I have read many of the stories included in John Updike's *The Early Stories* before, but Updike has re-arranged them in the way in which he presumably now wants them to be read, the arrangement that will convey most felicitously what they have to offer us. The fresh connections this arrangement makes between the stories, whether written as early as 1953 or as late as 1975, must surely also make them, if not more meaningful, at least meaningful in a different way than when they are read in isolation, or even in their original published context.

The first section of the book is dedicated to the "Olinger stories," written between 1954 and 1961 and clearly based on Updike's own youth in Shillington, Pennsylvania. I have never really thought of Updike as an autobiographical writer per se. Although much of his fiction is clearly anchored by his own experiences first in Pennsylvania and ultimately in Massachusetts, many of his books are not autobiographical at all, taking as their subjects characters completely unlike John Updike--*The Coup*, *Roger's Version*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, the Bech books. Even Rabbit Angstrom is obviously not an autobiographical character, however much some of his responses to his situation and his experiences might have come from Updike's familiarity with his milieu and his background.

The Olinger stories, however, are relentlessly autobiographical, so much so that when taken together their value as literary art, as fictional creations with full aesthetic integrity, is somewhat less than I expected it to be. One thing that even this initial section of *The Early Stories* begins to demonstrate is the price to be paid by a writer determined to survive simply as a writer, to have a "career" in fiction writing and not to either martyr himself in his poverty or take up a supporting career as professor or editor. The consequence is that some of the work is written as work, stories written to pay the bills or keep one's presence up but not necessarily because they were otherwise stories that just had to be written. Several of the stories in this section seem to me to be of this kind, written to first establish Updike's presence and then to help the writer earn his keep. There's nothing morally objectionable about this, but stories like the first one, "You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You," a coming-of-age vignette similar to Joyce's "Araby," but much less accomplished, or "In Football Season," an equally slight reminiscence of high school football games, are perhaps interesting enough to read in charting the development of John Updike's career but surely won't stand the test of time as short stories.

As a whole, these stories revolve around the same set of characters, given different names in some of the stories, but clearly the same nevertheless: a young man with a tendency to brood and to speculate about what his life will be like, as well as with some latent talent as a writer or artist, his parents, the mother somewhat frustrated with her lot but also capable of enjoying life, a father stuck in a low-paying job as high school teacher and given to a fair amount of brooding of his own, which he hides in a facade of cheerfulness, sometimes one or more elderly grandparents, the boy's real connection to the past, the history of the community in which he lives. This is all clearly enough a version of John Updike's own family and their travails, of his own trajectory from small-town boy to aspiring writer. But the effort seems so intensely focused on recreating
these circumstances and tracing that trajectory that one finishes these stories thinking more about John Updike's life and his desire to portray it in fiction than about the achievements of the stories in literary terms.

Probably the best-known story among the group of Olinger stories is "Pigeon Feathers," the title story of Updike's second collection, published in 1962. This is also a coming-of-age story (Updike seems fond of this conceit), in which the Updike character, in this case named David Kern, is seized with a kind of premature existential crisis. "Without warning, David was visited by an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede. You try to reach them but your arms are pinned. Shovels pour dirt into your face. There you will be forever, in an upright position, blind and silent, and in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called by any angel. . . ." No doubt this is as well one of the earliest stories in which religious faith becomes a foregrounded theme, a theme that has led many critics to label Updike in part a "religious" writer. David's crisis is resolved in the story's conclusion, when, after ridding the family's barn of a group of pesty pigeons, David looks at one of the dead pigeons and "lost himself in the geometrical tides as the feathers now broadened and stiffened to make an edge for flight, now softened and constricted to cup warmth around the mute flesh. And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a contolled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him." David buries the pigeons, and as he finishes "crusty coverings were lifted from him" and "he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever." One wants to think there is some irony in this, that it is not being suggested that the slaughter of "these worthless birds" (pigeon as Christ figure?) is not necessary to save David's soul, but I, for one, have to conclude that this revelation is meant to be taken precisely as such, the pleasing lyricism of the passage notwithstanding.

