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# Updike Interviews Collected in New Plath Book

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Pulitzer Prize-winning author and literary critic John Updike once called interviews “a half form, like maggots, and a form to be loathed,” yet he gave more of them than any other American writer, according to Illinois Wesleyan University’s James Plath.

Plath, a renowned Updike scholar, has compiled a collection of Updike interviews into a new book, *John Updike’s Pennsylvania Interviews* (Lehigh University Press, 2016), that illustrates and helps to explain the bond between one of America’s greatest literary talents and the setting of much of his early fiction. Updike’s most famous work is the series chronicling the life of Harry “Rabbitt” Angstrom. *Rabbit is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest* were both awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and along with two other “Rabbitt” novels, are set in Pennsylvania, where Updike was born and raised in Berks County.

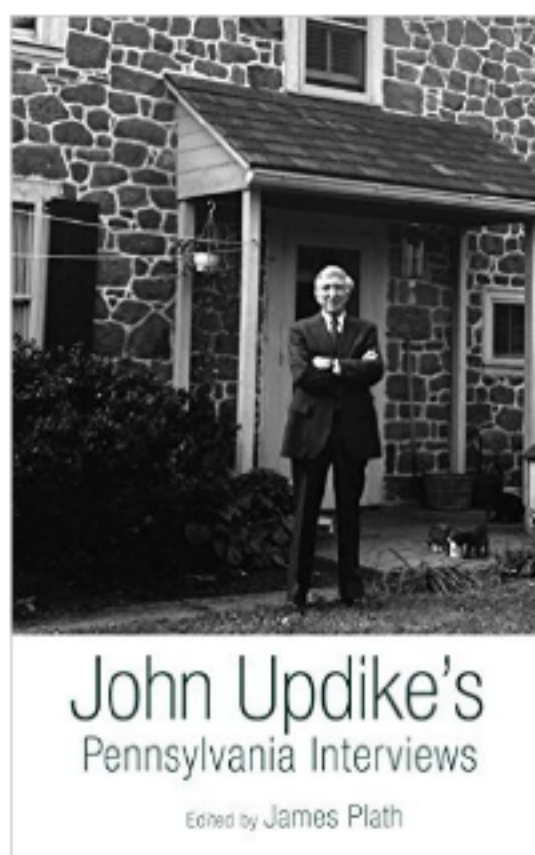
Updike was also a productive and important art and literary critic whose essays and reviews earned him the unofficial title of “America’s man of letters,” according to Plath, who noted Updike took that responsibility quite seriously.

“The press sought his opinions about the state of literature and the arts in America, and he obliged, without fail,” said Plath, the R. Forrest Colwell Chair and professor of [English](#). “Updike saw the writer as someone who could be counted on to tell the truth about America and American culture, and felt it his duty to comment, not only in his creative works, but in the media as well.”

So even though he “loathed” interviews in one sense, Updike knew a writer’s legacy depended, in some measure, upon continued critical attention from university scholars. Plath noted Updike asked that his personal letters not be published, so the only way Updike scholars and fans can read more of the author’s candid and insightful remarks is to revisit some of the interviews he granted.



James Plath



The new book includes a number of interviews with Terry Gross, host of the radio show *Fresh Air* distributed throughout the country by NPR, and articles published in the *Sunday Bulletin*, the *Reading (Pa.) Eagle* and *Reading Times*, *Pittsburgh Press*, Lancaster’s *Intelligencer Journal*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Berks County Living*. “Updike seemed more playful with Pennsylvania interviewers, and it’s clear he also gave them more information,” said Plath. “He was, for example, notoriously cagey when asked to pick his own favorites, but he’s very forthcoming in the interviews contained in this book.

“I also think this collection illuminates the sometimes uneasy relationship Updike had with Berks County,” Plath added. “Locals wanted him to keep writing about Pennsylvania Dutch life, but Updike kept shocking them with novels like *Couples*.” The 1968 novel about a circle of promiscuous couples in small-town Massachusetts, with its unusual-for-the-time explicit descriptions of sex, landed Updike on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Plath is also the editor of *Conversations with John Updike*, a 1994 collection of Updike short interviews, magazine and newspaper profiles. Plath said work on the new book of interviews proved more daunting than he expected. Because of budget cuts, damage, or equipment obsolescence, small public libraries no longer offer access to newspaper archives, and many small newspapers have eliminated their newspaper morgues.

“My biggest challenge was to find materials that weren’t on anyone’s radar,” he said, offering as examples two public question-and-answer sessions from Updike’s appearances at colleges. “Both of them came as a result of my poking around libraries and asking questions—and of course, because of the generosity of librarians. This type of research is a little like panning for gold...you keep at it, persistent, never knowing if there will be a pay-off.”

Plath said the project began more than five years ago when he realized the John Updike Literary Trust had no plans to publish Updike’s letters, making access to interviews more important than ever. “Interviews provide fertile ground for scholars,” Plath said. “They can corroborate a critical theory or spark new ideas for essays and books.” As president of [The John Updike Society](#), Plath said he felt an obligation to compile the book to provide more raw materials for scholars to use and, for readers, providing the equivalent of “bonus” features on a film’s DVD.

“Years into the project, though, after I began absorbing the interviews and felt their cumulative weight, it became clearer to me that Berks County may have had an even greater influence on Updike than anyone had previously thought,” Plath said. “Berks County really was his Yoknapatawpha, and I hope that these Pennsylvania interviews and articles, grouped into one volume, will help to illustrate and explain just how strong of a connection Updike felt with his little corner of southeastern Pennsylvania. And, of course, I hope that the book inspires people to read beyond the well-known Rabbit novels and experience the rest of Updike’s impressive oeuvre.”

In addition to his scholarship on Updike, Plath is a recognized Ernest Hemingway scholar and the editor of books of criticism on topics ranging from Raymond Carver to the film *Casablanca*. His short stories and poems have been published in *ACM* (*Another Chicago Magazine*), *The North American Review* and many other literary magazines. He is also a film critic and Approved Tomatometer Critic at Rotten Tomatoes. He earned a doctoral degree in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

