

## The Trouble with Harry: *Rabbit at Rest*

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When *Rabbit at Rest* was recently published in Britain, John Updike made an appearance on television. Smiling urbanely in a solid tweed jacket, and looking like a priest disguised as a banker, he seemed to identify uncomplicatedly with Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom as a “good person”—“good enough for me to like him.” In *Rabbit, Run*, we were told, he acted out Updike’s unfulfilled desire to have been a six-foot-three basketball hero. In *Rabbit Redux*, he reflected Updike’s own “conflicted” conservatism. In *Rabbit Is Rich*, his own happiness. In *Rabbit at Rest*, his mixed feelings of being worn-out and ill-at-ease and yet still in love with his country.

An epitaph for Rabbit? “Here lies an American man.” This neat formulation went unchallenged by his interviewer, but probably Updike’s statements as a smiling public man should be distrusted. For what goes on in the Rabbit books is much stranger than he makes out. Rabbit is certainly solid and “real,” a very thick fictional entity. Part of the joke of the name (more easily recognized, I suppose, in 1960, when people still read Sinclair Lewis) is its echo of Babbitt, whose idea of the ideal citizen (“At night he lights up a good cigar, and climbs into the little old bus, and maybe cusses the carburetor, and shoots out home”) is one of the epigrams for *Rabbit Is Rich*, the smuggest book of the four. When Rabbit supports Nixon and Vietnam in *Rabbit Redux*, or hangs around the wife-swapping clubhouse types in *Rabbit Is Rich*, he seems a stable enough piece of the American booboisie, a spokesman (though in a language he would never use himself) for the American dream: “America is beyond power, it acts as in a dream, as a face of God. Wherever America is, there is freedom, and wherever America is not, madness rules with chains, darkness strangles millions. Beneath her patient bombers, paradise is possible.”

But Rabbit as ideal citizen has always been a problem. His years of

glory as a 1940s high school basketball champion in Mt. Judge, a suburb of Brewer, Pennsylvania, are well past by the time the first book begins, when he is 26. Right from the start, then, he is looking back on lost virtue. What takes place inside his continuing present is mostly dismal, squalid, or banal. In *Rabbit, Run*, trapped by parents, parents-in-law, local minister, and his miserable small family, Rabbit runs out on his alcoholic wife, Janice, who accidentally drowns their baby while their small son Nelson looks on. Then Rabbit leaves his pregnant mistress Ruth (a lapsed hooker) and returns to Janice. Ten years on in *Rabbit Redux*, the book of the '60s, Janice goes off to have an affair, and Rabbit takes Jill and Skeeter, a rich lost hippie girl and her black revolutionary friend, into his house. Teenaged Nelson observes their sexual and political skirmishing. One night (while Rabbit is next door making love to the mother of Nelson's best friend) the house is burned down by racist neighbors, and Jill is killed. In the '70s Rabbit gets "rich" in his wife and mother-in-law's Toyota business. He buys gold, and he and Janice make love covered in Krugerrands, but out there in Carter's America the gasoline is running out and the hostage crisis is running on.

Now, in *Rabbit at Rest*, the greedy Rabbit of the Reagan years has become hugely overweight. On a quarrelsome family holiday in Florida, where he and Janice now have a condominium, he takes his granddaughter out sailing and has a heart attack and an operation—not a bypass, which terrifies him, but an angioplasty, to unclog his arteries from all "the old grease I've been eating." Meanwhile the wretched Nelson is stealing from the Toyota franchise to feed his cocaine habit and is beating up his wife, and Janice is becoming increasingly independent. (Rabbit "preferred her incompetent.") Nelson's secrets come out and she gets him to a rehabilitation center, from which he emerges talking in an "aggravating tranquilized nothing-can-touch-me tone." But Rabbit alone refuses to be cured of junk food and irresponsible desires, and out of the hospital he finds himself unexpectedly making love to his daughter-in-law. When she tells on him, he runs away to