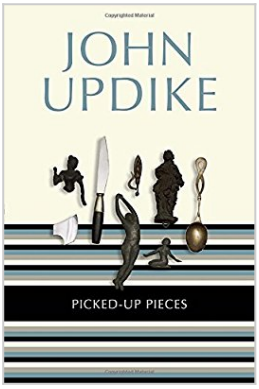

Picked-Up Pieces: Essays

By John Updike

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In John Updike's second collection of assorted prose he comes into his own as a book reviewer; most of the pieces picked up here were first published in *The New Yorker* in the 1960s and early '70s. If one word could sum up the young critic's approach to books and their authors it would be "generosity": "Better to praise and share," he says in his Foreword, "than to blame and ban." And so he follows his enthusiasms, which prove both deserving and infectious: Kierkegaard, Proust, Joyce, Dostoevsky, and Hamsun among the classics; Borges, Nabokov, Grass, Bellow, Cheever, and Jong among the contemporaries. Here too are meditations on Satan and cemeteries, travel essays on London and Anguilla, three very early "golf dreams," and one big interview. *Picked-Up Pieces* is a glittering treasury for every reader who likes life, books, wit—and John Updike.

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Editorial Review

Review
“[Updike’s] interests are wide . . . his prose is clear and straight, and his powers of organization and explication are formidable. . . . There is an immensely attractive, nonacademic attentiveness to his reviews. At his best he goes right to the human center, the heart of a writer expressed in his art.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Updike is a strong reviewer. . . . He describes precisely, praises judiciously, criticizes fearlessly, and ponders seriously.”—*The New Republic*

“Updike possesses that intuitive sense of other writers’ temperaments that raises literary criticism to the level of art. . . . If he wished, Updike could become one of our finest literary critics as well as novelists, an heir to that imposing predecessor in the pages of *The New Yorker*, Edmund Wilson.”—James Atlas, *The New York Times Magazine*

About the Author
John Updike was born in Shillington, Pennsylvania, in 1932. He graduated from Harvard College in 1954 and spent a year in Oxford, England, at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. From 1955 to 1957 he was a member of the staff of *The New Yorker*. His novels have won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Rosenthal Foundation Award, and the William Dean Howells Medal. In 2007 he received the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. John Updike died in January 2009.

the literary life

On Meeting Writers

The lust to meet authors ranks low, I think, on the roll of holy appetites; but it is an authentic pang. The county where I and my literary ambitions were conceived held only one writer, whose pen name, Mildred Jordan, masked her true identity as an unmeetably rich industrialist’s wife. At Harvard I stood with crowds of other students to hear, and to glimpse in the mysterious flesh, anthology presences like Eliot, Sandburg, Frost, and Wilder. After his lecture in Sanders Theater, Eliot, a gem of composure within a crater of applause, inserted his feet into his rubbers, first the right, then the left, as we poured down upon him a grateful tumult that had less to do with his rather sleepy-making discourse on poetic drama than with the fabulous descent of his vast name into an actual, visible, and mortal body. Whereas Sandburg, playing ballads in New Lecture Hall, rambled on into our dinner hour; as the audience noisily diminished he told us, his white bangs glowing in the gloom, that it was all right, that often in his life he had sat in hotel rooms with only his guitar for company.

The first author I met socially was Joyce Cary. It was in England’s Oxford. Someone kindly had us to tea, and into the stiff little party bounced a well-knit sandy man with light quick eyes and an intensely handsome chin; unhesitatingly he assumed his right to dominate the conversation. He was full of a tender excitement, the excitement of those certain they are loved, and anxious to share, before it spills over and is wasted, the bubbling treasure of themselves. He described to us his sitting in Paris writing at an outdoor table while around him in the Tuileries little boys were going pee-pee; he read us, with an excessive Irish accent, the

opening and then the closing words of Finnegans Wake, to show that they interlocked.

Now I had never read Cary, but had myself recently tasted the emboldening black blood of print. When he stated that Joyce's influence was enormous, I churlishly grunted disagreement; he cited e. e. cummings, and I absurdly shook my head No. His eyebrows lifted, and for a second I lived within the curiosity of those very quick eyes. They flicked away, and somewhat later I began to read him, and found him to be—above all in his two African novels—a splendid writer, peculiarly alive to nuances of power and competition such as my jealous rudeness that afternoon. For years the incident embarrassed me in memory, and in 1957 Cary heroically suffered his prolonged death, and I lost forever my chance to apologize.

Quite different was my preparation for meeting James Thurber, in London later that year. As a boy I had hoarded pennies to buy Thurber's books, and owned them all; he was for me the brightest star in that galaxy of New York wits I yearned to emulate, however dimly. A college acquaintance who knew of my adoration arranged the meeting: into her flat Thurber was led by his wife Helen. He was taller than I had expected, not Walter Mitty but a big-boned blind giant, and his upstanding hair was snowier than photographs had led me to expect, and there could have been no anticipating the alarming way his eyes caromed around under the refracting magnification of his glasses.

