



## Rabbit, Run

*John Updike*

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*Rabbit, Run* is the book that established John Updike as one of the major American novelists of his—or any other—generation. Its hero is Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, a onetime high-school basketball star who on an impulse deserts his wife and son. He is twenty-six years old, a man-child caught in a struggle between instinct and thought, self and society, sexual gratification and family duty—even, in a sense, human hard-heartedness and divine Grace. Though his flight from home traces a zigzag of evasion, he holds to the faith that he is on the right path, an invisible line toward his own salvation as straight as a ruler’s edge.

## Rabbit, Run Details

Date : Published 1996 by Random House (first published 1960)

ISBN : 9780449911655

Author : John Updike

Format : Paperback 325 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Literature, Novels, American

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## From Reader Review Rabbit, Run for online ebook

### **Fabian says**

The very precision of words makes this Man-Bad-so-Man-Punished tale oh-so jolting. A writer like this composes a cautionary story out of perfect and incredibly complex sentences. He is undoubtedly a poet, especially in his navigating the traditional ('somnambulant') realm of late '50s idyllic Americana gone to the dogs.

"On The Road" bears a comparison in its obvious Grownass-Young-Man-Seeking-Escape motif. The time-frames are also relatable. But this is closer akin to the intrepid tale of 50's Suburban Woe, "Revolutionary Road" by the brilliant Richard Yates in that it is the second party (i.e. the Running Man's wife, his children, his friends) who suffer the main repercussions of an egotistical act of indifference & familial apathy.

Rabbit symbolizes the Everyman. Rabbit is like an animal, sometimes acting like a dog. Rabbit is white, macho, racist, sexist. Rabbit has been conditioned: he is nonetheless disillusioned & runs away from the wife & into the arms of a slut. Rabbit: "Unique & Mortal"... that's for damn sure.

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### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

This was the first and shortest of the Rabbit books from Updike. I think that the last two are better because Updike had 30-40 more years of maturity and writing under his belt but this book grabs you and doesn't let you go and makes you beg the the next one. The original concept behind the series is that Updike describes the life of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom in 1959 in Rabbit Run, 1969 in Rabbit Redux, 1979 in Rabbit is Rich, and 1989 in Rabbit at Rest. There is even an epilogue Rabbit Remembered in the short story collection Licks of Love.

Back to Rabbit Run, Harry Angstrom is a tall man of his times. About 23 years old and married to an alcoholic woman. The outlook is rather grim (no spoilers), but it is so well-written and realistic that the characters really leap from the pages and you want to root for Rabbit even when he is acting like a prick (which he does a lot). The descriptions of life in the US for this everyman character are priceless (and continue to capture the uniqueness of each era in every volume).

What is striking in Updike is how closely his descriptions of human relationships reveal the fissures and cracks that will ultimately lead to rupture or in rare cases reconciliation. He, albeit male, perceptive of sexuality is incredibly realistic, the characters feel like you just sat next to them on the bus, or crossed them at the Five and Dime (if those even exist anymore). The evocation of America at the end of the 50s in Rabbit Run feels very real - the moral strictures of Eisenhower are still there, the wounds of McCarthyism are still fresh, and the Korean War is just over. The Cold War is certainly present as well. Another striking aspect is the frustration of Rabbit and at the same time his resignation to fate against which he feebly rattles his chains from time to time. Despite being a deeply tragic story in many ways, it introduces us to Updike's Everyman who will later takes us through 3 more decades of radical change - for him, for us, and for America.

I would highly recommend this book for those who wish to discover Updike who while perhaps not up in the Roth-Pynchon echelon of late-20th C writers is certainly very, very close with two Pulitzers (for the 3rd and 4th books). It is a fun and exciting read. Enjoy!

From a comment I made in a reading group on GR discovering Rabbit for the first time:

In Rabbit Run, I think that it is not a mid-life crisis that Harry is having, it is more that he is realizing that his actions have consequences. During his life as the high school star, he did not have to actually think about anything, he could get away with coasting (and boasting and bullying). Enter Janet and the unplanned pregnancy. Both of them are too young and too irresponsible to be parents. Janet drowns herself in alcohol unable to deal with the screaming baby and Rabbit, well, Rabbit runs. I think the book was trying to put the lie into the stereotypical Eisenhower era's idyllic 50s family in demonstrating how the lack of education on birth control and the authoritarian methods of parenting popular at the time only reproduce the same (or worse) behavior in the generation that follows. Each of the other Rabbit books does this kind of counter-example (against the 60s, 70s and 80s respectively). If Updike were alive, he would probably point to Rabbit Redux and Rabbit Run and say, "THIS is why Drumpf is in the White House" meaning that the Rabbit half of the country (you will see that Rabbit remains an Angry White Man like my dad and like the cornerstone of Drumpf's support) hated their weak mothers (like Janet) at least subconsciously and would never, ever conceive of voting for HRC and so have to double-down on their bad choice by convincing themselves that his lies are truth and truth is "alternative fact" because otherwise, they would be forced to see the rot that forms the core of themselves. Rabbit Runs demonstrates that, in fact, actions do have consequences and that irresponsibility snowballs - sorry no spoilers - and Rabbit running away does not solve his fundamental questions because he is blaming his circumstances rather than looking inside himself for answers because that is too painful for him.

Does anyone see what I mean here? The danger of posting on FB or GR so close to waking up...

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## Robin says

I'm kinda speechless. My mind is spinning from being held hostage by John Updike for the last two hours of reading this book, which is equal parts disturbing, relatable, repellent, tragic AND *one of the most amazingly written books I've read*.

Harry Angstrom (Rabbit) is 23. He was a one-time great basketball player in high school. Now, our tall protagonist is waking up to his real nightmare: he's married to an alcoholic with whom he has little in common (besides their two year old son and the baby she is carrying), he has a mindless job selling vegetable peelers, and he is **trapped**. One night, with no premeditation, he does the despicable: he runs.