In my opinion, the two best stories in this section are "The Persistence of Desire" and "The Happiest I've Been." In the former, the Updike stand-in, here called "Clyde Behn," returns to Olinger after a number of years and meets a former girlfriend. There is clearly unfinished business between the two of them, although they both understand why their relationship had to end. The ex-girlfriend, it seems, is willing to betray her husband for a sexual encounter with Clyde and leaves Clyde with a note: "The glimpse, through the skin of paper, of Janet's old self quickened and sweetened his desire more than touching her had. He had tucked the note back into his shirt pocket and its stiffness there made a shield for his heart. In this armor he stepped into the familiar street. The maples, macadam, shadows, houses, cars were to his violated eyes as brilliant as a scene remembered: he became a child again in this town, where life was a distant adventure, a rumor, an always imminent joy." The tone of regret and sorrow for things passed that runs through all of these stories is perhaps most effectively sounded here, an effect Updike achieves entirely through the aptness of phrasing and the rythmic ease of his language. "The Happiest I've Been" is an equally quiet story in which the narrator ("John") is a college sophomore about to drive back to school with a local friend. Before leaving they stop off at a party where the narrator meets up with some old acquaintances and eventually winds up sitting in a kitchen with a girl he doesn't know well but with whom he has a tender moment nevertheless: "She drew my arm around her shoulders and folded my hand around her bare
forearm, to warm it. The back of my thumb fitted against the curve of one breast. Her head went into the hollow where my arm and chest joined; she was terribly small, measured against your own body. Perhaps she weighed a hundred pounds." This is all that happens, but it makes the narrator "happy" that she "had trusted me enough to fall asleep beside me," as does his friend, Neil, as the narrator later drives away from Olinger. (We have also learned that "after we arrived in Chicago I never saw him again either.")

The wistful quality that many of these stories seem to be after comes through most affectingly in these two stories because they're understated, don't try as hard as does even the staged epiphany in "Pigeon Feathers." The remaining Olinger stories perform variations on the themes of these two stories, to greater or lesser effect, but ultimately work, at best, to sketch out the overall portrayal of Olinger and its influence on David/Clyde/John Updike. In my view "The Persistence of Desire," "The Happiest I've Been," and perhaps "Pigeon Feathers" are the works that will continue to attract readers among this grouping of stories. (Also in my view, the essay-like "The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother's Thimble, and Fanning Island" and "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car" just don't work at all.)

Throughout all of these stories, however, Updike's impressive prose style is in evidence, although it is here perhaps somewhat less florid, but also somewhat less assured, than it will later become. In addition to the passages I have already quoted, this paragraph, the opening paragraph of "In Football Season," shows Updike the pure stylist at his best:

Do you remember a fragrance girls acquire in autumn? As you walk beside them after school, they tighten their arms about their books and bend their heads forward to give a more flattering attention to your words, and in the little intimate area thus formed, carved into the clear air by an implicit crescent, there is a complex fragrance woven of tobacco, powder, lipstick, rinsed hair, and that perhaps imaginary and certainly elusive scent that wool, whether in the lapels of a jacket or the nap of a sweater, seems to yield when the cloudless fall sky like the blue bell of a vacuum lifts toward itself the glad exhalations of all things. This fragrance, so faint and flirtatious on those afternoon walks through the dry leaves, would be banked a thousandfold on the dark slope of the stadium when, Friday nights, we played football in the city.

Some readers find Updike's style excessive, too intoxicated with the description of things, but I find it irresistible, the style of a writer trying to discover in all good faith what words can really say.

In many ways, the real culmination of the Olinger stories is Updike's novel The Centaur (1963). Perhaps because it was Updike's immediate follow-up novel to Rabbit, Run, in my opinion it really did not then and to some extent still has not received the credit it is due. Containing essentially the same cast of characters, this novel really completes the portrayal of Olinger and its place in Updike's fiction, and is the most compelling portrait as well of Updike's father (or at least of his fictional transformation.) The novel additionally shows Updike beginning to depart from strict conventional realism, as it alternates the story of the father and the son with a depiction of the father as literally a centaur, the mythological creature who is half man and half graceful beast. It really is a completely successful novel, and it is to be hoped that in the future it acquires the many readers it deserves.
II

The second set of stories in John Updike's *The Early Stories* is a more miscellaneous grouping, united only very loosely through their characters' shared circumstance of being ""Out in the World," as this section's title has it. Whereas the first section, "Olinger Stories," (a discussion of which can be found here) is worth reading as a whole because of its portrayal of Olinger (a fictionalized version of Updike's home town), the second can probably be read selectively, focusing on the better stories and skipping over the less substantial. I will try to identify what seem to me to be the better stories, and perhaps suggest how these stories might be read within the context of Updike's then developing career as a writer.

