

Rabbit at Rest Short Guide

Rabbit at Rest by John Updike

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Characters/Related Titles

Updike introduced the character of Harry Angstrom as a young man in *Rabbit Run* in 1960. His nickname comes from his fame as a high school basketball player, and his inclination to run away from responsibility is clearly indicated in this first novel of the series. After his wife accidentally drowns their infant daughter, thoughts of death begin to invade and challenge his youthful sense of well-being. The fortunes of Harry Angstrom rise and fall in three more novels, but he remains a character who never regains the pleasure of success that he enjoyed as a young basketball player. Through more than a thousand pages of nostalgia and melancholy Rabbit fails to come to terms with the various stages of his life or to satisfy the repeated demands of his heart.

Harry learns more about drugs and death in the second novel of the series, *Rabbit Redux* (1971), when his life in the late 1960s is challenged by a runaway girl and a black veteran. Angstrom is beset with one disaster after another while the television reports the futile news of war from Vietnam: His mother is dying, he loses his job, his wife has an affair, their house burns down, and the runaway girl dies in the flames.

Despite a passive response to this sea of troubles, Rabbit remains a sympathetic character as he feels his way through the void left by his broken marriage and the failure of his dreams.

Harry and Janice are more or less reconciled in the third novel of the series, *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981,) and some inherited money adds a few opportunities for pleasure in their middle age.

Now they can make love on a bed full of gold coins, or experiment with wife swapping on a Caribbean vacation.

Troubles with their son, however, continue to illustrate Updike's theme of family tension and frustration. The shadows of death also continue to loom as the senior generation passes away and Harry and Janice become grandparents themselves.

The final novel of the series, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), follows Harry through a year of heart trouble and family crisis.

He cannot help but think of himself as "fifty-five and fading." Images of death appear from all directions: His golf partners in Florida discuss their heart operations, his mistress in Pennsylvania dies after a long painful disease, and Harry almost loses his own life 3423 early in the novel when he takes his granddaughter sailing off the Florida coast. To readers long familiar with Rabbit's self-indulgence and morbid soul-searching, it comes as no surprise that he is unable to cope with his own heart condition or with his son's addiction to cocaine. Still his long and futile quest for happiness remains a drama with considerable feeling, dark comedy, and pathos. The quest returns him in his mind to the lost glory of his youth, and thus it is appropriate for his final heart attack to occur when he attempts to play basketball with a nameless teenager.

Social Concerns/Themes

Rabbit at Rest is the fourth and final novel in Updike's series on the adventures and fate of Harry Angstrom. By focusing on the life of an average American character, Updike has assembled a portrait of American culture and its disintegration that now spans more than three decades. The latest episode includes the issues of drug addiction, business corruption, the AIDS epidemic, the selling of America to foreign investors, and the fate of women in a declining job market. The novel is a detailed reflection of the news stories so prevalent in the year George Bush inherits a debt-ridden America.

Rabbit at Rest is also the portrait of a family, three generations of Angstroms, who show how difficult it is to live in a contemporary America filled with debt, drugs, and sterile retirement communities. The first scene of the novel, a family visit to the Florida condominium where Harry and Janice now hope to spend half the year, establishes Updike's concern with the tension and pathos of trying to be grandparents, parents, and especially children. The family is severely tested by Harry's worsening heart condition, his son's cocaine habit, and the frequent demands of the next generation. The revelation of Harry's adultery with his daughter-in-law, however, proves to be the catalyst that destroys the family unity. Only his final heart attack prompts a family reunion in his hospital room at the end of the novel. The theme of adultery and its consequences is familiar territory in Updike's fiction, but keeping it in the family is a new way for Updike to underscore the decadence of America.

The subject explored most frequently in the novel is human mortality. After his initial heart attack, thoughts of dying are often in the shadows of Harry's mind. The news on television is full of disaster, with another plane crash or a hurricane ready to attack the coast. The novel has its share of worried doctors, intensive care units, and technical descriptions of how the heart does or does not work. Amid his thoughts of death, Harry often wonders whether there is any point to his earthly existence. "Nothing matters very much," he thinks, "we'll all soon be dead." The morbid thoughts of the title character form a long chronicle of dying, but he cannot be "at rest" with himself or the world until his heart stops. At the end of the novel his damaged heart is beyond repair, but Updike leaves Harry Angstrom typically wondering how much he should say to his anxious son.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Updike's fiction is well-known for its realistic style that renders every nuance and texture of daily life. The use of this technique in *Rabbit at Rest*, however, almost affords too much of a good thing. Details of contemporary America accumulate for more than five hundred pages. The reader may weary of hearing about every physical sensation, pain, desire, regret, and heart murmur that worry Harry Angstrom, but because Updike pays such loving attention to detail, the result is a style that forms the semblance of a life fully resonant with the experience of decades. The more Rabbit suffers in his fifties, the more he relives the various stages of his life, and thus Updike's realistic style is designed to reveal the complex layers of memory.

The tradition of literary realism offers several precedents for Updike, but he probably learned most about the use of interior monologue in fiction from the examples of James Joyce and Marcel Proust. By creating a series of novels to follow the thoughts and feelings of his title character, Updike demonstrates for American literature that the mind is truly an echo chamber of experience and memory.

The realistic style of *Rabbit at Rest* also includes close descriptions of many sights and sounds that form a sharp and comic satire of contemporary America. Whether he describes a retirement community in Florida or suburban life in Pennsylvania, Updike is unsparing in his perception of significant and often comic detail. His ability to create fictional characters against a backdrop of contemporary news events places him in the American tradition of literary realism which owes much to writers like John Steinbeck and John Dos Passos. When it comes, however, to reflecting the shadows of mortality in the mind of an average American character, John Updike is unsurpassed.

By creating a series of novels about Harry Angstrom that spans more than three decades, Updike has become his own literary precedent.

Adaptations

Updike's response to the film adaptation of *Rabbit, Run* is included in the analysis of *Rabbit Redux* (see separate entry).



Key Questions

Questions about the character of Harry Angstrom are likely to dominate any discussion of *Rabbit at Rest*. Critics have also debated Updike's vision of America in this novel, and whether he brings the Rabbit series to any reasonable or fitting conclusion.

1. How does Updike develop the character of Angstrom in this final volume of the Rabbit series? Are there important changes from his earlier incarnations?
2. Updike admits that *Rabbit at Rest* is "a depressed book about a depressed man." How can readers defend the novel against such charges by its author?
3. Does the title character remain sympathetic despite or because of his obvious flaws? How should readers respond when Rabbit commits adultery with his own daughter-in-law?
4. What aspects of contemporary America does Updike satirize in *Rabbit at Rest*? How does he find comic material in the subject of "family values"?
5. What political views are dramatized in this novel? Why does Updike have Angstrom parade in an Uncle Sam costume on the Fourth of July?
6. How does Updike use television news for realistic detail in *Rabbit at Rest*? Is the fate of America reflected in the failing health of Harry Angstrom?
7. Updike also admits that *Rabbit at Rest* was "written by a depressed man."

Does the novel show a morbid or healthy fascination with the shadows of mortality?

8. Does the realistic style keep the interest of the reader? Or does the novel begin to sink with its massive accumulation of detail?
9. Why does Updike write the narrative in the present tense? Does his strategy leave the novel open-ended?
10. What final judgment does Updike want us to make about the character of Harry Angstrom? After following his adventures for three decades, does Updike bring the Rabbit series to a satisfactory conclusion?



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