

Rabbit Redux Short Guide

Rabbit Redux by John Updike

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Characters

The protagonist of *Rabbit Redux* is a passive man in his mid-thirties. No longer does he live up to the nickname "Rabbit" left over from his high school days as a fast moving basketball player. Now he stays home to watch television while his wife and son go their different ways. Circumstances are so beyond his control — a dying mother, a teen-age son, an unfaithful wife, and then a lost job — that the protagonist finds comfort in a stoical and passive retreat. Near the end of the novel he has moved back into his boyhood home and is wearing his old basketball jacket. Lacking any obvious sign of intelligence or passion, Harry Angstrom appears to be a born loser, and some critics have faulted Updike for writing such a long novel about a "quintessential anti-hero." It is true that Harry gives himself a low grade — "As a human being I'm about a C minus" — but he does learn from experiences in the novel. Harry may not travel to the moon and back like the astronauts on his television screen, but he does explore the empty landscape of a broken marriage and the failure of his dreams.

Updike creates two other characters to shock and educate the protagonist.

The angry veteran who claims to be a black Jesus is a reflection, however exaggerated, of the decade that fought against racial injustice and the war in Vietnam. The runaway girl is a flower child of the 1960s who masks her selfdestructive yearning with shallow idealism. Updike's characters are thus rooted in a particular decade of American history, but their special combination of bitterness and vulnerability transcends time and place.

Social Concerns

Rabbit Redux is the second in a series of novels about the adventures of Harry Angstrom. All four novels are concerned with the deterioration of the American dream, but Rabbit Redux offers the strongest indictment of a contemporary America in crisis. The novel takes place during the late 1960s when pride in the success of Apollo 11 is set against the anguish of Vietnam.

The location is a small city in Pennsylvania where the flaws of an industrial society are evident, and the chances for life are diminishing. The chief character works at a Linotype machine for a local newspaper, but the day arrives when his skill is no longer needed, and his job disappears.

The disintegration of American culture is further described as violence comes to the suburban life of Harry Angstrom. Rabbit Redux includes a black militant who cannot forget the chaos of Vietnam, and a young girl who uses drugs and sex to escape the limits of her rich but uncaring family.

When both characters move into Rabbit's house, the result is a desperate play of drugs and sex followed by scenes of arson and death. Updike's realistic style exposes the crisis in America after a decade noted for its social revolution, race riots, and television coverage of the war in Vietnam.

Techniques

Updike is best known as a novelist of manners. The clarity and precision of his style create the illusion of real characters in a plausible setting. Updike is true to form in *Rabbit Redux*, but he adds another element of craft that is more experimental and original. The novel is united by several references to the flight and landing of Apollo 11.

Each chapter begins with a quotation from men in orbit around the earth or the moon. The exploration of space thus becomes a controlling metaphor to describe the way Harry Angstrom is subject to the voids and craters of his experience. The young girl who moves into his house is identified as a "moon child," and Harry learns from her much about the love and madness so long associated with the moon. Updike's experiment with references to space travel and its related metaphors adds a new dimension to his achievement of social realism.

Updike also finds a new way to project the interior monologue of his main character. Harry works at a Linotype machine for the newspaper of a small city. He often thinks in terms of newsprint, and Updike exploits this as a stylistic device by including in the text of the novel several of Harry's mistakes at the typesetting machine. The mistakes are direct evidence of the distraction and confusion suffered by the protagonist. Harry feels that the rules for his life are "melting away," and Updike reflects the chaos directly on page after page.

Themes

The rival claims of freedom and responsibility are explored in *Rabbit Redux* from several different points of view. After twice deserting his wife in the earlier novel of the series, the title character is now trying to maintain a home in the face of increasing odds.

This time his wife experiments with freedom by having an affair with a used car salesman. Harry learns about this at a bar where the television repeatedly shows Apollo 11 blasting off to the moon. Updike thus reveals the emptiness in the life of his chief character at the very moment that America is ready to explore a new world in space.

The drug-crazed young girl and the black veteran offer two more examples of the contest between freedom and responsibility. Both characters think of themselves as free from the rules of any conventional society. His experience in Vietnam has convinced the veteran that the entire American system is bankrupt. What he offers in its place is a mad vision of himself as a black Messiah. The young girl expects to find love and freedom by rejecting the materialism of her family, but instead she is sexually exploited and left to die in a burning house. Updike shows in *Rabbit Redux* how the quest for freedom can be mad and dangerous when responsibility is exchanged for a limbo of self indulgence and chaos.



