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Book of the week

The master's voice

John Updike's late stories are not his best, but they are a lesson in love. By Martin Amis

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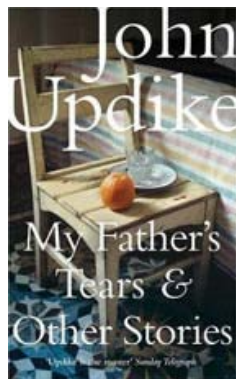
The following wedge of prose has two things wrong with it: one big thing and one little thing - one infelicity and one howler. Read it with attention. If you can spot both, then you have what is called a literary ear.

My Father's Tears and Other Stories

by John Updike

292pp,

Hamish Hamilton



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... Craig Martin took an interest in the traces left by prior owners of his land. In the prime of his life, when he worked every weekday and socialised all weekend, he had pretty much ignored his land.

The minor flaw is the proximity of prior and prime. This gives us a dissonant rime riche on the first syllable; and the two words, besides, are etymological half-siblings, and should never be left alone together without many intercessionary chaperones. And the major flaw? The first sentence ends with the words "his land"; and so, with a resonant clunk, does the second. Mere quibbles, some may say. But we are addressing ourselves to John Updike, who was perhaps the greatest virtuoso stylist since Nabokov - who, in his turn, was perhaps the greatest virtuoso stylist since Joyce.

So, the portrait of the artist as an old man: this is a murky and glutinous vista (and one of increasingly urgent interest to the present reviewer, who is closing in on 60). My broad impression is that writers, as they age, lose energy (inspiration, musicality,

imagistic serendipity) but gain in craft (the knack of knowing what goes where). Medical science has granted us a new phenomenon: the octogenarian novel. And one thinks, with respect, of Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein* and Norman Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest*; yet no one would seriously compare these books to Humboldt's *Gift* and Harlot's *Ghost*. Updike was 76 when he died. And for many years he suffered from partial deafness. I don't know (perhaps nobody knows) whether the two afflictions are connected, but the fact is that Updike, in *My Father's Tears and Other Stories*, is in the process of losing his ear.

This piece would have gone unwritten if its subject were still alive. In the last three decades I have published about 15,000 words of more or less unqualified praise of John Updike, and his achievement remains immortal. The most astonishing page in the new collection is the one headed "Books by John Updike": 62 volumes, many of them enormously long. His productivity was preternatural: it made you think of a berserk IVF pregnancy, or a physiological condition (pressure on the cortex?), or - more realistically, given his Depression-shadowed childhood - a Protestant work ethic taken to the point of outright fanaticism. *My Father's Tears* is Updike's last book, and perhaps his least distinguished. But it ends, all the same, with the glimmer, the thwarted promise, of a happier ending.

Readers must now prepare themselves for quotation, and a blizzard of false quantities - by which I mean those rhymes and chimes and inadvertent repetitions, those toe-stubs, those excrescences and asperities that all writers hope to expunge from their work (or at least radically minimise: you never get them all). Updike's prose, that fantastic engine of euphony, of first-echelon perception, and of a wit both vicious and all-forgiving, has in this book lost its compass. Formerly, you used to reread Updike's sentences in a spirit of incredulous admiration. Here, too often, you reread them wondering a) what they mean, or b) why they're there, or c) how they survived composition, routine reappraisal, and proof-checking without causing a spasm of horrified self-correction.

Consider:

ants make mounds like coffee grounds ...
polished bright by sliding anthracite ...
my bride became allied in my mind ...
except for her bust, abruptly outthrust ...

This quatrain is not an example of Updike's light verse; the lines consist of four separate examples of wantonly careless prose. Similarly: "alone on a lonely afternoon", "Lee's way of getting away from her", "his rough-and-tumble, roughly equal matches with women", and "a soft round arm wrapped around her face". One sentence contains "walking" and "sidewalk"; another contains "knowing" and "knew"; another contains "year", "yearbook", and "year".

"For what is more intimate even than sex but death?" Well, you know what he means (after a moment or two), but shouldn't that "but" be another "than" (which, I agree, wouldn't be any good either). "Fleischer had attained, in private, to licking her feet." Attained? And we surely don't need to be told that Fleischer isn't licking her feet in public. Or take this (from the title story) as an example of a sentence that audibly whimpers for a return to the drawing board: "He was taller than I, though I was not short, and I realised, his hand warm in mine while he tried to smile, that he had a

different perspective than I."

This isn't much of a realisation; and by the time you get to the repeated "than I", the one-letter first-person pronoun (which chimes with "realised" and "mine" and "tried" and "smile") is as hypnotically conspicuous as, say, "antidisestablishmentarianism". Let us end these painful quotes with what may be the most indolent period ever committed to paper by a major pen (and one so easy to fix: change the first "fall" to "autumn", or change the second "fall" to "drop"): "The grapes make a mess on the bricks in the fall; nobody ever thinks to pick them up when they fall." The most ridiculous thing about this sentence, somehow, is its stately semi-colon.

Considered as mere narratives, the stories are as quietly inconclusive as Updike's stories usually are; but now, denuded of a vibrant verbal surface, they sometimes seem to be neither here nor there - products of nothing more than professional habit. Then, too, you notice a loss of organisational control and, in one case, a loss of any sense of propriety. This is "Varieties of Religious Experience", which concerns itself with September 11. First we get a strongish eyewitness account of the falling towers; then Mohammed Atta ordering his fourth scotch in a Floridan gogo bar; then an executive in the North Tower minutes after impact; then United 93 and the passengers' (weirdly telescoped) revolt. This story appeared in November 2002: fatally premature, and fatally unearned. Death, elsewhere appropriately seen as infinitely mysterious, august and royal - as "the distinguished thing", in Henry James's last words - is treated here without decorum and without taste.

I said earlier that My Father's Tears contains the rumour of a happier ending. These stories are presented in chronological order, and after a while the reader feels a disquieting suspense. How far will the degeneration advance? Will the last few pages be unadorned gibberish? This doesn't happen; and the lost trust in the author begins to be partly restored. The prose takes on solidity and balance; Updike, here, is attempting less, and successfully evokes the "inner dwindling", the ever-narrower horizon imposed by time. This perhaps would have been Updike's very last phase. And the reader closes the book with a restive sadness that death has deprived us of it.

"The Full Glass", the final story, seems to me to be quietly innovative, like the ending of "The Walk with Elizanne" (where the literary imagination boldly rescues a failing memory). VS Pritchett, on his 90th birthday, said to me in an interview: "As one gets older one becomes very boring and long-winded to oneself. One's thoughts are long-winded, whereas before they were really rather nice and agitated. The story is a form of travel ... Travelling through minds and situations which reveal their strangeness to you. Old age kills travel."

I suggest without irony that Updike's last challenge might have been to turn long-windedness into art - and to make boredom interesting.

Age waters the writer down. The most terrible fate of all is to lose the ability to impart life to your creations (your creations, in other words, are dead on arrival). Other novelists simply fall out of love with the reader; this was true of James, and also of Joyce (who never much cared for the reader in the first place: what he cared for was words). Not so with Updike, even in these loose and straitened pages. As you might see on a signpost in his beloved American countryside (while approaching some stoical little township), the stories here are "Thickly Settled". Updike's creations live, and authorial love is what sustains them. He put it very plainly in his memoir, Self-

Consciousness: "Imitation is praise. Description expresses love." That love, at least, never began to weaken.

- **Martin Amis's novel *The Pregnant Widow* will be published by Cape next year. To order *My Father's Tears and Other Stories* for £17.99 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0330 333 6846.**

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