a near-flawless landscape of the discontent that can encroach on a life as winter nears. It is the definitively autumnal book for this first autumn of the 1990s.