He sat, talking and drinking tea until I wondered why his bladder didn't burst. We listened, I raptly at first and finally becoming, to my own amazement, bored. Though Thurber cocked his head alertly at my poor fawning attempts to make conversation, these attempts did not appreciably distract him from the anecdotes of Columbus, Ohio, he had told a thousand times before, and that I had read ten years before, in their definitive, printed versions. Pages of The Thurber Album and My Life and Hard Times issued from his lips virtually intact.

His performance, though remarkable, was, alas, a performance; I had been privileged to join an auditory audience slightly less anonymous than readership, and there was no question of living for even a second in his curiosity. Fifteen years later, with another adored writer, Jorge Luis Borges, I was to reëxperience the disappointing revelation that blindness and fame and years do island a man, do isolate him within a monologue that, if he is a literary man, he had delivered to you already, in finer and grander form—"grander" because literary obsessions appear to have been selected from an infinite field, whereas personal obsessions seem to betray a mere narrowness. Sad to say, my love of Thurber's works was slightly stunted ever after his generous teatime monologue.

All the writers I have met—and they have not been many; I must be one of the few Americans with a bachelor-of-arts degree who has never met either Robert Lowell or Norman Mailer—carry around with them a field force that compels objects in the vicinity to conform to their literary style. Standing next to E. B. White, one is imbued with something of the man's fierce modesty, and one's sentences haltingly seek to approximate the wonderful way his own never say more than he means. Whereas Thurber's humor bore a trace of the tyrannical, a wish to impose confusion from above, White's seems to stem from an extreme of attentiveness that would grant to things the graceful completion they lack in reality. Once I barged through a door in The New Yorker offices, and powerfully struck an obstacle on the other side; White had been hurrying down the hall, and stood there dazed. Reading in my face my horror, my fear that I had injured this sacred and fragile person, this living embodiment of the magazine's legend, he obligingly fell down as if dead.

A room containing Philip Roth, I have noticed, begins hilariously to whirl and pulse with a mix of rebelliousness and constriction that I take to be Oedipal. And I have seen John Cheever, for ten days we shared in Russia, turn the dour world of Soviet literary officials into a bright scuttle of somehow suburban

characters, invented with marvellous speed and arranged in sudden tableaux expressive, amid wistful neo-Czarist trappings, of the lyric desperation associated with affluence. As if transported to the moon, people in Cheever's neighborhood lose half their bodily weight. My most traumatic experience of gravitational attraction came with John O'Hara. I had consented to read at a White House entertainment for the National Honor Students; crossing the lobby of the Hay-Adams, I spied brooding on a chair a broad-shouldered presence strongly reminiscent of the back of a book jacket. Deferentially I moved closer. "Mr. O'Hara?" said I.

O'Hara held out his hand. "Pull," he said. I hesitated. "My back," O'Hara explained. I pulled. He grunted in pain and did not budge. "Again," said O'Hara.

This time he made it, wincing, to his feet. Our laconic but characteristic dialogue continued. He, too, was attending the White House function. I offered him a ride in the limousine that had been sent for me, since I was one of the entertainers. I explained to the suspicious driver that this gentleman was John O'Hara, a very great writer and a guest of the President. The driver with maximum grudgingness made space for him in the front seat, while my wife and I settled regally in the back.

Within the few seconds of this encounter I had been plunged into a cruel complex of stoic pain and social irony—a Negro chauffeur and a stammering light-verse writer had transformed a millionaire author into a front-seat hitchhiker. Mortified by the situation, feeling all its edges grating on O'Hara's acute nerves, I fled conversationally to the state of Pennsylvania, which we had in common. O'Hara moved us to a plane both higher and more concrete—the number of Updikes in Princeton, New Jersey. At the White House he showed a distinct preference for the company of Marianne Moore, bending his big ear to her tiny precise voice like a schoolboy listening to a transistor radio he has smuggled into class.

These not entirely fanciful reminiscences (which have omitted how I met Bernard Malamud in a museum lavatory, or how James Dickey entertained me one hungover 6 a.m. with a concert of country guitar music that fetched tears to my hillbilly eyes) mean to suggest that writers, like everyone else, see a world their personalities to some extent create. Denis de Rougemont claims that Chateaubriand could never have written Stendhal's essays on seduction because seduction was simply no problem for Chateaubriand. The cosmos of delay and obfuscation rendered in The Castle surely in part reflects the special environment Kafka's neurotic mannerisms spun around him. And we all recall how Hemingway scouted the world for those marginal places where violence might feed his style.

Also, as one who in a small way is himself now and then "met," I suggest that forces within the writer-reader personal encounter foment unreality. The reader comes equipped with a vivid, fresh, outside impression of works the writer remembers wearily from the inside, as a blur of intention, a stretch of doubting drudgery, a tangle of memories and fabrications, a batch of nonsensical reviews, and a disappointed sigh from the publisher. The reader knows the writer better than he knows himself; but the writer's physical presence is light from a star that has moved on.

