

Updike Family Panel in Pennsylvania

JAMES PLATH

This panel discussion took place during the first conference of The John Updike Society, held at Alvernia University in Reading, Pennsylvania, on October 1–3, 2010. The panel featured John Updike’s first wife, Mary Weatherall, and three of their children: Elizabeth Cobblah, Miranda Updike, and Michael Updike (David Updike would speak at the same university a week later). James Plath, president of the Society, moderated the discussion, which convened at 10 a.m. on October 1 in the Bernardine Franciscan Conference Center.

PLATH: We’re especially delighted to have with us Mary Weatherall, who was John Updike’s first wife, and three of his four children: Elizabeth Cobblah, Michael Updike, and Miranda Updike. It doesn’t get any better . . . unless David were here.

MICHAEL: Well . . . maybe not.

PLATH: And the first revelation bubbles to the surface! Can each of you talk briefly about your earliest or most prominent memory of your father-slash-former husband, as a writer?

MICHAEL: I remember mostly the wizard stories he told us. They were formulaic, with some little animal having a problem and traveling through the woods, and then it would get participatory. If the animal was on a third day of travel, he’d knock three times and we’d rap on the bed louder each time. Then he would get out of bed and do this squeaky, annoying wizard voice, and always the refrain was, “I just got back from a vacation in Florida,” and “Why are you bothering me?”

Even as a child you could tell that sometimes he'd get the plot into a corner and not quite be able to get out of it. And the wizard's solution would be to turn the animal over and there was a switch, indicating skunk smell or porcupine quills, that was set the wrong way. And then he'd call it the end. That's my first memory.

MIRANDA: I'm thinking more about his writing process and where he was—how he had an office at our house and how relaxed he was when writing. There were always lots of us around—four kids, and at any given time there might have been a bunch of our friends there as well. As he was typing away he was very relaxed and didn't get annoyed if interrupted. He was very good at multitasking and was always happy to see us—our little heads poking into his office and stealing rubber bands or sharpening pencils. He was very open to that, incorporating his family life into his work life.

ELIZABETH: As the eldest, even I got wise old wizard stories and they were delightful. But I have a distinct memory—I don't know if it's my earliest—of the sound of his typewriter, lickety-split. He was a very rapid typist, and he had his little office upstairs. Another memory I have is sitting with him in church. He is responsible for my kind of faith, I guess. He got us to Sunday school. Mom, being the minister's daughter, really didn't care about Sunday school much; she didn't emphasize that. But it was his Christian faith that he passed to me, in a way. I remember him jotting notes on his program during services, and you learned that he was always thinking about what he was going to write next. Another image I have is of him sitting around the house with his proofs on his lap—long sheets of proofs—with all the hubbub going on around him, just sitting there working on his proofs in the rocking chair.

MARY: Well, my first memory of John as a writer was in college when we took a fine arts course together and I saw what a good writer he was on a term paper. Later on, he typed up my thesis for me—which I thought was a great act of generosity, since he was also taking many courses and on the *Lampoon* and, at the time, very busy. Then shortly after that in the summer we exchanged letters while he was working at the *Reading Eagle*. He talked a lot about the rejection slips he was getting from the *New Yorker* and how miserable it made him, and how hard he was working. He was thinking about writing every minute of the day. It never stopped, after that. Eventually, he got some positive replies, and it was very exciting for him—for all of us, actually.

PLATH: Mary, do you remember at what point you both realized that he wasn't just a writer, but that he was a writer with a capital "W"?

MARY: I think as soon as he got a book published, that was the first, for him, and having so many stories accepted by the *New Yorker*, also. It was very important to him.

PLATH: Many of us here are familiar with that well-known detail about John writing three pages of polished prose per day. Can you add anything else to that? Anything about his work habits? You said something about him having a home office and being very calm. Is there anything else you can tell us about his work?

ELIZABETH: Well, even though he was very present in our lives growing up, he would often be off in thought, so he would have this distracted response to a simple question like—oh, I don't know, What time are we leaving?—and he would take his time to getting around to the answer because he was deep in thought. I think he was always thinking about the life of his fiction or poetry. Whatever was going on in his office was also going on in his head, all the time.

MIRANDA: About that three pages, I'm not sure if he actually wrote three pages. I know he *said* he did. He definitely had one deep, heavy chunk of hard time that he spent writing, usually in the morning—not early morning, either. He slept late-ish, at least when we were growing up, and he would stop after lunch and take us to the beach or something. So it was a short workday. Yet he was always thinking about writing and had clearly committed himself to a certain period of time during the course of the day for his writing.