Yeah, he abandons his pregnant wife and little boy. Rabbit, as an astute Goodreads friend of mine said to me, is a Pig. Tis true, he's often acting like a jerk. But somehow John Updike, this literary craftsman extraordinaire, makes us understand him, feel his disappointment in his 1950's suburban hell, and hope for some kind of release.

There are stretches of this book where not much "happens" - but Updike captures the interior world of the characters so well. He depicts their thoughts and feelings in such a way that I am glued to the page. Despite the 1950's setting and his excellent depiction of this time, I am astonished at how modern this reads. The depiction of male sexuality is spot-on, and fairly graphic. Sex plays a big role in Rabbit's determination to find the elusive *something* that will give his life meaning, that *something* that satisfied him so well on the basketball court in years past.

Eccles, a priest who is trying to steer Rabbit in the right direction, uses religion as a beacon to bring Rabbit

away from the dark side. But Rabbit is more interested in (an imagined?) flirtation with Eccles' wife than God. One of the most fascinating parts of the book is when Rabbit is playing golf with Eccles, and the game becomes metaphorical, with Rabbit struggling and getting stuck in the sand, then experiencing a perfect swing.

If the idea of rooting for such a character disgusts you, never fear. Rabbit is doomed to be punished - severely - for thinking he can escape his responsibilities. The tide bringing this punishment comes slowly. I could see it approaching inch by inch, feeling sicker as its destructive wave threatened, but powerless to move, witnessed its hideous, tragic crash.

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## Perry says

***"If you have the guts to be yourself...other people'll pay your price."***

--RABBIT ANGSTROM

---John Updike, "Rabbit, Run"

*Down the Cunicular Hole, Yo*

Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, 26, Mt. Judge, PA, married with a two-year-old son, is a Magipeeler salesman (not what he dreamed in high school basketball glory days). His wife Janice is expecting another child any day, as every night she boozes it up.

After another argument with Janice, Rabbit snaps, hit with an existential crisis, trapped by lifeless monogamy called marriage, choked by a meaningless job. He **RUNS**, escapes.

This novel follows three months of Rabbit's life in 1959, from the night he runs, to his visit to his high school basketball coach, an affair with Ruth (who feels comfortably "right" as long as she nixes the diaphragm), the birth of his daughter and running, running, running.

Rabbit is an immature, insecure male obsessed with sex, as an animalistic act, looking at potential partners for their sexual fit. He often refers to his being uncircumcised (his *"hooded warrior,"* the original *"Rumpleforeskin"*)--uncommon in the U.S.-- insisting Ruth fellate him, as she had other men.

Updike chose Angstrom (meaning "stream of angst"), inspired by his reading Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. In creating the novel (from which flowed three sequels), Updike thought of Kerouac's "On the Road," in imagining what might happen if a small-town, middle-class WASP family man hit the road, and who would be hurt.

He chose a former high school basketball star because he was intrigued by the number of men he saw who had peaked in high school with athletics and were thereafter stuck in a downward spiral.

Updike was groundbreaking in writing graphically about sex in well-regarded literature. Knopf required Updike to delete the sexually explicit passages prior to the 1960 publication, parts that he restored for Penguin's 1963 edition.

Updike said, *"About sex in general, by all means let's have it in fiction, as detailed as needs be, but real, real in its social and psychological connections. Let's take coitus out of the closet and off the altar and put it on*

*the continuum of human behavior."*

It would be hard to imagine the novel not having sexually explicit passages when it follows three months in the life of a guy whose very identity as a man and human is tied to sex and thoughts of sex and thoughts of things in life as they relate to sex.

This is especially so with Updike's use of the present tense, a brilliant choice. Of employing the present tense, Updike observed:

*In Rabbit, Run, I liked writing in the present tense. You can move between minds, between thoughts and objects and events with a curious ease not available to the past tense. I don't know if it is clear to the reader as it is to the person writing, but there are kinds of poetry, kinds of music you can strike off in the present tense.*

Until reading this, I didn't realize the many things a writer can do with the present tense. It has a sense of immediacy and a flow that involves one in a story that seems more realistic.

*"Glory days, well, they'll pass you by  
Glory days, in the wink of a young girl's eye"*  
"Glory Days," Bruce Springsteen, 1982

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### **Justin says**

This is the best book I've read this year. Period. Maybe last year, too. Maybe. I don't know. But this book is amazing. I just looked up synonyms for "amazing", and all of them are adjectives you can use to describe this book.

Man, John Updike just has this way of making the most mundane, ordinary stuff extraordinary. He takes pages and pages to set a scene or describe the inner thoughts of one of his main characters, and all of it is awesome. I mean there were paragraphs that went on for pages to depict every single aspect of a scene, and I ate it all up like a beautifully crafted Caesar salad before the filet and baked potato arrived. That steakhouse analogy seems appropriate because this is like the Ruth's Chris of literature. There is so much more I want to do with this illustration, but I'm gonna stop myself and move on.

When I consider the plot of this story and imagine myself describing it to someone, it doesn't feel like an easy sell at all. I mean, here I am giving it five stars, and I feel like breaking down the story for someone will make them think I'm crazy. Like, "Alright, alright, check this out. This guy, Rabbit, yeah, not his real name. Long story. Anyway, dude has this wife and a kid and stuff and he has this boring job and then one day he just decides to run away from it all. It's crazy. And, man, I don't wanna run it for you, but he makes these crazy decisions and gets himself in some wild situations and I'll be damned if it really is just a whole awful, sad mess of a story, but it's awesome, man. It's so awesome. Sometimes nothing happens for a long time, but the writing is so good that you don't even really care. The characters are complex, too, and all developed and stuff and you just get lost in the story every time you pick the book up again. It's classic contemporary American literature or something. I don't know."