The characters in this group of stories, most of them still recognizably some transformed version of Updike himself (or at least of Updike and his experiences taken as representative of certain kind of postwar American, an aspirant to the educated middle class), are "out in the world" as students, as recent college graduates, as husbands starting families, or in some way getting an idea (in at least one case, not getting it) of what the world "out there" is really like. Like the Olinger stories, these stories were all written between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s, and if one were to judge by these first two sections of *The Early Stories*, it would seem that Updike set out to be a writer who would chronicle the coming-of-age and the subsequent experiences of that generation of Americans who were born before World War II but came to maturity and adulthood in the immediate postwar period. In Updike's case this also entails chronicling the journey from small-town America and its assumptions to those of the more "wordly" suburbs and cities.

Some of the stories are slight and, in my opinion, readers could safely pass on them: "The Kid's Whistling," "Who Made Yellow Roses Yellow," A Trillion Feet of Gas," Dear Alexandros, and "At a Bar in Charlotte Amalie" would fit into this category. "The Lucid Eye in Silver Town" and "His Finest Hour" are worth reading, but are ultimately fairly recognizable kinds of maturation stories (the latter confronting its married protagonists with the reality of domestic violence just next door) that, after promising beginnings, more or less disappoint by the end. One group of stories--"Dentistry and Doubt," "A Madman," "Still Life," and "Home"--portray their student protagonist's visit to and return from England, but only the last, which concerns this character's return and the beginnings of his readjustment to "home" and career, could really be classified as among Updike's more compelling stories.

This leaves "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So Forth," "The Christian Roommates," "The Doctor's Wife," and "Ace in the Hole" as the cream of this crop. "Tomorrow and Tomorrow" depicts an episode between a young male schoolteacher (still somewhat earnest and unsuspecting) and what he assumes to be a female student with a crush on him. (She is caught conspicuously passing a note that expresses her love for him.) It turns out, however, that this girl has been buttering up all of her teachers, and it is the protagonist who indeed winds up crushed. After discovering her stratagem, "Mr. Prosser took his coat from the locker and shrugged it on. He placed his hat upon his head. He fitted his rubbers over his shoes, pinching his fingers painfully, and lifted his umbrella off the hook. He thought of opening it right there in the vacant hall, as a kind of joke on himself and decided not to. The girl had been almost crying; he was sure of that." (This latter is a repetition of the same thought he had had upon confronting the girl.
Many of Updike's stories end with these epiphanic moments of truth, but this is a story in which that moment is particularly affecting.

"The Christian Roommates" is finally less effective as a story, but is remarkable for the current of barely concealed homoeroticism that runs through it. Otherwise a more or less conventional story of "the college experience," it presents probably the most naive and sheltered character in this group of stories, Orson Ziegler, who "came straight to Harvard from the small South Dakota town where his father was the doctor," confronted with his assigned roommate, "Hub" Palamountain, an unconventional fellow of a sort Orson certainly has never before encountered. Orson comes to hate Hub, but the hate clearly enough hides a simultaneous attraction. It all comes to a climax, so to speak, when Hub steals a parking meter and brings it into their room. Orson is scandalized and the two of them finally have it out: "Orson came up behind him and got him around the neck with one arm. Hub's body stiffened. . . Orson experienced sensations of being lifted, of flying, and of lying on the floor. . .He scrambled to his feet and went for Hub again, rigid with anger and yet, in his heart, happily relaxed. . .Hub's body was tough and quick and satisfying to grip. . .Orson felt a blow as his coccyx hit the wood; yet even through the pain he perceived, gazing into the heart of this forced marriage, that Hub was being as gentle with him as he could be. . .He renewed the attack and again enjoyed the tense defensive skill that made Hub's body a kind of warp in space through which his own body, after a blissful instant of contention, was converted to the supine position. . ." By today's wised-up standards, this scene has a barely suppressed hilarity about it, but Updike's language is clear enough to conclude he knew what he was doing.

"The Doctor's Wife" in a sense takes us farthest "out in the world," to an out-of-the-way Caribbean island where a young American family is vacationing. The doctor and his wife are permanently resident caucasians, and the story impressively enough depicts some of the racial tensions being felt during the early 60's. (As, in its way, does "The Christian Roommates.") The doctor's wife has come to have the attitude of the white colonialist toward the black inhabitants of the island ("Unnatural, childish ingratitude. You just don't know how unnatural these people are"), and at the end of the story she tells the American husband that the locals think his own wife's "good tan" means she is "part Negro." The husband is left brooding on his own reaction to this: "She [his wife] would have wanted him to say something like yes, her great-grandfather picked cotton in Alabama, in America these things are taken for granted, we have no problem. But he saw, like something living glimpsed in a liquid volume, that his imaginary scenarios depended upon, could only live within, a vast unconscious white pride; he and the doctor's wife were in this together."

