

98 QUOTATIONS



John Updike

(1932-2009)

John Updike the prolific novelist, story writer and poet began in fiction as a Realist of manners, got inspired by the 1960s sexual revolution and became increasingly inclined to fantasies of adultery, starting with his sensational *Couples* (1968), which made him rich. He had easy success and many rewards. His best novel is his satire of Feminism, *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984). Updike has a provincial East Coast suburban vision--mostly liberal with exceptions--most significantly his religious faith. But unlike Hawthorne or Flannery O'Connor he is unsuccessful at integrating religion in his fiction, due in particular to his rebellion against the Puritanism of his New England heritage. He has a moral dimension that the secular novelists lack, but it is weak, ambiguous and vague except overall in *The Witches*. Updike seems to enjoy the faithless self-indulgence of his characters, as when rendering illicit sex acts in lush metaphorical prose. He is Postmodern in his (1) adolescent obsession with sex; (2) alienation by Feminism; and (3) emphasis on poetic style over substance. Other writers are impressed primarily by his figurative language, though it is sometimes excessive, distracting and forced.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, religion, God, existence, nature, love, women, marriage, sex, adultery, society, children, Feminism, Postmodernism, pacifists as stateless eunuchs, Political Correctness, government, free speech, leadership, America, writing, Realism, Expressionism, criticism, old age, death:

YOUTH

Four years was enough of Harvard.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Dreams come true; without that possibility, nature would not incite us to have them.

Being able to write becomes a kind of shield, a way of hiding, a way of too instantly transforming pain into honey.

To distribute oneself thus, as a kind of confetti shower falling upon the heads and shoulders of mankind out of bookstores and the pages of magazines is surely a great privilege and a defiance of the usual earthbound laws whereby human beings make themselves known to one another.

Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face.

RELIGION

Chaos is God's body. Order is the Devil's chains.

Man is a means for turning things into spirit and turning spirit into things.

Religion enables us to ignore nothingness and get on with the jobs of life.

The inner spaces that a good story lets us enter are the old apartments of religion.

As souls must cry when they awaken in tiny babies and find themselves far from heaven.

The essential self is innocent; and when it tastes its own innocence knows that it lives forever.

Christianity isn't looking for a rainbow. If it were...we'd pass out opium at services. We're trying to *serve* God, not *be* God.

I don't think even the blackest atheist has an idea of what real separation [from God] will be. Outer darkness. What we live in you might call...“inner darkness.”

GOD

God is in the tiger as well as in the lamb.

Ours is no aloof Lord—no Buddha beyond it all or Zeus making light of mortal travail. Among the world religions Christianity is unique in presenting a suffering God, a God who took human suffering upon Himself and in His agony gave birth to mankind's salvation.

EXISTENCE

Existence itself does not feel horrible; it feels like an ecstasy, rather, which we have only to be still to experience.

NATURE

Rain is grace; rain is the sky descending to the earth.

Natural beauty is essentially temporary and sad, hence the impression of obscene mockery which artificial flowers give us. [echo of Wallace Stevens]

I must go to Nature disarmed of perspective and stretch myself like a large transparent canvas upon her in the hope that, my submission being perfect, the imprint of a beautiful and useful truth would be taken. [Compare the “transparent eyeball” metaphor in Emerson's *Nature*.]

Of plants, tomatoes seemed the most human, eager and fragile and prone to rot. Picking the watery orange-red orbs, Alexandra felt she was cupping a giant lover's testicles in her hand.

LOVE

We are most alive when we're in love.

It frightens him to think of her in this way.

That's the trouble with caring about anybody, you begin to feel overprotective. Then you begin to feel crowded.

WOMEN

How do you write women so well? I think of a man and I take away reason and accountability.

In asking forgiveness of women for our mythologizing of their bodies, for being unreal about them, we can only appeal to their own sexuality, which is different but not basically different, perhaps, from our own.

With women, you keep bumping against them, because they want different things, they're a different race. Either they give, like a plant, or scrape, like a stone.

A woman's beauty lies...in the arabesque of the spine. The curve by which the back modulates into the buttocks. It is here that grace sits and rides a woman's body.

MARRIAGE

Every marriage tends to consist of an aristocrat and a peasant. Of a teacher and a learner.

Women, fire in their crotch, won't burn out, begin by fighting off pricks, end by going wild hunting for one that still works.

SEX

Sex is like money; only too much is enough.

Being naked approaches being revolutionary; going barefoot is mere populism.

For male and female alike, the bodies of the other sex are messages signaling what we must do; they are glowing signifiers of our own necessities.

What more fiendish proof of cosmic irresponsibility than a Nature which, having invented sex as a way to mix genes, then permits to arise, amid all its perfumed and hypnotic inducements to mate, a tireless tribe of spirochetes and viruses that torture and kill us for following orders?

Sex ages us...the demon rots us out.

ADULTERY

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

But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it.

The first breath of adultery is the freest; after it, constraints aping marriage develop.

An affair wants to spill, to share its glory with the world. No act is so private it does not seek applause.

It was not difficult to deceive the first time, for the deceived possesses no antibodies; unvaccinated by suspicion, she overlooks lateness, accepts absurd excuses, permits the flimsiest patching to repair great rents in the quotidian.

One of the nice things about having a lover, it makes you think about everything anew. The rest of your life becomes a kind of movie, flat and even rather funny.

Wickedness was like food: once you got started it was hard to stop.

SOCIETY

We take our bearings, daily, from others. To be sane is, to a great extent, to be sociable.

Just how childlike golf players become is proven by their frequent inability to count past five.

