



More Matter: Essays and Criticism

John Updike

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In this collection of nonfiction pieces, John Updike gathers his responses to nearly two hundred invitations into print, each “an opportunity to make something beautiful, to find within oneself a treasure that would otherwise remain buried.” Introductions, reviews, and humorous essays, paragraphs on New York, religion, and lust—here is “more matter” commissioned by an age that, as the author remarks in his Preface, calls for “real stuff . . . not for the obliquities and tenuosities of fiction.” Still, the novelist’s shaping hand, his gift for telling detail, can be detected in many of these literary considerations. Books by Edith Wharton, Dawn Powell, John Cheever, and Vladimir Nabokov are incisively treated, as are biographies of Isaac Newton, Abraham Lincoln, Queen Elizabeth II, and Helen Keller. As George Steiner observed, Updike writes with a “solicitous, almost tender intelligence. The critic and the poet in him . . . are at no odds with the novelist; the same sharpness of apprehension bears on the object in each of Updike’s modes.”

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R. says

Note: Mainly read the contemporary book reviews, introductions to special editions of his own books, a few of the personal reflections on books that changed his life (and/or shaped the world), award banquet remarks, and, Cripes, did you know he wrote the beginning and ending to an exquisite corpse for an Amazon.com contest way back when? Well, they're here, too.

John says

A very lengthy and varied edition of his essays. I have not read all of them, but I did go through about a dozen or so. This is a book to be read over time and to come back to. As with all of Updike's non-fiction work, very erudite and plain-spoken. Pieces that came from The New Yorker and elsewhere. Prose that talks to you conversationally over a cup of coffee.

The Nook edition at Barnes & Noble for five dollars was more than worth it.

Eric says

Discussing Barthes and his detractors, Updike once said that those who can write brightly about anything generate much ill-will. Witness David Foster Wallace's jibe that Updike "never has an unpublished thought"--as if that's a serious insult when you're talking about a writer. We're lucky to have Updike commenting so profusely. I've had this by my bedside for the last month and am still coming across wonderful bits--most recently his suggestion that 'Swann's Way' was a significant influence on the tone and subject of 'The Age of Innocence.' Huh.

James Murphy says

I bought this book about five years ago in an Atlanta used book store called The Book Nook. I'd put it off so long because at 856 pages of criticism it seemed such a monumental reading commitment. Having finished it today I'm alternatively kissing my hands and arms for being discerning enough to want to read it and slapping my wrist for waiting so long. I'm an Updike fan, one of what I sometimes feel is a dwindling population. I believe a handful of his novels are astonishingly fine examples of fiction. His short stories are, across the board and the years of his career, exemplary, as good as can be found. But this collection of his critical pieces has reinforced what I'd long suspected, or knew subconsciously, that his criticism is as strong as any being written today. He died recently, and at that time some wrote that he was surpassed in the field only by Edmund Wilson. I believe that. This volume is more than book reviews. It also contains general essays on literature and past masters of fiction, essays on current social issues, comments on film, art, photography, and religion. He even has interesting things to say about lust, a subject dear to everyone. The choice of subject matter veers in an arc wide enough to include the cosmic concerns of Melville and the

racial tone of cartoons and cartoon characters of the 1930s. This is a ripe, lush crop of wise writing about literature, art, and culture, and it's studded with a splendid harvest of aphorisms. And, as always, Updike gives us all this in his gorgeous prose style. This is worthwhile reading.

Marc says

Witty, lucid, charming...