The most noteworthy story among the "Out in the World" group may be "Ace in the Hole," and not just because it is clearly a precursor to Rabbit, Run. It is an interesting and accomplished story in its own right, perhaps the most successful of those stories (so far) in which Updike tries to move beyond his own experiences and create a protagonist who is not merely a fictional persona. Like Rabbit Angstrom, Ace is a former high school basketball hero no longer in the spotlight. But unlike Rabbit, Ace Anderson seems only obliquely aware that his glory has irretrievably faded, and although he clearly is just drifting through his life as depicted in the story, he can't quite let go of the happy-go-lucky attitude of his basketball days. The story ends with a confrontation between Ace and his wife (Eve) that doesn't bode well for the future,
reinforcing the uneasiness Ace has been feeling of late: "He wasn't hungry; his stomach was
tight. It used to be like that when he walked to the gymnasium alone in the dark before a game. .
.
.
But once he was inside, the locker room would be bright and hot, and the other guys would be
there, laughing and towel-slapping, and the tight feeling would leave. Now there were whole
days when it didn't leave."

What Ace Anderson lacks is Rabbit's self-awareness that his life has become tragic in an
archetypally American way. Having made it to the top so early (and under such unavoidably
consticted circumstances), Rabbit isn't likely to have another chance, and his horror at this
prospect is what gives Rabbit, Run its sense of urgency and inescapable failure. Ace is less astute
than Rabbit, and it's unlikely that as written his character could have developed the alertness to
his situation that made it possible for Rabbit to be the center of a full-length novel. But the very
qualities that distinguish Ace from Rabbit still illuminate for us the realities of American life
Updike seems to be exploring in both "Ace in the Hole" and Rabbit, Run. In the one case a
growing sense of quiet desperation that will probably remain muted, in the other a prolonged
outcry against the conditions that create that desperation in the first place.

III

Probably it will be John Updike's "domestic fiction" for which he will be best remembered and
perhaps on the basis of which he will be judged as a writer. And indeed "The Married Life," the
third section of The Early Stories, provides the most provocative and most consistently
accomplished set of stories in this book so far. (For a discussion of the first two, go here and
here.) Of the fourteen stories in this section, probably only "The Crow in the Woods" and "Wife-
Wooing" fail to reward a careful reading.

Which is not to say these stories are unequivocally agreeable, without their disturbing qualities.
The portrayal of marriage that emerges probably has at least as many shadows as warm light,
although that is ultimately what makes them seem more honest than not and gives them the
dramatic tension they need to succeed as short stories. The underlying assumptions about gender
roles can at times seem questionable—again the majority of the stories were written in the 1950s
and early 1960s—as can some of the attitudes toward unfolding political and cultural changes that
are at times expressed or at least implicitly suggested. However, many of these problematic
features can be interpreted as inherent in the circumstances and the mindsets of the characters
themselves, whose assumptions and actions are precisely the focus of Updike's depiction of
marriage in postwar America.

Most of the stories in "The Married Life" are in the form of vignettes or isolated episodes,
episodes that nevertheless reveal much about the characters and their moments of heightened
awareness of the pain and toil involved in married life. It is a form that Updike handles well (and
that he had perfected long before it was taken up by the minimalists and neorealists of the 1970s
and 1980s), seems perfectly suited to the disclosure of small insights Updike seems to be after,
and that also allows him to exercise his stylistic gifts in a way that can transform the stories into
something like lyrical set-pieces. (Readers will of course have greater or lesser tolerance for
fiction of this kind.) Even the slighter stories have these kinds of lyrical moments, as in the
conclusion to "The Crow in the Woods": "Something happened. Outdoors a huge black bird
came flapping with a crow's laborious wingbeat. It banked and, tilted to fit its feet, fell toward the woods. His heart melted with alarm for the crow, with such recklessness assaulting an inviolable surface, seeking so blindly a niche for its strenuous bulk where there was no depth. It could not enter. Its black shape shattering like an instant of flak, the crow plopped into a high branch and sent snow showering from a sector of lace. Its wings spread and settled. The vision destroyed, his heart overflowed. . . ."