We are each of us like our little blue planet, hung in black space, unheld by nothing but our mutual reassurances, our loving lies.

CHILDREN

Having children is something we think we ought to do because our parents did it, but when it is over the children are just other members of the human race, rather disappointingly.

If men do not keep on speaking terms with children, they cease to be men, and become merely machines for eating and for earning money.

FEMINISM

All men are boys.

We are cruel enough, without meaning to be.

Revolution is just one crowd taking power from another.

If she'd been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem.

You know how it is with fathers, you never escape the idea that maybe after all they're *right*.

One advantage of the collapse of civilization is that the quality of the young women who are becoming whores has gone way up.

POSTMODERNISM

The great thing about the dead, they make space.

The true New Yorker secretly believes that people living anywhere else have to be, in some sense, kidding.

The world keeps ending but new people too dumb to know it keep showing up as if the fun's just started.

People go around mourning the death of God; it's the death of sssin that bothers me. Without sssin, people aren't people any more, they're just sssoul-less sheep.

Our brains are no longer conditioned to reverence and awe. We cannot imagine a Second Coming that would not be cut down to size by the televised evening news, or a Last Judgment not subject to pages of holier-than-thou second-guessing in *The New York Review of Books*.

The fucking world is running out of gas.

PACIFISTS AS STATELESS EUNUCHS

To say that war is madness is like saying that sex is madness: true enough, from the standpoint of a stateless eunuch, but merely a provocative epigram for those who must make their arrangements in the world as given.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

I'm willing to show good taste, if I can, in somebody else's living room, but our reading life is too short for a writer to be in any way polite. Since his words enter into another's brain in silence and intimacy, he should be as honest and explicit as we are with ourselves. [Realism]

I would rather chance my personal vision of truth striking home here and there in the chaos of publication that exists than attempt to filter it through a few sets of official, honorably public-spirited scruples.

GOVERNMENT

I love my government not least for the extent to which it leaves me alone.

Government is either organized benevolence or organized madness; its peculiar magnitude permits no shading.

FREE SPEECH

I feel my professional need for freedom of speech and expression prejudices me toward a government whose constitution guarantees it.

LEADERSHIP

A leader is one who, out of madness or goodness, volunteers to take upon himself the woe of the people. There are few men so foolish, hence the erratic quality of leadership in the world.

AMERICA

America is a vast conspiracy to make you happy.

The U.S. is till the U.S., held together by credit cards and Indian names.

Americans have been conditioned to respect newness, whatever it costs them.

To be President of the United States, sir, is to act as advocate for a blind, venomous, and ungrateful client.

There was a beauty here bigger than the hurtling beauty of basketball, a beauty refined from country pastures, a game of solitariness, of waiting, waiting for the pitcher to complete his gaze toward first base and throw his lightning, a game whose very taste of spit and dust and grass and sweat and leather and sun, was America.

Most of American life consists of driving somewhere and then returning home, wondering why the hell you went.

WRITING

Inspiration arrives as a packet of material to be delivered.

What art offers is space—a certain breathing room for the spirit.

I want to write books that unlock the traffic jam in everybody's head.

When I write, I aim in my mind not toward New York but toward a vague spot a little to the east of Kansas.

He had returned to the archetypal sense of what a book was: it was an elemental sheaf, bound together by love and daring, to be passed with excitement from hand to hand.

The essential support and encouragement comes from within, arising out of the mad notion that your society needs to know what only you can tell it.

The refusal to rest content, the willingness to risk excess on behalf of one's obsessions, is what distinguishes artists from entertainers, and what makes some artists adventurers on behalf of us all.

Truth should not be forced; it should simply manifest itself, like a woman who has in her privacy reflected and coolly decided to bestow herself upon a certain man.

A narrative is like a room on whose walls a number of false doors have been painted; while within the narrative, we have many apparent choices of exit, but when the author leads us to one particular door, we know it is the right one because it opens.

Perfectionism is the enemy of creation.

REALISM

The mirror of art.

Life, just as we first thought, is playing grownup.

All vagrants think they're on a quest. At least at first.

Inch by inch, Life is a cinch. Yard by yard, Life is hard.

Suspect each moment, for it is a thief, tiptoeing away with more than it brings.

Hope bases vast premises upon foolish accidents and reads a word where, in fact, only a scribble exists.

Customs and convictions change; respectable people are the last to know, or to admit, the change, and the ones most offended by fresh reflections of the facts in the mirror of art.

EXPRESSIONISM

Days, pale slices between nights, they blend, not exactly alike, transparencies so lightly tinted that only stacked all together do they darken to a fatal shade.

He rolls on his stomach and spins in the grass revolved by his own incoherent kicking. Eccles' heart seems to twist with the child's body; he knows so well the propulsive power of a wrong, the way the mind batters against it and each futile blow sucks the air emptier until it seems the whole frame of blood and bone must burst in a universe that can be such a vacuum.

CRITICISM

Writing criticism is to writing fiction and poetry as hugging the shore is to sailing in the open sea.

Hemingway described literary New York as a bottle full of tapeworms trying to feed on each other.

There is no pleasing New Englanders, my dear, their soil is all rocks and their hearts are bloodless absolutes.

OLD AGE

Now that I am sixty, I see why the idea of elder wisdom has passed from currency.

How can you respect the world when you see it's being run by a bunch of kids turned old?

Life is like an overlong drama through which we sit being nagged by the vague memories of having read the reviews.

DEATH

We do survive every moment, after all, except the last one.

Our lives fade behind us before we die.