MICHAEL: There was always a book in his hand, along with a pencil, and on these trips to the beach he'd be laying there on the sand reading or writing. That was just sort of something he was doing all the time while walking through the rest of his life, attentively or inattentively. It was just there. I don't know where I'm going with this, but he was able to manage all the social niceties while also managing this never-ending job of being a writer.

PLATH: Let's talk about some of those social niceties and diversions. How did he divert himself from the writing regimen and from filling his head so full of ideas? What did he enjoy for recreation? Did you, for example, take family vacations?

MICHAEL: There was the nine-hour trip we made to Pennsylvania every summer, for a week, and the trips to Vermont, where my mother's parents had a house up on a mountain. Expo 67 I think we did. Then later, when there was a little more money, we'd go to Martha's Vineyard. Ipswich, Massachusetts, is notorious for greenhead flies, which render the outdoors uninhabitable for a month every summer, so we'd go to Martha's Vineyard, usually for July or August, and he'd set up his little writing station in an outbuilding or upstairs in a quiet place in whatever house we rented. He kept his routine pretty much there, but then the beach came, and the cocktail parties, and golf with various writers and friends on the Vineyard. If he did any hobnobbing with fellow writers, it was always on the Vineyard. He'd play poker with Lillian Hellman and saw friends like Robert Crichton.

MIRANDA: He liked to go to movies and to take us bowling, and on rainy days he would often take all of us kids to a greasy clam food place called Woodman's, in Essex, and . . . what else?

ELIZABETH: Ski trips in the winter, volleyball on Sunday afternoons with his buddies. He was very active, physically, very socially animated, much loved by his social peers in Ipswich. He played poker a couple times a month.

MARY: He had to learn games. He had to learn to swim in college, and to ski, because our children wanted to ski. He played basketball a bit with his friends in mud season in Ipswich, which was between winter and spring, and touch football. He also learned how to play tennis. What was amazing to me was that, for somebody who hadn't taken sports very seriously at school, he all of a sudden in his early adulthood began pursuing all kinds of physical activities with great enthusiasm and quite a lot of ability too.

MICHAEL: I think the only sport he came into adulthood with was roofball, which I had never heard of but which was learned, apparently, on the streets of Shillington. He taught us all how to play roofball. I don't know if it still exists as a playground game or not.

PLATH: Can you describe it, Michael?

MICHAEL: You have a roof . . . and you just line up the kids for a game of elimination. It's played on the low roof of a shed or garage. The kids face the roof and



Roofball in Shillington, circa summer 1944; Updike reputed to be second child in line.
Photograph by Thelma Lewis, courtesy of Silcox-Lewis Collection.

form a line away from it. The first child serves the ball volleyball-style onto the roof and runs to the back of the line. The ball needs to hit the roof at least once. As it descends, the second child hits it volleyball-style back up to the roof, and so it goes like this down the line. Failure to get the ball on the roof means you're eliminated. This continues until there's a single winner.

PLATH: I think the most extreme thing I've done for any of my kids is playing the part of the king in the *Sleeping Beauty* ballet because my daughter was Little Aurora. Do you remember your father doing anything extreme that way, like you're thinking, Boy, he's really doing this for me?

MIRANDA: Not really, though maybe the wise old wizard stories functioned that way.

MICHAEL: Yeah, and the way he would mow the lawn in circular paths back and forth so we could run across it. But he was more of a home father than not. Most fathers would come home around five-thirty or six, but he was around the house essentially from one in the afternoon until the next morning at nine, when he would get up and go off for his four hours of writing for the day.

ELIZABETH: He took me to my flute lessons, and I think he took our brother David to his guitar lessons. He was available in the afternoon.

MARY: In a nice way.

ELIZABETH: Even though Mom was also available.

MARY: He didn't think of himself as being musical but he learned how to play the recorder, and we both played recorder in a group for several years. He also wrote reviews of the local classical concerts for the town newspaper and was quite good at it.

PLATH: Was he free of household chores, or did you divide up the work? He writes domestic fiction, but how much of a domestic was he?

MARY: He didn't wash dishes. He didn't cook very often.

ELIZABETH: Grocery shop?

MARY: He *would* grocery shop. And the first thing he did when we moved into a new house was not to help unpack the car. Instead, he got out a saw and cut a mailbox in our front door so he could be sure to get his news from the *New Yorker*.