Perhaps the very best story of this type in the group at hand is "Unstuck." The story can be easily summarized: A married man wakes up to find that a heavy snowfall has occurred overnight. He goes outside to dig his car out from under a snow bank that has hemmed it in. Unable to do so, he enlists his wife to help him. They succeed. The story begins by telling us of the husband and wife that "They had made love last night and again she had failed to have her climax." Later: "She wanted to make a holiday of it. And she wanted, he thought, to bury the aftertaste of last night." In the story's conclusion, the wife has navigated the car out of its snowbank: "[The car's] driver, silhouetted with her nose tipped up, looked much too frail to have managed so big a thing. . .Mark shouted 'Great!' and leaped over the shattered ridge, brandishing the shovel. . .He walked to his car and opened the door and got in beside his wife. The heater had come on; the interior was warm. He repeated, 'You were great.' He was still panting. She rosily smiled and said, 'So were you.'" The not-so-subtle humor of the sexual suggestions here are nicely balanced, at least in my reading of the story, by the authentic generosity of the wife's words, making the story itself the most generous vision of the rewards of marriage in this section of the book.

This generosity toward her husband is shared by Joan Maple, wife of Richard, the two of whom are featured in a series of stories from the 1960s and 1970s chronicling the break-up of their marriage. Five of these stories are featured in "Married Life": "Snowing in Greenwich Village," which introduces the couple, and the four concluding stories in this section, "Giving Blood," "Twin Beds in Rome," "Marching Through Boston," and "Nakedness." Taken individually, these are not necessarily the best stories in part III of The Early Stories, but collectively they are probably the most significant of these fictions when considering the development of Updike's career as a whole. They clearly serve a dual purpose: to give an account of the difficulties of marriage in America, but also to register the social cultural changes in postwar life that contributed to these difficulties.

It is a good thing for Richard and Joan Maple's marriage that Joan exhibits some generosity of spirit, some forebearance and acceptance, since Richard Maple doesn't himself possess many such characteristics. The stories, although told in the third-person, are deflected through Richard's central consciousness, and while this technique almost always creates some initial bond between character and reader, it isn't long before this bond is frayed and Richard comes to seem a frightened and insecure man with some very unpleasant habits and assumptions. He's inclined to be patronizing toward his wife, mostly because he's the man and she's the woman, but he also comes to be envious of her, almost afraid. Joan takes the social changes of the 1960s in stride, attempting to accommodate herself to them, but Richard does so with great reluctance, sometimes out of jealousy that Joan's increased activism is taking her away from him, and frequently lashing out because of it. His racial attitudes and his contempt for "liberals" like his wife come to seem unsavory indeed. Some readers might be inclined to think that Richard's attitudes are given too much prominence, suggesting they might be shared by the author himself,
but Updike elsewhere, particularly in the Rabbit books, has demonstrated his ability to explore the mindset of characters whose views he himself does not share, and the portrait of Richard Maples that emerges from these stories finally comes off, to this reader, at least, as an honest attempt to present such a character from the inside, so to speak, to depict Richard Maples the middle-class American male of this period as authentically as possible.

"Snowing in Greenwich Village" shows Richard already, early in the marriage, not entirely comfortable in the role of young husband, as in this story he escorts a dinner guest back home, going up to her apartment and at story's end obviously tempted to take things further. "Giving Blood" begins "The Maples had been married nine years, which is almost too long," and shows the marriage to be indeed quite fragile. "Twin Beds in Rome" begins this way: "The Maples had talked and thought about separation so long it seemed it would never come. For their conversations, increasingly ambivalent and ruthless as accusation, retraction, blow, and caress alternated and canceled, had the final effect of knitting them together in a painful, helpless, degrading intimacy." The couple's vacation in Rome perhaps momentarily revives the marriage, but Richard's bad faith (in a noxious alliance with his genuine love for his wife) is sufficient to guarantee that this reprieve won't last long. "Marching Through Boston" and "Nakedness" most directly chronicle the Maple marriage in conflict with social change, in the former case the civil rights movement and in the latter the sexual revolution. "Marching Through Boston" casts Richard in an especially ugly light, as his latent bigotry is exposed quite explicitly, although some of his vilest words are clearly enough spoken in his own protest against the changes taking place in his relationship with his wife. (The story literally narrates Richard's participation with Joan in a civil rights march in Boston. It only drives them farther apart.)

What these Maple stories most memorably offer is a representation in fiction of the way in which the neuronal threads constituting the male psyche, perhaps reinforced by that patriarchal cultural climate of the 1950s, began to unravel during the 1960s and 1970s. This unsettling of gender roles and perspectives is further reflected in such stories as "Sunday Teasing" and "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" (A parallel kind of turmoil in racial perspectives can be seen in the story "A Gift from the City," perhaps the most direct confrontation with these kinds of changes.) The male characters in these stories are not completely aware of the way in which their assumptions are being overturned, and perhaps Updike himself could not have entirely recognized the long-term consequences of those social forces causing the marital tension he was attempting to depict in these stories. Perhaps all of this makes the fiction collected in "Married Life" at least as interesting for sociological as for aesthetic reasons. But in all of the ways I have indicated, most of the stories as well show Updike's talent for writing poetically insightful short fiction coming to be confirmed, the WASP-y, middle-class focus on marital matters notwithstanding.