And that's how I would describe the book. Just like that. Because that's how I talk in real life when I'm not reviewing books on the internet.

I can't recommend this book enough. I've got some Roth and Bellow waiting now. Look at me getting all well rounded and cultured all of a sudden. Maybe I'll start writing serious reviews like I'm writing for The NY Times or something. Bigger adjectives and more pretentiousness and whatever. Start talking about existentialism and symbolism and the human condition. Maybe I'll turn a corner.

Nope.

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### **Alan says**

I discovered Rabbit Angstrom and John Updike while sitting in the Intensive Care Waiting Room at a local hospital. My mother languished in a coma for one month before she finally found peace, and I spent most of those days and many of my nights in that waiting room. During much of that time I'd blown through typical waiting room crap like books with plots about overthrowing the government, stories about detectives who were psychoanalysts, stories about psychoanalysts who were detectives, etc. One day during this siege, I stopped at my mother's house and was checking out her bookcases when I found a hardback copy of "Rabbit" and took it back to the hospital with me.

What a revelation. I was amazed. I couldn't remember reading anything like it before. Honest true-to-life emotions of real everyday flawed people. And in the most beautiful and precise prose that I'd ever encountered. I immediately followed up reading this book with "Redux", the only other Rabbit book published at the time. Since then I've easily read more pages of Updike than of any other writer.

My mother was a voracious reader, and a big public library patron. She bought relatively few books of the many that she'd read, so I always thought that there must have been some special significance to the books that she owned. I've always thought that my personal discovery of Updike's work among her collection was special for that reason. (I also once found a paperback copy of "Tropic of Cancer" at her house – that still blows me away.)

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### **j says**

You know what would be nice, is if there was a wikipedia for life, and every time you met someone, you could just give it a glance and see if, you know, you really want to be associated with that person.

Sure, it would backfire, it would reveal your prejudices and narrow-mindedness, your circle of friends might become a lot less varied and interesting. On the other hand, you'd never have to fake a conversation about football again, and you could easily avoid the total assholes like Rabbit Angstrom.

I didn't finish this book. I read 30 or 40 pages and I can't even remember the writing because never before have I hated a character so much. I am someone who never notices the annoying characters in books or movies; mostly, you have to reach a Bella Swan-level of idiocy before I'll start hating you. Rabbit did it within a few pages. I can decide what it was: was it when he berated his wife for being too fat and unkempt after giving birth to and caring for his child? Was it when he kept thinking about how dumb she was? Was it how he pulled that whole, "See you honey, I'm going to the store... forever!" trick, and ran off to sleep with his mistress and mope about his sad excuse for a life?

But this is an Important Book by a Famous Author, and who wants to admit defeat? So I went to wikipedia and I read the plot synopsis. Disgusted, I read about the rest of Rabbit Angstrom's life as told in Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich and ~~Yay, Rabbit is Dead~~ Rabbit at Rest. Spoiler alert: he never stops being absolutely horrible for a single second. They say you shouldn't make snap judgments, but I'd wager running away from your wife and toddler son with nary a word is one of those times where basing your opinion on a first impression is ok.

Please, go ahead and tell me I am wrong for reviewing this without finishing it, for not appreciating Updike's prose, for not seeing how he has humanized a hateful man, for failing to realize the way Rabbit's life works as a metaphor for the deconstruction of masculine identity in post-WWII America, or how erectile dysfunction is a really big deal, or the lie of hyper-consumerism, or the empty pursuit of middle-class ideals. Then I can go ahead and make a snap judgment about you too (for clarity: JUST KIDDING!).

Sometimes you just don't want to read a nasty, ugly book about someone horrible. Let alone fucking *four* of them. This one's for you, wikipedia.

*Facebook 30 Day Book Challenge Day 2: Least favorite book.*

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### **Violet wells says**

I've read three or four Updike novels and I can't recall a damn thing about any of them. Never a good sign. I was fifty pages in before I realised I'd already read this one. That in itself – to spend money on a book I'd already read – was irritating! Updike's novels seem like misplaced objects in my life. He's one of those writers I feel I've underappreciated and yet every time I give him another go I'm left underwhelmed. This isn't a bad novel by any means. But I was relieved to finish it because it's not what I would call an enjoyable novel. It's rather humourless and lacking in vitality for a novel written by such a young man. In terms of its scope it often felt like a short story or a novella that had been fattened up for consumption.

Updike is writing about the blindfolding tyranny of male vanity but I often felt he himself was guilty of it in the register of this novel's voice. I couldn't help thinking of our (English) young literary protégé Martin Amis. Like Updike's Amis' first novel was a sexy, cynical affair about a self-centred misogynistic young man. Except Amis gets us to like his hero by not asking us to like him. Updike, on the other hand, I always felt wants us to like Rabbit. He knows he shouldn't but he can't help himself. He's trying to work Rabbit's (for me nonexistent) charm on us the reader as if he is a reflection of the writer himself. I never felt Updike was sufficiently detached from the character he created. Amis is a whole lot more subtle in creating his male monsters. Amis' women are deliberately male projections. Updike's are male projections but presented otherwise. When he gives us their perspective we discover they have nothing better to think about than Rabbit, usually in terms that gratify Rabbit's vanity. When Rabbit's supposedly irresistible virile charm also has the clergyman's intelligent wife wobbling at the knees my suspension of disbelief was punctured. It was like Updike's own vanity couldn't resist another (gratuitous) female conquest.

Maybe part of the problem is that I'm English and didn't find any connection to the suburban middle America community he was depicting but I found this hard work. It's not a misogynist novel but it does have a lot of misogynist undertones, especially in its depiction of women as weak-kneed, gullible concubines (most evident in his patronising depiction of the clergyman's wife where he had the opportunity to create a woman of some integrity).

Only the quality of the writing made it a 3 star novel instead of 2.

