



More Matter: Essays and Criticism

John Updike

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John Updike's fiftieth book and fifth collection of assorted prose, most of it first published in *The New Yorker*, brings together eight years' worth of essays, criticism, addresses, introductions, humorous feuilletons, and -- in a concluding section, "Personal Matters" -- paragraphs on himself and his work. More matter, indeed, in an age which, his introduction states, wants "real stuff -- the dirt, the poop, the nitty gritty -- and not . . . the obliquities and tenuosities of fiction."

Still, the fiction writer's affectionate, shaping hand can be detected in many of these considerations. Herman Melville, Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, Dawn Powell, Henry Green, John Cheever, Vladimir Nabokov, and W. M. Spackman are among the authors extensively treated, along with such more general literary matters as the nature of evil, the philosophical content of novels, and the wreck of the Titanic. Biographies of Isaac Newton and Queen Elizabeth II, Abraham Lincoln and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Benchley and Helen Keller, are reviewed, always with a lively empathy. Two especially scholarly disquisitions array twentieth-century writing about New York City and sketch the ancient linkage between religion and literature. An illustrated section contains sharp-eyed impressions of movies, photographs, and art. Even the slightest of these pieces can twinkle.

Updike is a writer for whom print is a mode of happiness: he says of his younger self, "The magazine rack at the corner drugstore beguiled me with its tough gloss," and goes on to claim, "An invitation into print, from however suspect a source, is an opportunity to make something beautiful, to discover within oneself a treasure that would otherwise have remained buried."

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