IV

The two middle sections in John Updike's The Early Stories, "Family Life" and "The Two Isouls" offer a grab-bag assortment of stories united by the shared subjects of family and/or marriage, the latter increasingly portrayed as a locus of dissatisfaction and betrayal, of real but fleeting pleasures and of dashed hopes. There are two more Maple stories, "Eros Rampant" and "Sublimating," which cast these themes in the starkest relief, but most of the other stories as well
work, to the extent they do work, to sketch a collective image of midcentury family life in suburban America.

Perhaps the most representative stories in this middle part of the book are two that serve as bookends of a sort for the two sections, "The Day of the Dying Rabbit" and "I Will not let Thee Go, Except Thou Bless Me." The first simply depicts a family vacation in a "five-room shack" to which the family retreats every summer, this one ultimately memorable for the incident named in the title (the family cat brings in a baby rabbit that finally can't be saved), but it in turn only serves to fix in place this particular vacation as a kind of emblem of the quiet joys of family life. The father and narrator, a photographer, wonders aloud: "What was it in the next twenty-four hours that slowly flooded me, that makes me want to get the day on some kind of film?" He answers his own question at the end of the story, as the narrator and his son are paddling their way across a pond back to the shack, about to strike land: "The days since have been merely happy days. This day was singular in its, let's say tone, its silver-bromide clarity. Between the cat's generous intentions and my son's lovingly calm warning, the dying rabbit sank like film in the developing pan, and preserved us all." The story works because it is fully dramatized (unlike some other other stories in these sections) and because it works out its structural metaphor (story as photo) with a satisfying aesthetic logic, allowing the story to avoid sentimentality. The dying rabbit introduces an element of tragedy into the "happy days" of family life, but, like the day itself, the rabbit's very suffering gets preserved as a kind of testimonial to all of life's realities.

"I Will Not Let Thee Go, Except Thou Bless Me" is an equally simple but amply realized story that focuses on a farewell party being held for a couple about to move from their Connecticut suburb to Texas. In this awkward transition period, "The familiar lulling noises--car horn and dog bark, the late commuter train's slither and the main drag's murmur--had become irritants, the town had unravelled into tugging threads of love. Departure rehearses death." At the party, the husband dances with a woman the story clearly intimates is a former adulterous lover, her stony indifference to him now both a painful reminder of what they once meant to each other and a telling sign (to readers) of the malaise into which the husband and wife have fallen and from which they are fleeing. The story's closing dialogue captures this fatigue quite nicely:

Safely on the road, Lou asked, "Did Maggie kiss you goodbye?"
"No. She was quite unfriendly."
"Why shouldn't she be?"
"No reason. She should be. She should be awful and she was." He was going to agree, agree, all the way to Texas.
"She kissed me, Lou said.
"When?"
"When you were in the bathroom."
"Where did she kiss you?"
"I was standing in the foyer waiting for you to get done admiring yourself or whatever you were doing. She swooped out of the living room."
"I mean where on you?"
"On the mouth."
"Warmly?"
"Very. I didn't know how to respond. I'd never been kissed like that, by another woman."
"Did you respond?"
"Well, a little. It happened so quickly."
He must not appear too interested, or even to gloat. "Well," Tom said, "she may have been drunk."
"Or else very tired," said Lou, "like the rest of us."

Unfortunately, many of the other stories in these two sections are very slight and expose some of Updike's weaknesses as a writer. Too often he relies on lyricism to raise his subjects to a level of profundity they just can't reach on their own, as in "The Morning," literally a story about mornings: "At moments his dull attention caught, like a slack sail idly filling, a breath, from this multifaced horizon, of the hope that set in motion and sustained so many industrialized efforts, so much commercial traffic, such ingenious cross-fertilization of profit, such energetic devotion to the metamorphosis of minerals, the transport of goods. . . ." The same lyricism that breathes life into Updike's characters and their situations in his best stories here just goes blowing off into nowhere.