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## Richard Derus says

Get over it! Pull up your socks and get on with it! Sheez.

### Book Circle Reads 96

Rating: 2.5\* of five

**The Book Description:** Penguin's bumf--*Rabbit, Run* is the book that established John Updike as one of the major American novelists of his — or any other — generation. Its hero is Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, a onetime high-school basketball star who on an impulse deserts his wife and son. He is twenty-six years old, a man-child caught in a struggle between instinct and thought, self and society, sexual gratification and family duty — even, in a sense, human hard-heartedness and divine Grace. Though his flight from home traces a zigzag of evasion, he holds to the faith that he is on the right path, an invisible line toward his own salvation as straight as a ruler’s edge.

Ballantine's is a little better--To millions of Americans, Rabbit Angstrom is like a member of the family. They have followed him through RABBIT, RUN, RABBIT REDUX and RABBIT IS RICH. We meet him for the first time in this novel, when he is 22, and a salesman in the local department store. Married to the second best sweetheart of his high school years, he is the father of a preschool son and husband to an alcoholic wife. The unrelieved squalor and tragedy of their lives remind us that there are such people, and that salvation, after all, is a personal undertaking.

**My Review:** I suspect my hostility to this book stems from a lack of respect for Rabbit Angstrom. I knew guys like this, I could have been a guy like this, and I think reading this book held up too undistorted a mirror to the facets of my own psyche that I dislike the most for me to enjoy the book as a leisure read.

So now let me get at why I gave it such a low rating: I think Updike's writing is mediocre. I think he's gotten heaps of praise for being unsparing and a brilliant observer, both of which are undeniable, and then the flat-surfaced all-nuance-low-impact writing style in this book got a pass. It's BORING. The story infuriates me, yes, my issue there; but the way it's told...! Blahblahblahblah even in the most tragic moments. Like the *Peanuts* cartoon adults, the entire cast of the tale seem to honk and blatt, and nothing makes one sit up and take much notice of any one of them.

Flat flat flat. Untoasted white bread spread with Miracle Whip, topped with limp outer leaves of iceberg lettuce and slices of weak-kneed, pale-pink winter tomatoes, with one piece of undrained, undercooked bacon in the middle.

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## Ben says

On the surface, *Rabbit, Run* is about a guy who runs around on his son and pregnant wife, and ends up living with a prostitute. Real interesting, right? Actually, yes. Because the characters come to life and they're struggling with their own moral weaknesses and existential problems -- their problems and interactions are truly believable. So this *is* an interesting story, because Updike can write, and he pulls it off.

But first, I must explain why my rating is only 3 stars (or, 3 and a half, really).

Never, at any point in my life, have I been good with concrete details.. No, let me rephrase that: Never, at any point in my life, have I been anything other than *poor* with concrete details. Little details that people notice -- the small visual treasures appreciated by most -- are often lost upon me. My sense of direction is embarrassing. My mechanical abilities are almost nonexistent. The color and types of friend's cars, the outer appearance of houses... all of them, I'm typically oblivious to.

But I'm quite happy immersing myself in the world of my head; the world of figuring things out, of daydreaming, and the like. That's where I'm comfortable. I retreat into my head naturally and easily -- it's where I typically choose to live when given the choice. But.... if I really try -- I mean, if I really put in the effort -- I can sometimes get myself to the point of noticing, engaging with, and appreciating outer details. But it takes effort. Massive, draining effort.

Updike is amazing with these concrete details -- the simple but beautiful aesthetics of every day living. It's just damn difficult for me to keep my focus on these things, whether through actual experience, or through reading. If you're a great appreciator of these subtleties, it's hard to see how you wouldn't reach an almost joyous state from Updike's deft attention to detail. At times, even for me, he made time stop. Right there, in the moment, I was in the car when Rabbit drove off; I was at dinner with Rabbit and his friends... I saw what he saw. But it rarely lasted long -- I lost my focus too easily.

Updike is great with characters, too. Even if you don't like them (and his main characters are difficult to like) you understand them, and because they're human, you care for them. Rabbit is certainly not likable. In the beginning of the book, Rabbit drives off. He's headed to Florida. He didn't plan it; he just suddenly realized that he had enough with his life -- he didn't like his wife; he didn't want responsibility anymore, so he just impulsively decides to drive off, without telling anyone. Tell me, is that not tempting as hell? To just drive right past whatever obligations you may have and run away towards freedom. But you know you can't do that, if not for moral reasons, then because of the consequences that stem from doing such a thing. Rabbit doesn't get this. He goes through life without thinking of the consequences of his actions -- he lives in the moment, and feeds and acts out of his own quick, selfish motives. Or, as Updike puts it in one sentence, "He likes things to happen of themselves." But you know, this outlook, this philosophy -- these *actions*: they don't work when you grow up and have certain responsibilities. You can't get along in life by feeding your selfish desires all the time. It just doesn't work, and Rabbit still hasn't gotten that, and he -- and those in his family -- are affected by it, heavily.

To quickly continue with the characters: I personally didn't like Rabbit's wife Janice, either (and I think most would agree). I kind of liked Ruth, the "hooer" (Rabbit's word) that Rabbit moved in with -- she's your classic hard shell, secretly soft-hearted kind of person. brian (dude, am I really not supposed to capitalize the "B" in your name?) said that he liked her in his review. I, personally though, liked Pastor Eccles best: The guy tries so hard to make things work for others. He has this need to solve things -- to make things right. That resonated with me.

