

In *Bech at Bay*, the last in the trilogy chronicling the life and times of Henry Bech, John Updike wastes little energy on creating an inclusive work. In fact, his alter-ego Bech is far more distancing than his previous working man, Rabbit, of *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990). Blame it on that most self-indulgent of genres, writers writing about writing. At best, the series reveals the shifting alliances and treacherous pitfalls of the literary world in a style so clever and cruel that even those not aspiring for their own Pulitzer may find it appealing. At worst, Bech is so shallow and stiflingly self-important as to remind you of exactly why you wouldn't want to be a writer.

If Bech does not immediately connect with the reader, he seems to have no trouble connecting with his creator. In fact, Updike's character leaves the reader with the certainty that Bech is Updike, regardless of how much or how little one knows about Updike. Both are writers: one swiftly approaching 70, the other swiftly passing it. Both live in New York, and circulate amongst the bitterly vengeful cabal of writers, critics, and editors common there. One wins a Nobel Prize (guess which one).

The work is presented not as a short story, but as a "quasi-novel." A "quasi-novel" is a treacherous form. It requires the concision of language dear to the short story with the consistency of character integral to the novel. Each short story/chapter/segment (call it what you will) must be tight with action, while at the same time furthering the development of the over-arching idea. No wonder Updike here seems so impotent—the easiest way to balance excitement with depth is to provide neither.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in his weakest story, *Bech in Czech*. His breezy style stumbles over his more serious subject matter, tossing off lines like, "It was all the more noticeable because Czechs, once a wry and humorous race, found rather little to smile about" in a tone one part flippant to two parts melodramatic. He sounds as though he couldn't care less, and so gives the reader little to care about. "There was never, it seemed to Bech, any moon. Did the moon shine only on capitalism?" A line too serious to be witty and too foolish to be serious, it staggers awkwardly off the page. "That was why . . . you traveled to places like this: to encounter fictional selves," Bech ponders as a cultural ambassador. Updike seems to prefer simply creating lightly fictionalized selves and allowing them to vent all the backbiting criticism and meandering observations you can't get away with in good company. Bech defending his own work sounds so much like Updike defending his creation that a line that describes a book as "an elemental sheaf, bound together by love and daring, to be passed with excitement from hand to hand" seems less beautiful than it does self-important.

*Bech Presides* is no doubt one of the very strongest pieces in the collection, if only because here the author is at last not over-reaching himself. (*Bech Pleads Guilty* is simply too dull to mention, succeeding only in portraying the tedium of the legal process by imitating it.) Bech presides over the Forty, an aging and distinguished group of writers, composers, and artists dedicated to furthering society's progress through the dispensation of grants and tea sandwiches. This is precisely the only kind of thing that Bech (or Updike) can make us care about. The story centers, in fact, on whether or not one should care about the Forty; that is, whether it ought to be an old relic put to rest, or allowed to totter on indefinitely, a dimly-lit beacon on the hill. The possible importance of somewhat important artists seems to be just about where Bech belongs. All this is mixed, of course, with smatterings of heavy-handed sermonizing and absurdly tired sexual dalliances, but redeemed by the presence of vibrant supporting characters, a wonder in a quasi-novel where the protagonist's devotion to himself seems matched only by the author's single-minded devotion to him. In short, it's nice to see a non-Bech face now and again. If only Updike would have drawn Martina, Bech's latest conquest, with the fine attention given to the Forty's fearless leader, Edna. Where Bech refuses to characterize his *amour du chapitre* as little more than a collection of full breasts and romantic fictions, Updike is loath to contribute any more. Even Robin, the mother of Bech's child and heroine of not one but two stories (or are they chapters?) is

only one more victim of Bech/Updike's curious habit of reducing all female leads to ethnic stereotypes.

*Bech Noir* (which, along with *Bech in Czech*, appeared as a fiction selection in the *New Yorker* magazine) presents a curious dilemma. On its own, it is surely the strongest and most engaging of all the stories, possessing a strong narrative and a forward-moving action. Still, if one adopts the form quasi-novel, one better be prepared to stick with it. Three stories precede *Bech Noir*, one follows it. In none is Bech a serial killer, even a man one could reasonably imagine transformed into a serial killer. Nor can one overlook that, in light of the otherwise painstaking consistency of the five stories, it is absurd. On its own, it presents a darkly humorous and pleasantly brutal tale of the aesthete/murderer of the type well known to literature since Dorian Grey and brought to perfection in John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure*. Robin, his *zaftig* sidekick, is clutter, but unobtrusive enough not to ruin the fun. The modes of murder are thrillingly original, the demise of one techno-geek most especially. In fact, the story is put together so well as to almost excuse the fact that the tale utterly discredits the entire idea of a "quasi-novel." And perhaps points to the very reason Updike would have been better off without one. Here he is at his best: witty, charming, and reckless. After too many obvious and awkward attempts to renounce totalitarianism, relish the printed word, and rescue art as we know it, a little murder is a nice relief.

After the jarring imbalance of seriousness and insignificance the last story is left with the difficult task of both tying up loose ends and setting a tone for the story (note to authors: the last five pages of any book are a bad place to establish tone). The result is a weak story with a predictable and unsatisfying ending which only serves to make one think less kindly of the stories that precede it. The entire story feels like a self-indulgent Updike interior monologue mistakenly committed to page: "What should I say? How should I say it? What do I mean?" That kind of anxiety-ridden indecision is best left private. After all, one would like to think Updike decided what he wanted to say some time before now.

If a reviewer can think of little impassioned commentary to make on the behalf of *Bech at Bay*, perhaps it is because of the conviction that Updike himself has little impassioned feeling for or against Bech. Nothing is ever at stake here and there is little to lose. The intellectual malaise and angsty indifference that beset Bech seem more a product of creator than creation. Bech cares so little for anything, one cares little for him. His attempts to reach out to his daughter, to his lovers, and to the reading audience lack the energy to be compelling. Neither casually malicious enough to be truly devilish nor sincere enough to be moving, the quasi-novel is often a disappointing lesson in moderation. The book is too light, too pleasant, too distracting, and too forgettable to offer a stern moral lesson or create a truly heartfelt emotional bond. Nor is that even required. I, for one, like Bech best when he is simply fun.