And too many of the stories are really just excuses for rather cloying reflections on the various aspects of family life. Among these would be "The Family Meadow" (you can guess its subject), "Plumbing," "The Orphaned Swimming Pool," "Son," "Daughter, Last Glimpses of," "Solitaire," and "Leaves." Other stories--"How to Love America and Leave It at the Same Time," The Music School," "Museums and Women," "Four Sides of One Story"--are "experiments" in chronology or perspective or presentation as alternatives to scenic or episodic realism, but in my view they only suggest that Updike is much more skilled at this kind of realism. One understands why a writer like Updike would attempt such experiments--for a little variety, if nothing else--but most of these stories seem to me, at least, more a consequence of the need to keep churning out short stories than a real interest in literary experimentation.

It must also be said that in some of Updike's fiction the overall characterization of women can be unpleasant, bordering on the misogynistic. In "The Stare," a woman initially defined by her "blunt and elusive" demeanor is further described in this way: "In the months that unfolded from this, it had been his pleasure to see her stare relax. Her body gathered softness under his; late one night, after yet another party, his wife, lying beside him in the pre-dawn darkness of her ignorance, had remarked with the cool, fair appraisal of a rival woman, how beautiful she--she, the other--had become, and he had felt, half dreaming in the warm bed he had betrayed, justified. Her laugh no longer flashed out so hungrily and her eyes, brimming with the secret he and she had made, deepened and seemed to rejoin the girlishness that had lingered in the other features of her face. Seeing her across a room standing swathed in the beauty he had given her, he felt a creator's, a father's pride." The masculine vainglory here is pretty unattractive, and although the exposure of such male conceit seems built into Updike's project as a writer, there are times when one wonders whether some authorial condescension isn't seeping through, nevertheless.

V

Section six of John Updike's *The Early Stories* gathers together fourteen stories set in the fictional town of Tarbox, Massachusetts (although in several of the stories the town's name is never mentioned.) Readers looking for a supplementary depiction of the suburban town that also
serves as the setting for Updike's novel *Couples* (1968) are likely to be disappointed with these stories.

The first four stories in this section--"The Indian," "The Hillies," "The Tarbox Police," "The Corner"--do provide some extra coloring beyond what one would find in *Couples*, but these "tales" are really sketches more than they are fully dramatized short stories, and as much as anything they seem to be the vehicles for Updike's musings on the changes being wrought on a town like Tarbox during the "turbulent" late 1960s and early 1970s. Several of the other stories--"Lifeguard," "The Deacon," "The Carol Sing," "Believers"--are better examples of Updike's treatment of religion and religious belief than they are of "Tarbox Tales," stories about middle-class suburban life. I am probably not the best judge of Updike's "religious" fiction, since in the main I find it obvious and heavy-handed right from the start, even though I know that scholarly articles and books have been written about the centrality to his work of Updike's own Karl Barth-derived religious beliefs. I actually much prefer the stories about suburban malaise and serial adulteries. "Lifeguard" is probably the best of this group, as it also introduces the preoccupation with sins of the flesh to be found in many of Updike's novels.

There are two Maple stories in this section, "The Taste of Metal" and "Your Lover Just Called," although it isn't clear to me why these are included as Tarbox Tales while the others are not. They are in fact two of the better stories about this ultimately doomed marriage, as they focus on the relational dynamics and sexual restlessness of the Maple marriage rather than linking the couple's problems in a too facile way to the social transformations going on around them as perhaps some of the other Maple stories do.

For most readers, then--and for me--the most significant story in "Tarbox Tales" is probably "A & P." Easily Updike's most anthologized story, its first-person narrative tells the deceptively simple story of the protagonist's coming of age as he, a checkout boy in the grocery store named in the title, watches the reaction of the Tarbox residents ("the sheep") to the appearance of a sexually uninhibited, scantily clad young lady in the store one day. The story's conclusion, relating the immediate aftermath of the narrator's resignation after he has taken the girl's side (for reasons beyond the obvious one) against his employer, is justly famous: "I look around for my girls, but they're gone, of course. There wasn't anybody but some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon. Looking back in the big windows, over the bags of peat moss and aluminum lawn furniture stacked on the pavement, I could see Lengel in my place in the second slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me from here on in." And we understand that the narrator, Sammy, is correct: the world will be hard on him. The story is not just an account of adolescent rebellion but indeed a meditation on the unavoidable turning-points in life. The present-tense narration still seems powerful in its immediacy, even though the use of the present tense among current neorealist writers has become something of a commonplace. (Updike should probably be held accountable for this phenomenon only to the extent that he really was a pioneer of the technique, here and in *Rabbit, Run.*)
(The last selection in "Tarbox Tales," the brief poem-story "Eclipse," although it is not narrated in the present tense, also dramatizes a turning-point in its protagonist's life. The narrator comes to his own kind of realization during an eclipse, which Updike handles in a subtle and satisfying way. I would identify this story, along with "A &P," as the two really indispensable stories in this section of the book.)