Adaptations

Only the first novel in the Rabbit series has been adapted as a film. Updike reports: "Rabbit Run, made in the late '60s, came and went with tremendous speed at the box office. It was not a success, although I thought parts of the movie were very fine. It starred James Caan, whose physique was not quite Rabbit's, but his face had that worried look that was good for Rabbit."



Key Questions

Updike describes *Rabbit Redux* as "echoes and ramifications of the national and international disturbances that were so preoccupying in the late 60's." Thus questions about the novel's picture of America in turmoil should provoke a stimulating discussion.

Many critics have also focused on the role of the main character in the Rabbit series and have debated his response in this novel to the news of Apollo 11 and Vietnam.

1. Why does Updike narrate *Rabbit Redux* in the present tense? How does this strategy help to create a consciousness for the novel that hovers between author and character?
2. Does the realistic style of *Rabbit Redux* allow the novel to be read as a reflection of contemporary American history? How do echoes from newspapers and television bring another dimension to Updike's story?
3. How is space exploration used as a controlling metaphor to show the experience of Harry Angstrom? Why does Updike begin each chapter with a quotation from men in orbit around the earth or the moon?
4. What views of America's role in Vietnam are expressed in the conversations between Angstrom and the black veteran? How does the violence of the war begin to invade Rabbit's life in America?
5. Why is the black veteran presented as a self-proclaimed religious prophet? How does his indictment of America foreshadow the scene of arson and death near the end of the novel?
6. How does Updike retain our sympathy for a hero who has a low opinion of himself — "As a human being I'm about a C minus"? Despite the many shortcomings of this character, why do readers still care what happens to him?
7. Is the character of Harry Angstrom consistent in the first two novels of the Rabbit series? What changes have come with a new decade of experience?
8. Now that Rabbit is further removed from his days as a star basketball player, how does his nostalgia take on a new political and social dimension? Does he confuse his own youth with some imagined lost innocence of America?
9. What ending does Updike create for a novel that will be followed by two further recreations of the same character? Does the final scene resolve the main issues of plot and character?

Literary Precedents

Two of Updike's contemporaries published books just before *Rabbit Redux* that respond in different ways to the success of *Apollo 11*.

Norman Mailer was invited to the NASA facilities in Houston and Cape Kennedy. He interviewed the scientists and astronauts, had dinner with Wernher von Braun, and witnessed the liftoff of *Apollo 11*. The result is a book, *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), that contains some of Mailer's best descriptive writing, but he was too close to the events to be able to turn them into metaphors and images for fiction. Mailer and Updike, however, share a fascination for the language used by the astronauts, and quote several examples of how the men in space are programmed to talk like robots.

Saul Bellow was so inspired by the success of *Apollo 11* that he planned to call his next book "The Future of the Moon," but second thoughts relegated that title to a manuscript owned by a comic character in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970). There is a scientist in Bellow's novel who talks insanely about the immediate need for establishing colonies on the moon. Updike does not create a comic advocate for the space program to match Bellow's scientist, but in *Rabbit Redux* he does work the language of space exploration into the very texture of the novel.



Related Titles

Updike began the adventures of Harry Angstrom with *Rabbit, Run* in 1960. The protagonist is in his midtwenties, feels trapped by the responsibility of a young family, and tends to run away each time the pressure mounts. He leaves behind a trail of hurt feelings, bitter accusations, and tragic events. His wife accidentally drowns their new baby after one of Harry's repeated desertions. Although his actions may be selfish and cruel, Harry remains a sympathetic character insofar as his restlessness is marked by a nostalgia for the innocence of lost youth, and his sexual adventures are described as a metaphysical yearning.

Ten years later in *Rabbit Redux* the protagonist still has more questions than answers, but he is less apt to run away from his problems. Despite the chaos of the novel, the ending shows a tentative reconciliation of husband and wife. Updike builds upon that for the next book in the series, *Rabbit Is Rich*, in 1981. The education of Harry Angstrom continues as he makes love on a bed full of gold coins and discovers the unexpected dividends of wife swapping. The echoes of space travel, however, are only dimly heard. The novel is written in Updike's realistic style, but now it seems limited to probing deeply into the surface of things. The hero enjoys more sex and money than he deserves, but Updike can no longer find what he revealed in *Rabbit Redux* — the violence and fear at the heart of contemporary America.

Please also see the separate entry on *Rabbit at Rest*, the final novel about Harry Angstrom.

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