

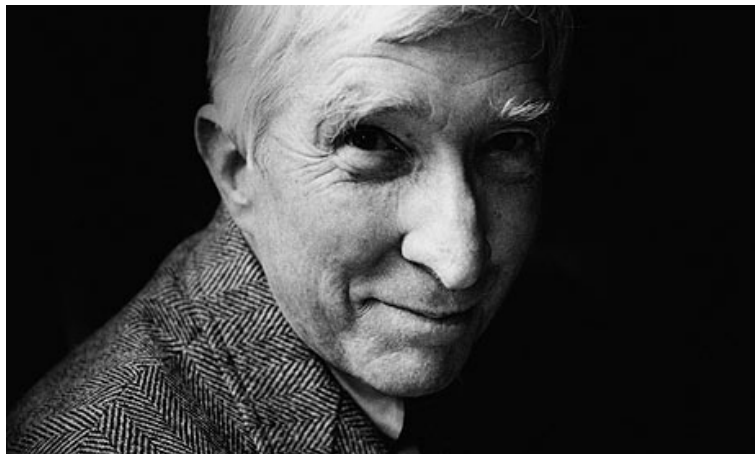
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'He took the novel onto another plane of intimacy'

Martin Amis

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John Updike, giant of postwar literature. Photograph: Christopher Felver/Corbis

He said he had four studies in his house so we can imagine him writing a poem in one of his studies before breakfast, then in the next study writing a hundred pages of a novel, then in the afternoon he writes a long and brilliant essay for the New Yorker, and then in the fourth study he blurts out a couple of poems. [John Updike](#) must have been possessed of a purer energy than any writer since DH Lawrence.

I've seen it suggested that such prodigies suffer from an enviable condition called 'pressure on the cortex'. It's as if they have within them an underground spring which is always on the point of eruption. He has produced an enormous body of work. He is certainly one of the great American novelists of the 20th century.

He alone could hold his head up with the great Jews - Bellow, Roth, Mailer, Singer - it was entirely typical of him that, as a sideline, he became a great Jewish novelist too, in the person of Henry Bech, the hero of several of his books. That seems to me to be an essential Updike trait, never being satisfied with any limitations always demanding far more than his fair share.

There aren't supposed to be extremes of uniqueness - either you are or you're not - but he was exceptionally sui generis. He himself was too much under the spell of Joyce, and in a novel like *Couples* you can see that he set himself the task of bringing Joyce to America. I don't think he could see this - the great stylists are the ones you shouldn't be influenced by, but it was a noble attempt and with a treasury as deep as Updike's he could afford to have a few near misses.

Joyce himself said that certain things were too embarrassing to be written down in

black and white. Updike was congenitally unembarrassable and we are the beneficiaries of that. He took the novel onto another plane of intimacy: he took us beyond the bedroom and into the bathroom. It's as if nothing human seemed closed to his eye. I think he was probably of the pattern of his generation. As he said, 'My wife and I had children when we were children ourselves.' The wild oats period came in early middle age.

For me, his greatest novels were the last two Rabbit books - Rabbit is Rich and Rabbit at Rest. With that fourth novel in the tetralogy, he had the homerun with all the bases loaded. His style was one of compulsive and unstoppable vividness and musicality. Several times a day you turn to him, as you will now to his ghost, and say to yourself 'How would Updike have done it?' This is a very cold day for literature.

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