Those wishing to experience Updike's portrayal of Tarbox, the otherwise rather nondescript New England town going through its own kind of turmoil during the 1960s, will thus probably have to turn to Couples. Although I wouldn't necessarily rank it at the very top among Updike's novels, I have now read this novel twice, and each time I thought it provocative and convincing, despite the critics who scorned it at the time of its publication. It's interesting partly as a period piece, but it also shows (along with a few of the stories in "Tarbox Tales") John Updike discovering what, in my opinion, is still his most interesting and most enduring subject.

VI

In contrast to the two previous sections of the book, there are in the final two sections of John Updike's The Early Stories, "Far Out" and "The Single Life," many very good short stories, perhaps a couple of great ones. It is a pity, however, that these stories are reserved for the concluding pages, as some readers may have already given up on reading the whole book because of the lesser work to be found in its middle sections and will miss out on some of Updike's more satisfying work in the short story form.

"The Astronomer" is one of Updike's better explicitly "religious" stories, relating, in an efficiently compressed way, a brief episode dramatizing the not-so-disparate-after-all views of the scientist and the theologian. "The Witnesses" and "A Constellation of Events" present the adultery story in which Updike so frequently specializes from perspectives different than the usual, the latter focusing on the woman's point of view for a change. "Ethiopia" and "I am Dying, Egypt, Dying" are stories of Americans visiting Africa, and are worth reading for the insight they provide into the American response to its "natives." "The Bulgarian Poetess" is the first of the Henry Bech stories, but, although a perfectly good story, it probably doesn't really belong in this collection. "Separating" and "Gesturing" more or less bring the saga of the unsuccessful Maple marriage to its conclusion.

"Transaction" is the longish but suprisingly compelling story of an evening’s encounter between a "man of forty" and a prostitute. It proves to be an unexpectedly profound experience for the man of forty, as "Always, until now, [sex] had been too much, bigger than all systems, an empyrean as absolute as those first boyish orgasms, when his hand would make his soul pass through a bliss as dense as an ingot of gold. Now, at last, in the prime of life, he saw through it, into the spaces between the stars." "Problems" is one of Updike's most successful formal experiments, a brief story of, again, adultery, told entirely in the form of a mathematics test.

In my view, the two best stories in the final sections, both perhaps among Updike's very best, are "The Hermit" and "Killing." The first very quietly tells the story of a man who, in the gradual dissatisfaction he has come to feel for his life, finds an old shack in a deserted track of woods and withdraws into solitude. As much as he wants to escape from the troubles and frustrations of
the world he's left behind, however, the story depicts the ultimate impossibility of doing so. Updike establishes a kind of empathy with this character (authorial empathy) that I, at least, found rather surprising. "Killing" relates the story of a daughter coming to terms with the death of her invalid father, which she herself has had to oversee, and it does so very effectively indeed.

My final judgment of this book is that, although it contains numerous very good stories, stories on which Updike's ultimate reputation will certainly in part be assessed, as a book it is not a very satisfactory presentation of Updike's skills. Far too many of the stories are throw-aways (the second half of "Far Out," for example, consists of a series of overly cute exercises in whimsy that are, frankly, not worth the bother), and the order Updike has given them doesn't particularly do them credit or force us to consider him as a writer of short fiction in any new and more illuminating light. It is a book that probably ought to exist (as a convenience for scholars and critics, perhaps), but is not something that even Updike's fans need to read with any great urgency. Updike's talents as a writer of stories will be much better served when a "Selected Stories" ultimately appears, one that would include probably only a third to a half of the stories to be found in The Early Stories, 1953-1975.

If anything, the casual reader is likely to find the book frustrating if not counterproductive as a way of sampling Updike's shorter fiction. I myself still think that Updike has a lot to offer as a stylist, and even occasionally as a writer willing to stretch the limits of form in fiction (although this he does more satisfactorily in the novels, novels such as The Centaur or The Coup, Roger's Version or Brazil). There's no doubt, however, that he can also belabor certain subjects beyond their aesthetic usefulness, and that a long career spent actually earning a living as a writer of fiction has resulted in a fair number of short stories that seem motivated primarily by the need to keep churning them out. This latter problem, on the other hand, is one most writers would gladly welcome if it meant being able to also produce fiction of higher quality and care through the literary livelihood thus provided. John Updike is certainly in the final analysis a writer who has produced such fiction, even if one does have to pick and choose when surveying his very large body of work.