ELIZABETH: He was very handy with little repair jobs around the house. Things like a door not closing properly would bug him enough that he'd get out his plane and make it a good tight fit. He taught me how to glaze windows. He also taught me that if you have a cracked window, how to take it out and replace it, which entailed cleaning the little trough and knowing how to run the putty knife over the corners. Things bugged him about the house, particularly things that didn't work properly, so that was kind of cool.

PLATH: This question is for Mary. This conference celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Rabbit, Run*. John had received a Guggenheim [fellowship] to help him complete the novel, and I was wondering if you could talk about what your life was like as a couple while this second novel was being written. Does anything stand out?

MARY: Well, nothing much changed, except Miranda hadn't been born and Michael was very young, perhaps a year old, I think. The others were also young,

maybe five and three. We had our hands full. I think that everything was going smoothly, but we were both very busy.

PLATH: Did he share chapters or drafts in progress?

MARY: Well, not so much with novels, but with short stories. When he finished a short story, I would read it and I would be able to say what I thought about it. Then he would send it to the *New Yorker*. When it came back, if there were editorial changes, he always wanted to know whether they were good or whether the original, his first version, was better. That's the sort of thing I was doing. Also little things . . . about whether he was repeating himself, or whether characters were saying appropriate things to each other.

PLATH: Appropriate things meaning, Does this character sound like the person upon whom it's based?

MARY: No, not so much that, but the consistent personality of the fictional character.

PLATH: As for the children, I was wondering something about the later writing, particularly *Couples*. When was it that each of you realized your father had written what some people were calling a dirty book? How did you feel about that?

MIRANDA: For starters, it took a long time for me to figure out that he was a famous person. I mean, he was a writer and the next-door neighbor was a lawyer, or something like that, but he was just our father. He did what he did, and that was that. It wasn't important for a long time, and maybe it still isn't. I would have been seven or so when *Couples* appeared, and because of that novel we went to England for a year. We were wealthy enough after *Couples* to go and spend a year abroad, and that was big for us. So I guess it sort of sneaked into my consciousness that it was a racy book, and a lot of the characters were based on people from our community.

MICHAEL: We had to get out of the town we lived in when the book came out. So that was in my fourth grade year, and we stayed in lovely Cumberland Terrace, Regent's Park, and I remember always watching the *New York Times* best-seller list, because *Couples* was second for so many weeks, behind *Airport*. I think he was No. 1 for maybe one or two weeks, so he just made it, but he was No. 2 forever. We came back from England and bought a much bigger house as well, and then a few years

later Liz decided she wanted private school, so the rest of us all realized private school was an option. That's when we realized, I *think*, that he was doing all right.

ELIZABETH: I was more concerned with the painting of a nude man in our dining room than I was with his books. When the Girl Scouts were coming for dinner, I asked if that painting could *please* be removed. So when it came to the racy book thing, I was pretty naive and a slow bloomer. I think I didn't fully grasp that until college, really, and I still have not read *Couples*. Have you guys read *Couples*?

MICHAEL: I did climb that mountain, and it wasn't as bad as I suspected it was going to be. It was nice to have my mother to say, "Oh, that's Mrs. Thompson," or, "That was a rumor." It's always been dismissed as the best seller he had to write to get wealthy, but I thought there's a lot in there that's really good. I enjoyed it more than I thought I would.

MARY: I read it once, and I think I'll not read it again. But there *were* some good parts, and the characters derived from reality but were always mixed up with another character from reality.

PLATH: So they were composites.

MARY: They were very composite, and he worked hard at it. Sometimes it carried the day, and other times people recognized themselves in spite of it. But he did it very well. I don't think anybody was totally offended or surprised.

MICHAEL: As you read, especially the early short stories, you really get a sense for the history of Ipswich and what is happening. For instance, there was an incident where a car smashed into the house across the street, which I barely understood at age four. But then I read about it later [in "The Corner"] and learned that the axle had broken, that the driver was a young guy, and that he had almost run over my sister. When I read that, I read it as all being fact in a way, and I think I'm correct in saying that it is very factually based . . . but not all of it.

ELIZABETH: When I recognize people I know in his work, it can be a little bit distracting from the main story. Yet I marvel at his ability to really nail a certain character—townspeople, friends included. So yeah, it's both a distraction and a source of awe for me.

MICHAEL: There's a pretty damning account of my grandmother [Linda Grace Hoyer Updike] in *Of the Farm*, and it's just amazing how much he nailed it. He knew exactly her conniving, manipulative ways, and he just lived with it and wrote about it.

PLATH: Have you read *The Centaur*? I remember his father Wesley's remark about that book and how "the kid got me right."