Even with seemingly shallow characters such as Rabbit, Updike manages to show that they *do* have a level of depth, and he brings out that depth expertly. Existential issues in general, haunt us all from time to time,

and Updike articulates this personal inner struggle like the pro that he is. His writing manages to articulate and combine these with the animal instincts we all have -- that fight between our spiritual yearning and our instinctive animal elements. Sometimes, he even manages to pull it off in the very same paragraph as his descriptions of everyday beauty. Check this out:

*"Eccles sits by the window of Kruppenbach's den on an oak-backed choir pew left over from some renovation. Seated on the bench he feels an adolescent compulsion to pray but instead peers across the valley at the green fragments of the golf course where he would like to be, with Harry. Eccles has found other partners either better or worse than he; only Harry is both, and only Harry gives the game a desperate gaiety, as if they are together engaged in an impossible question set by a benevolent but absurd lord, a quest whose humiliations sting them almost to tears but one that is renewed at each tee, in a fresh flood of green. And for Eccles there is an additional hope, a secrete determination to trounce Harry. He feels that the thing that makes Harry unsteady, that makes him unable to repeat his beautiful effortless swing every time, is the thing at the root of all the problems that he has created; and that by beating him decisively he, Eccles, will get on top of this weakness, this flaw, and hence solve the problems. In the meantime there is the pleasure of hearing Harry now and then cry, 'Hey, hey,' or 'I love it, love it!' Their rapport at moments attains for Eccles a pitch of pleasure, a harmless ecstasy, that makes the world with its vicious circumstantiality seem remote and spherical and green."*

It's good for me to read Updike. Doing so addresses -- and therefore improves upon -- my weaknesses with concrete details. I plan on reading a Rabbit book a year. This way, as I grow and look back upon Rabbit's changes in behavior, I can look at mine as well. I hope to see us both growing. Who knows, I may even have a wife and kids by the time I get to *Rabbit at Rest*.

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brian has written of Updike almost perfectly in the plethora of his Updike reviews. If you're considering reading Updike, or just interested in his style and why he has such a sound literary reputation, check out brian's reviews, here

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## Alex says

### **The Rabbit Series**

Here's the thing about Updike: he's *such a good writer*. He's a pure natural. His sentences are incredibly good. (Here in *Rabbit, Run*, sometimes you can feel the effort a little; by the third book, *Rabbit is Rich*, he's flawless.) His characterization is brilliant: Rabbit most of all is one of the great real people in literature, and the supporting cast - his wife and child, among others - are also real individuals. And, listen: some writers are good at writing but not good at books (Saul Bellow, maybe?), so they end up a little boring; some writers are bad at writing but good at books (Stephen King), so you enjoy reading them but wince on every page. Updike is great at both; the overall effect is great and so is each individual word. Like one of those fractals where the picture is pretty and then you zoom in and every little piece is just as pretty. That's high praise!

*like this but if it was blowjobs all the way down*

On the other hand: most of his characters are jerks, and you come off with the general impression that Updike is also a jerk. Rabbit is a small person: selfish, self-pitying, horny. Mediocre in his best moments. You're not sure whether Updike likes him or despises him, and you're uncomfortable either way. So it's easy to admire the Rabbit books, and easy to enjoy them, but in the end you're left with a nagging feeling that you don't love them. There's something off-putting about the whole project. People you don't like are big Updike fans. They're the sort of people who you meet at parties and casually mention that you like to read and they immediately start mansplaining about why Updike is so great and two beers from now they're talking trash about Virginia Woolf. I find myself, like, "Ugh, this book is great," which is a weird thing to say.

### **Great Authors Whom Annoying People Like**

- Updike
- Ernest Hemingway
- Cormac McCarthy
- David Foster Wallace

### **This Particular Book**

*Rabbit, Run* is about a guy who spends (view spoiler) funeral checking out 14-year-old girls. "Their bodies are already there but their faces are still this side of being good," he muses, as they (view spoiler)

Ruth, the sometime prostitute (and only likable character) he hooks up with when he leaves his wife has his number: "You're Mr. Death himself," she realizes. "You're not just nothing, you're worse than nothing." What does he have going for him? He's handsome and he's sortof likable, which is enough to get him close enough to destroy everyone around him. Incredibly, you sortof like him too, which is the fantastic achievement of this book: as terrible as he is, you still sortof, dimly, somewhere, root for him.

So here's one of our Great American Characters, and this is a great book. There are a few times where you can feel that Updike was only 28 when he wrote it. There are some sentences that...they're not exactly bad, but he certainly wrote the living shit out of them.

By the way, I can't really recommend reading this if you have a newborn child. (view spoiler)

There are several astonishing sex scenes. The first, which is something like 20 pages long, is Rabbit's first encounter with Ruth, and it reads something like if Lena Dunham were John Updike. Later on Rabbit will insist on demeaning sex with both Ruth and Janice, and there will be consequences. (view spoiler) What this is is sex as plot. Updike has a reputation for terrible sex scenes, but I think maybe people are just mad because they're not sexy. I don't think they're supposed to be sexy. They're supposed to be awful, like everything else in this great book about awful things.

Speaking of awful things: if you're not sure what a Modess pad is, here you go.

### **Rabbit, Ranked**

1. Rabbit is Rich, five stars (1981)
2. *Rabbit, Run* (1960)
3. Rabbit at Rest, three stars (1990)
4. Rabbit Redux, two stars (1971)
5. Rabbit, Remembered, three stars but totally unnecessary and not usually even mentioned (2001)

**Can I just read this one and not the others?**

**Yes.** It is a self-contained story that's satisfying all by itself.

**What should I use as a bookmark?**

**A burned match.**

(More of my dorky bookmark project here)

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**Kemper says**

God, do I hate Rabbit Angstrom! How much do I hate him? If I was in a room with Hannibal Lector, the Judge from Blood Meridian, the Joker from Batman, and Rabbit Angstrom, and someone handed me a gun with only 3 bullets, I'd shoot Rabbit three times.

This is the first book by Updike I've read, and his reputation as a writer was well-earned. I'd had a vague idea that this story was about a former hot shot basketball player struggling to adjust to a regular life. I was completely unprepared for this spoiled, impulsive, selfish guy who really only cares about himself and his whims and manages to completely destroy almost everyone around him and still refuses to accept any responsibility for it.