Evasive temperaments are drawn to the practice of fiction. Their work is done far behind the heat-shield of face and voice that advances against a room of strangers. The performance can be a shambling and ingratiating one as much as a cocksure and intimidating one, but performance it is: a pity, for these anonymous devoted readers who press affectionately toward a blind man are his lovers, who have accepted into themselves his most intimate and earnest thrusts. I would like to meet, I suppose, Vladimir Nabokov and Henry Green, but recognize the urge as superstitious, a seeking of a physical ritual to formalize the fact that we already are (I write as a reader) so well met.

Voznesensky Met

(A New Yorker Notes and Comment: August 1967)

Several times, a few years ago, we dined with Andrei Voznesensky in the dining hall of the Writers' Union in Moscow. The Union's building, on Vorovsky Street, was Tolstoy's Moscow mansion, and the model for the home of the Rostovs in War and Peace. One drives in through the gates through which the Rostovs and a wagonload of possessions fled Napoleon's approaching armies; straight ahead, past a bust of Tolstoy, are the yellow doors to the long, parqueted ballroom. The dining hall—to the right, in a wing of the building—is still pleasantly redolent of Czarist days. Walnut panelling reaches to the ceiling; a carved staircase leads up to a balcony. Here, in the same smoky atmosphere of clashing silver and prolonged table talk that one finds in any New York club for the privileged, come and go the local members of the immense Soviet literary Establishment. We met a few of them: the perky young Yunost editor, full of chaffing and "routines"; the cheerful translatoress, spouting the latest names in beatnik poetry; the tough yet comradely gray-haired lady who sat on the editorial board that had declined to publish Doctor Zhivago; the war novelist who after three vodkas began to look through us toward something desolating he had once seen; the round-faced art critic whose subtlest thoughts had to be couched, protectively, in French; the Union official, all a-twinkle—gold teeth, gold spectacles—a volley in his laugh and an executioner's chop in his hands. In this company, Voznesensky was a pet, a shy, shrugging pet, with a cold sore on his lower lip, politely sipping water at each toast offered in vodka, but nevertheless, amid so many literary foremen and mechanics, the real thing, a poet—a poet whose voice had already broken through to Russian youth and was on the verge of being heard in the West. Now his breakthrough has been made, and has led him to a perhaps disastrous defiance of the Writers' Union, which tried, as far as its fundamentally anti-artistic function permitted, to cherish him.

We worry that our side might do him in. Introducing him at a poetry reading in this country last May, Robert Lowell confided to the audience that he thought both he and Voznesensky had "really terrible governments." Such a remark could not hurt Lowell but would certainly arrest the attention of the Russian Embassy watchdog who invariably attends displays of Russo-American cultural exchange. Now the Times has zealously and, we suppose, rightly, published the outraged letter from Voznesensky denouncing the Writers' Union's clumsy and mendacious cancellation of his scheduled reading at Lincoln Center in June—a letter that Pravda declined to print. Perhaps the time is ripe for open opposition to the "atmosphere of blackmail, confusion, and provocation"—as Voznesensky put it—in which the heirs of Tolstoy and Chekhov and Pushkin do their work. The Writers' Union's control over publication is absolute. Yet a poet of Voznesensky's fame and genius is not defenseless; the Soviet system, unlike ours, admits that it needs artists, as blazoners of the ideals of the state. Hence, along with the censorship, there are the summer dachas and assured incomes and pleasant dining halls and erratic indulgences. Stalin sheltered the maverick Mayakovsky; Khrushchev let Yevtushenko keep writing. The Sinyavsky-Daniel trial was carried to its foregone conclusion, but a petition of dissent was signed by Russia's best writers. Thaw cannot be imported from the West. If Voznesensky carries his point, it will not be thanks to indignant editorials in this country or petitions signed by writers smug in their pre-bought freedom. If he cannot carry his point, let him at least survive. His mere survival, like Pasternak's, would be a victory.

Studying his photograph in the Times (our own delicate experts in propaganda have selected one that looks especially worried), we remember him across the table trying, in his then fragmentary English, to communicate. His pale face appeared faintly bloated, like a nun's squeezed in her wimple. His manner was both boyish and elderly, his thinning hair studiously licked down, his nose an innocent ski jump. Only a certain steadiness in his heavy blue eyes betrayed awareness that to be Pasternak's spiritual son, the hope of poetry in a nation hungry for poetry, was a mighty thing. One does not advance in post-Stalin Russia without some steel. Voznesensky, the gentlest of men until he stands to recite, becomes then a prophet, clangorous

and stern; the reunion of Russian and modern poetry demands an ambitious campaign. To speak and write honestly in the Soviet Union is still a more difficult enterprise than an American can imagine.

Bech Meets Me

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Donald Gullett:

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