MICHAEL: Yeah, I've never understood why my father didn't respect *his* father more, and I think he got it right in *The Centaur*. We saw our grandfather as just a lovable and gregarious person, and my grandfather always looked at himself as a failure because he ended up as a schoolteacher and barely made a go of it. But I love *The Centaur* and I love the depiction of my grandfather. It really displays his charm and why he was valued in this very community that we're in.

MIRANDA: I agree with Michael. It was the very first book I ever read of my father's, so it was a long time ago, and though it's very fuzzy I remember the car scene well—the car breaking down in the winter, and the main character being very embarrassed by his father. I just don't understand what his problem was with his father.

ELIZABETH: Well, *The Centaur* was the one book of my father's I was ever asked to read by a teacher, and that was in the eleventh grade, I think. I loved it. While I haven't read it since, I do intend to reread it. And yes, we *adored* our grandfather Wesley. He was a saint in our eyes.

PLATH: There's a tour [during the conference] for John Updike Society members to Plowville, and I was wondering if you could talk about your family vacations there and your memories of the farmhouse.

MARY: The house was very small, but they managed to squeeze us in when we arrived. It was wonderful being there. It's a lovely old house. The barn was absolutely beautiful, the landscape lovely, and I missed going there after John and I were separated. The kids loved it too.

MIRANDA: I would like to add that our grandparents would accommodate us, when we came, by sleeping in the barn while we all slept in the house. But all of us kids wanted to be with *them*, so we all piled into the barn to sleep, which

meant that my mother and father had the house to themselves. It was a very old-fashioned kind of visit—crickets chirping, fireflies buzzing. We'd catch fireflies at night, and we'd eat corn on the cob and fresh peaches—it was really nice. We'd also take long walks in the early morning with our grandfather and his collies, his dogs.

ELIZABETH: Well, when you come from New England, one thing you notice about this area is the stone, the stone constructions and the use of sandstone in the buildings. We were admiring, yesterday, just driving into Berks County and seeing those familiar sandstone houses. Some of them have become quite decrepit and others abandoned, but the sandstone is what I associate with this area.

MICHAEL: I'm going to "out" you a little bit, Liz, and talk about your early college visit to Mom-mom's farm. Correct me as I go, but you thought you were being helpful by going out and weeding the garden on a Sunday, and my grandmother, being a strict Lutheran, didn't agree with working on the Sabbath. So as punishment, she declined to report that you had been crying the entire time [following a confrontation]. She let you cry while my mother thought that everything was fine. That's the kind of manipulation that you see from the grandmother in *Of the Farm*.

MIRANDA: Yes, our grandmother had a short fuse and was very focused on our father when we went to visit. The rest of us would have to work around that, but she had a sharp tongue and was quick to scold.

ELIZABETH: She also outlived our other three grandparents, so we had, I think, the privilege of knowing her into our adulthood. She mellowed and softened over the years, and it was sad when she died in 1989.

PLATH: Could you talk a bit more about Wesley Updike?

MIRANDA: First of all, he was just so charming. He would meet strangers as we'd go into town or people he knew and he would always compliment them. He would find some way of giving them a compliment, making them feel like a wonderful person, and he did that with us. He gave us all sorts of nicknames, although I'm drawing a blank on them.

MICHAEL: My father drove from Plowville to Shillington with my grandfather every day, and he would sometimes joke, though often at my grandfather's ex-

pense. For instance, he would describe, for laughs, lurching the car ahead two feet as his father was getting into the car in front of a group of high school kids. My grandfather was of the personality that he would let it go.

PLATH: What books by your father speak to you most, or which books do you identify with? Any standouts or favorites?

MARY: Well, I'm partial to the early short stories, probably because I know them so well. It was all very exciting as, one by one, they were accepted, and then later collected and reviewed, which verified our feeling about their success.

PLATH: Have any of you seen yourselves in those short stories? If so, what was your reaction?

ELIZABETH: I'm touched but also a little unnerved. His observations are just so keen, and he had a way of being a little harsh while loving at the same time. So it's an awkward thing. But what I love about his writing, really—and I don't have a favorite, I'm not particularly well-read when it comes to his writing—are his observations, and the combination of his playfulness and reverence, which comes through in his poems. So yes, that combination of playfulness and reverence.