It's obvious that Rabbit isn't meant to be a hero, or even an anti-hero. Updike does a masterful job of tricking you into initially liking Rabbit, even after he leaves his pregnant wife and son and takes up with a sorta-prostitute, but then slowly showing you Rabbit's true nature. And the trick is that it was right in front of you all along.

Brilliant book, and I'd planned to read the other Rabbit novels, but I honestly detested him so much that I don't know if I'll have the stomach for another one in the near future.

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**brian says**

bellow's writing blows my mind but rarely touches my heart. a handful of mailer's essays and novels are essential, but it's his guts and brain and balls and heart and the ferocity with which he lived life that's the real inspiration. roth? well, i've made my views on roth very well known in bookface world. and the few updike short stories i've read only convinced me that his elegant & writerly style really bugs the shit out of me.

all of 'em (bellow, mailer, roth, updike) found themselves as the right people at the right time: white dudes in america when america was the shit and white dudes were kings of the shit. but they knew that their kingdom of shit, of course, owed much to the disenfranchisement of non-dudes and non-whites. and fools have always found 'em to be racist and/or sexist, not realizing that a post-war examination of racism and sexism was much of the point; that this conflict, that life as 'guilty royalty', lies at the heart of much of their work. i've always found mailer and roth to be -- wait for it, wait for it -- amongst the most compassionate of any and all writers. and they're hardasses. they accept no preconceived notions. they want to know, they NEED to know, even if they find themselves branded self-loathing jews or repressed homosexuals or shouted down by an

angry panel of feminists...

well nobody catches more shit than updike and nobody gets more sucked off. and i, of course, found myself in the former camp. and digging it. updike, from my not-having-read-much-of-his-stuff perspective always kinda came off as some dull & smiling yuppie dick. and that obsession with the perfect, elegant, adjective-heavy sentence makes me wanna diarrhea. updike seemed kinda like the literary equivalent of billy joel sitting down for a lunch of kraft cheese and mayonnaise on wonder bread. and so i started the first Rabbit and my suspicions were immediately confirmed. i mean, those first two sentences:

*Boys are playing basketball around a telephone pole with a backboard bolted to it. Legs, shouts.*

aaaarrrgggh! horrible. the kind of shit to make a writing teacher come in his/her jeans. and he uses all those writerly terms that don't really correspond to anything in real life. people talking are 'clucking' or 'chirping'; 'crisp' to describe a pair of slacks; or 'lumpy' to describe people or words or ideas or anything the hell else.

and it's not just, as many people have pointed out, that Rabbit is a dickhead -- it's that he's an uninteresting dickhead. and updike sets an uninteresting dickhead against a symbolically charged tapestry meant to represent a kind of microcosmic america. and it's dull and obvious and schematic and, again, writerly.

and then 1/2way through the book, neck deep in boredom and fury, something happened. rabbit and ruth (the tragic town slut he's shacked up with) run into rabbit's sister, who's headed down the same road as ruth... and it resonated. and as the events of the second half unfolded, i HATED updike even more as i realized that the bastard was fucking with me. and it was working. it *had* worked. and all that junk in the first half is suddenly given new significance by the events of the latter half and i was, yes, blown away by updike's compassion and understanding and skill.

so updike. my first book. made me cry. i'm not talking misty eyed and lump in the throat, but, like, tears running down my cheeks. not bad. and i feel okay upgrading updike from 'smiling yuppie dick' to 'subject of unfortunately cheery author photo'. and i just bought the second Rabbit book. we'll see.

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### Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

**The CCLaP 100:** In which I read for the first time a hundred so-called "classics," then write reports on whether or not they deserve the label

Essay #48: *Rabbit, Run* (1960), by John Updike

*The story in a nutshell:*

(Much of today's recap was culled from Wikipedia, for reasons that are explained below.)

Released right at the beginning of the countercultural 1960s, John Updike's "anti-hero" tale *Rabbit, Run* is centered around perhaps the most unlikable character in all of modern literature -- one Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, that is, a 26-year-old former high-school basketball star and now full-time jackass, a married

salesman in suburban Pennsylvania with one kid already and another on the way, until literally on the spur of the moment one night he decides to abruptly leave them and move to Florida; but after getting lost on his way out of town, he decides instead to visit his creepy old basketball coach, who takes him out for an awkward dinner with two white-trash part-time prostitutes. One of them, Ruth, quickly falls into a dysfunctional relationship with Rabbit, living with him for two months while his family moves back in with his wife's parents, and with a local priest constantly bugging Rabbit to reconcile; but he ends up staying with Ruth, until finding out that she once had a fling with his high-school nemesis, at which point he rapes her and leaves, conveniently at the same time he finds out that his wife has just given birth to their new child.

The two reunite and Rabbit tries to be a good man again, but finds it hard -- among other foibles, he misinterprets an offer for coffee from a local minister's wife for a sexual advance, then tries to pressure his wife into post-natal sex before she's ready, physically assaulting her when she refuses, leading to her accidentally killing their child in a drunken incident. This then takes us into a slightly existentialist ending, with Rabbit fleeing the newborn's funeral after first loudly proclaiming his innocence to those gathered, then getting lost in a graveyard, then returning to Ruth to find out that she's pregnant too, then leaving her again after realizing that he's unwilling to divorce his wife; and this then sets the stage for the three sequels to come, symbolically charting the downfall of America in the second half of the 20th century by looking at the downfall of Rabbit himself.