MIRANDA: He began giving me the books when I was nineteen or so, and I started most of them. I gravitate toward the thinner books, although I do like *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. *Seek My Face* is a book in which I saw a lot of my grandmother, and the descriptions were just beautiful. There's one description of this older woman who lives alone and makes herself a cup of tea; she reuses the teabag, then puts it on the corner of the sink where it looked like a little purse. That reminded me exactly of my grandmother's purse, and it kept sticking in my head. I would agree with Elizabeth that his descriptions are just wonderful.

MICHAEL: I think the question was about standout novels. *The Poorhouse Fair* I read, and, to be honest, just didn't quite get. There are lovely parts in it, but I think what bothered me is that it's more dialogue, which leads to a discussion Miranda and I have had about his dialogue. Are the people too smart? Is the dialogue too polished? A lot of us say things that go nowhere. We say things that sound flat and silly. When you're writing about fictional people, his dialogue is very crisp and the people are smart, intelligent. But what I think is preferable is the description

and the many different details, such as Miranda described, like the purse, and that bit from *Couples* where he's coming down to a house that's being renovated and describes the [unconnected pipes under the] kitchen sink, which [had been left] "open like a cry." That makes perfect sense, I thought, that's wonderful! So it's all peppered with little fine details.

PLATH: Do you recognize yourself or others in the short stories, Michael?

MICHAEL: Yeah. I can read all the short stories and see my siblings in most of them. I'm not in too many of the novels that I know of. In *Marry Me* I think I'm a young child. The family [in the books] ranges from five to three, so I think my brother is the one who disappears a lot in these books. I'm sort of the limbo in between, and I think my divorce was informed by his divorce, where I was trying to do something different, such as hold onto my kids more at the time than he did. So there was this commentary in his short stories about that which I don't think he fully understood or appreciated.

ELIZABETH: I was getting ready to marry my husband, a man from Ghana, West Africa, and my dad thought I needed to read *The Coup*. I confess, however, that I have not yet read *The Coup*, but I will.

PLATH: All of you turned out to be artistic in some way, whether writing, painting, or sculpting. Could you talk about the influence of your parents?

ELIZABETH: Dad drew—we both drew—you know, cats and little scenes of babies being fed, landscapes and vases with flowers, that sort of thing. Cartoons, birthday cards. Our birthday cards from our father were almost always hand-drawn. Up until he died, he was even giving hand-drawn caricatures of grandchildren in birthday cards, that sort of thing.

MIRANDA: I think our parents' lifestyle encouraged us to become artists just by seeing that we didn't have to go to a real job. You could make a living free-flowing, intertwining with your family life, and I think we all liked that idea.

ELIZABETH: It was a trial-and-error sort of thing. They had expectations but they were not that explicit. They were permissive and inventive and creative, and they had a faith in us, I think, as creative beings. Mom took a leap of faith in marrying

my father in the first place when he was only—what?—twenty and still in college, and I think the two of them transferred that faith to us—a faith in life, art, God, everything.

PLATH: We now have time for just a few questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, first of all, thank you for sharing all these personal stories about your father and family. It sounds as if you had such affection for your grandfather, and I'm wondering, did you see your grandparents more than the one week in summer when you came here to visit?

MARY: Oh, yes. They came to visit us in Ipswich several times, and they came to France when we were there in the winter of . . .

ELIZABETH: '62.

MARY: Yes, '62, and they baby-sat for the children while John and I went to Italy for a week. That was, I thought, very brave and heroic of them. They had to drive a car in France, and they were very good babysitters.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can I ask, what was your reaction to *Self-Consciousness*, his memoir?

ELIZABETH: I personally feel it's a gift to his progeny. I've been using it as a resource, and, yes, a love letter, really.

MICHAEL: I loved *Self-Consciousness*. It has so many beautiful descriptions of Shillington and his childhood here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is it true that John Updike did not like Frank Sinatra, and if so, what singers and musicians did he like?

MIRANDA: He liked Bing Crosby.

MICHAEL: Boy, you stumped the panel. I will say, however, that I lived with my father my senior year in high school, which was 1976, I think, and he loved the Captain & Tennille.

MARY: We actually met Frank Sinatra in New York, courtesy of Bennett Cerf, who was entertaining us at dinner at a restaurant, and John seemed very pleased to meet Frank Sinatra, even though *I* never knew that he didn't like him.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My other question about music, given Rabbit's listening tastes, is whether he liked disco. Did he like Donna Summer?

MIRANDA: I don't think he did, but I could be wrong. He liked the Beatles, jazz, and classical music. . . . What else?

ELIZABETH: The Supremes.

MIRANDA: Motown! He liked Motown.

PLATH: And on that note, we shall conclude. Thank you to all of our panelists.