#### *The argument for it being a classic:*

Well, for starters, say its fans, it's perhaps the most well-known book by the guy who a lot of people consider one of the most important writers of the entire 20th century, one of only three authors in history to win the Pulitzer more than once (and in fact, his two Pulitzers came from two of the other books in the "Rabbit" series, 1981's *Rabbit is Rich* and 1990's *Rabbit at Rest*); and in more general terms, a lot of people consider this four-book series as a whole to be literally the best thing the entire Postmodernist Era has to offer, a sweeping and beautifully written history of post-WW2 America as seen through the eyes of one of its most despicable citizens. Plus there's the fact that it's deceptively funny, an exquisitely constructed linguistic puzzle that confounds all expectations the further you read; and on top of all this, it's historically important for technical reasons too, with it being one of the first great examples of an entire novel being pulled off in a first-person present-day voice, one of the many stylistic innovations that occurred during this highly important period of literary history.

#### *The argument against:*

Like is the case with a lot of modern authors, critics of this book are not just ambivalent about their dislike but passionately active; they claim that along with '60s contemporaries like Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Don DeLillo and Norman Mailer, it was Postmodernists like Updike who literally ruined literature, and who were single-handedly responsible for movies and television becoming the new dominant media for popular culture in this country in these same years. And *Rabbit, Run*, they claim, is nearly a textbook example of what they're talking about, because of it being guilty of nearly every criticism that's ever been made about Postmodernism: it is overly talky yet goes nowhere, much more interested in precocious language than in constructing a good story, designed to appeal not to the general public but mostly to his fellow academics, and which lacquers a shiny intellectual sheen over what in reality is some pretty brutal misogyny, the kind of whiny, rambling snoozer that inspired the creation of such frou-frou critical terms as "essayistic saunter," "interruption of the abyss," "sense of self-qualification," "a dialectical theological debate between the book itself and its reader," and all the other impenetrable AcademicSpeak BS that has driven tens of millions of arts fans away from contemporary literature in the last 40 years, and right into the open arms of the film industry.

#### *My verdict:*

So to understand what my personal reaction to *Rabbit, Run* was, you really only need to know this -- that after starting it, not only did I quickly abandon my original plan to read all four "Rabbit" novels as part of this essay series, but even the first book itself became one of only a handful of CCLaP 100 titles so far I haven't been able to finish, and the only one so far that I abandoned not for arcane outdated language but rather because IT WAS SO FREAKING TERRIBLE. And that's because, Dear Lord, every single thing that critics of this book complain about is true; and in fact you could strongly argue that this single title virtually creates the blueprint for every snotty, coolly ironic, pop-culture-obsessed, casually sexist diatribe about jaded middle-class white people in the Big Bad Suburbs that has come since, a glut that had become intolerable by the turn of the 21st century and that the "Sincerists" of post-9/11 literature\* are actively fighting against.

It can sometimes be a tough call for me with this type of book, because as I've said before, as someone who was raised in the late Postmodernist Age, I was conditioned as a punk-loving teen to rebel against it, and it's only now in my forties that I'm trying to go back and learn to have a simple appreciation for these groundbreaking authors of the '60s and '70s (for example, at the same time I'm writing the CCLaP 100, I'm also reading all nine of Philip Roth's "Zuckerman" novels, which like the "Rabbit" books is a highly regarded, award-winning Postmodernist series about the downfall of America in the late 20th century); and I want to make it clear that I'm not done with Updike yet, with him being simply too revered to give up on after just one bad novel. (If nothing else, I want to at least read his 1968 *Couples*, which along with Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* was one of the racy must-reads of the countercultural era, and is widely credited for kickstarting the wife-swapping craze among '70s suburbanites.) But man, I have to confess, here during its 50th anniversary, the first thing I thought after giving up on *Rabbit, Run* was, "Sheesh, what a stinker that turned out to be," a novel I absolutely do not recommend to others at all, and that I suspect will end up being one of the worst titles of this entire essay series once all hundred books have finally been read. If you're interested in the history of early Postmodernism like I am, do yourself a favor and pick up some much more deserving books from the period instead.

**Is it a classic?** Good God, no

(And don't forget that the first 33 essays in this series are now available in book form!)

\*Or, you know, call it what you will; but now that we're a decade in, I think it's almost impossible to deny anymore that we are firmly in the early years of a brand new artistic era, past the Postmodernism that came before it and in many ways an angry reaction *to* it, one in which the quest for irony-free authenticity, a new dedication to plot development, and a new appreciation for genre fiction is rapidly becoming the new touchstones of American intellectualism. I've been calling this "Sincerism" or "The Sincere Age" at CCLaP (which of course ties into a lot of other elements of our contemporary culture as well, from Michael Chabon to *Lost* to Radiohead to President Obama), and it'll be interesting I think to see what term society eventually settles on for this period in the future.

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### Matthew says

Have you ever seen something noted because it is a representation of a specific thing? For example, a building might be marked with a plaque as a perfect representation of a type of architecture. Well, this book should be marked with a plaque as a perfect prose example of America in the late 50s/early 60s. The thoughts, ideas, acceptable social standards, treatment of women, etc. are so vivid and strongly represented, but soooooo dated!

The book is very interesting, but mainly held my attention the way a trainwreck would. I spent most of the book exclaiming "NO, Rabbit, NO!", "Why would you do that, Rabbit!?", "How can anyone put up with you, Rabbit!?", "Do you really feel like none of this is your fault, Rabbit!?", etc. Needless to say, Rabbit is a guy that needs some serious help!

This is not a book for everyone - especially if you don't like uncomfortable relationships. I spent some of the book thinking it is great and some of it thinking it is terrible. In the end, the terrible only made me want to see more (again, trainwreck), so I settled on the 4 star rating.

Also, I am looking forward to seeing what insanity Rabbit gets up to in the rest of the series as so much is left unanswered.

## **Rebecca Waller says**

John Updike has a very non-traditional interpretation of redemption, and you find that in his main character, Harry Angstrom, also known as Rabbit. In this first Rabbit novel, he is 26, and he finds himself in crisis about where his life is headed. I found myself loving Rabbit and sympathizing with him (mostly), but also hating him and hating his choices. As a friend once put it to me, "He is Holden Caulfield grown up." It is a painful and powerful book. The writing is delicious, and I have never read an author who can see so deeply and so clearly into humanness; not only that, but Updike has the unique ability to articulate truths like almost no one else can.

**Manny says**

Guys are like that. Why blame Updike?

**Shovelmonkey1 says**

I'm sorry I think I might have to pause before the start of this review and scream discretely into a pillow:

Phew, that's better, very cathartic. This is yet another book from the 1001 books list which has made me question whether or not the people who write the list actually like people who read books or if they are really secretly intent on torturing us all for their own amusement?

The review will now proceed in the style of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom...

Hello everyone, I'm Harry Angstrom, but you can call me "Rabbit". The name is totally applicable in two ways - in high school basket ball games (I was a sporting ace don'tcha know?) a rabbit is a runner who sets the pace, and since leaving high school I appear to be breeding in a way which is prolific and almost rabbit like too. Some might say I also have a tendency to bounce from thing to thing without really thinking about

it. No twitchy nose or whiskers though.

So I had this girl since high school, Janice Springer, and I knocked her up and well, damn it, I'm a fan of the idea of domesticity so I made an honest woman of her and her old man hooked us up with an OK place to live and all and no one was too suspect when little Nelson was born 7 months after the wedding. After all, I'm Rabbit, I'm a breeder... that's what we do!

But y'know how it is. Maybe I'm just not ready to be tied down. Janice drinks, man oh man she drinks and she can be a misery. Nowadays she's so busy looking after the kid she's not interested in me (ME ME ME), not like she should be. I mean, I'm great... a regular swell, the cats pyjamas sewn up around the bees knees. I'm a catch and any woman would be lucky to have me.

So one day I decided that rather than go home to my pregnant wife and two year old kid ,I could pretend that I was still the Rabbit of old, and set out to remove myself a suitable distance from adult responsibility. Turns out that a suitable distance involves moving about ten blocks away in the same town and setting up home with a retired hooker with chunky ankles, while reacquainting myself with a load of people who thought I was great ten years ago. When alls said and done its a nice little ego boost! Don't get me wrong, I think I love her. I mean I am pretty sure I do and she lets me talk about myself a whole lot. Plenty in fact and really that's what it boils down to - self indulgence on a grand scale. I'm a bit uncertain about my direction in life, possibly because of an immature, shallow perspective which doesn't allow me to appreciate other peoples outlooks - maybe I'm a Sociopath? I have no empathy. I like to please myself. End of.

Obviously poor old Janice went and had the baby and man, did it cut me up to think that I might miss out on a whole extra helping of double domesticity so off I went back to Janice without a thought for chunky ankles and my newest domestic set up. After one short night I realised that when the going gets tough then rabbit gets going and promptly bailed again, this time with disastrous consequences. Still I manned up and came home to face what was coming to me, but really I didn't enjoy that much and now I've strapped on my running shoes and am sprinting off into the sunset again as fast as my lucky rabbits feet can carry me. You can catch me in the sequels Rabbit Redux and Rabbit is Rich if you feel like playing with the boundaries of your own sanity, but the subtext will always be that I'm a selfish loser with low self esteem and the attention span of a kitten filled with e-numbers.

Erin says

If it's hard to love a book when you dislike the hero, it's harder still when the book leaves you cursing the nature of humanity.

I hate John Updike right now.

I hate him as an idealistic dreamer, for making me remember how ugly we are – all of us humans with our selfish hearts and boring thoughts, our fractious flaws, and our suffocating sense of doom and exceptionalism.

I hate him as a woman, for cringe-worthy moments of misogyny, for the distancing male sexual fixation, and for making me wonder that even the kindly back massage my husband gave me last night was really just a covert attempt at foreplay.

I hate him as a writer, for his beautiful way with details, drawing me in against my will with his quiet and clever descriptions.

**I hate John Updike because I don't want to care about Rabbit Angstrom.** I'd like to tell this dickhead Rabbit to go jump off the top of Mount Judge and leave me in peace – and yet here I am searching my local bookstore for the next installment.

*Because he has to stop running eventually, right?*

*And then I'll feel better about life, right?*

Ugh.

This is what wrestling with literature feels like.

**I don't want to think any more about this book because I'm afraid of what I might discover: that at the bottom of this ugly, messy pile of ambivalence, my real reason for hating Rabbit is not so much that he's a self-centered jerk but that I am too.**

I've never abandoned my pregnant wife and child, or shacked up with a prostitute, or hit on the minister's wife, but I do plenty of other hateful, hurtful, stupid things, over and over again, *ad infinitum*. I'm the hero of my own story only by default, which makes me neither heroic nor interesting. And maybe that's the point. None of us is as great as we think, and life without love or grace is empty indeed.

So maybe I don't hate John Updike after all. Maybe...

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### **MJ Nicholls says**

Something of a masterpiece, this first in the trilogy of five explores the universal themes of domestic humdrummery, fidelity, and the repercussions of discarded dreams. The titular Rabbit is a compelling portrayal of a now somewhat stock character, the coulda-been-a-contender (in this case basketball) bounced into a life of McJobs, dowdy small-town wives, and unwanted children. Updike's novel is the best depiction of this soap-opera conceit I have read: he transforms every banal scene into something riveting and moving and sexy and wrenching. His dialogue, character nuance, sex scenes and melodramatic moments glisten with pearly descriptive gems and metaphors, and utilise a close third-person partial SoC narrative that adds dramatic heft to his characters' reflections. Rabbit is a brilliant creation—philandering bastard, all-too-human everyman, Hamlet-like dilly-dallier, tender lover and Mersault-like drifter. And the surrounding characters, esp. Joyce, the tormented daddy's-girl and alcoholic, are equally stunning. I can't wait for book number two. \*runs to Rabbit\*

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