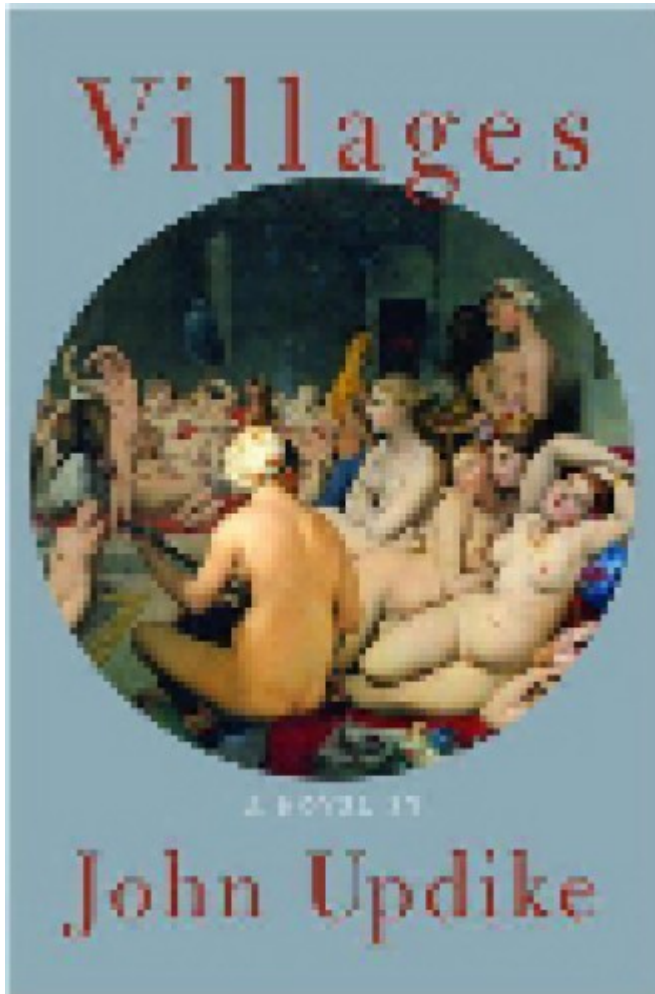


It takes a village

By [James Yerkes](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Villages

John Updike
Knopf

When Knopf advertised Updike's novel as "a *Bildungsroman* describing the education, romantic and otherwise, of Owen Mackenzie," critics knew that the

ending would be the crux of the literary proposal. Not that the “getting there” would be irrelevant. But the literary and moral value of the story would depend on where the journey ended.

And where is that? “It is a mad thing, to be alive,” we are told in the final paragraph. “Villages exist to moderate this madness—to hide it from children, to bottle it for private use, to smooth its imperatives into habits, to protect us from the darkness without and the darkness within.”

Getting to this conclusion takes the reader through Owen’s provincial growing-up years in Pennsylvania and his education at MIT, where he meets his first wife, Phyllis, with whom he moves to New York City for his first job. A friend convinces him they should launch an innovative software company (E-O Data) in a small Connecticut town. That’s where Owen and Phyllis raise their four children and move into the ranks of the suburban middle class. After a series of infidelities and a traumatic divorce, Owen moves to Maine with his second wife, Julia, who was the wife of an Episcopal clergyman before her affair with Owen.

There is no more gifted and insightful narrator of domestic experience, particularly of middle-class America in the 1960s and 1970s, than Updike. *Villages* is a retrospective coda to *Couples*, his 1968 best-seller that explored similar themes. That there could be many men gainfully employed who could sexually navigate eight affairs between first and final marriages does seem a tad unrealistic, but one presumes that the dalliances with so many women, in sometimes bizarre sexual formats, are to be seen as mythic exemplars of a Freudian male fantasy world. In these situations Owen usually is portrayed as adoringly gullible and sexually “used,” while the women tend to be portrayed as earth-mother vessels and sexual savants.

There is something disturbingly sad, morally and psychologically, in Owen’s confession that his “past is like a sheet of inky-blue tissue paper held up to a light, so the holes pricked in it shine: these stars are the women.” And “the past,” the narrator adds in another place, “is all we have.”

Darkness symbolizes death, of course, but it also points to the terror of uncertainty involved in our not-just-animal consciousness—the capricious nature of agonizing physical suffering and the paralyzing fear of the known “Unknown,” cosmic and temporal, which drives our spiritual torment.

Highlighted in this novel is the compulsive darkness in marriage which propels people toward infidelity. To have is to be held. The paradox in marriage is that only in being loved and freely choosing whom to love is the soul set free. Marriage limits this freedom, so as Updike once put it, “The enforced and approved bonds of marriage, restricting freedom, weaken love.”

This novel enshrines the thrill, even if a deadly one, of infidelity over against “the interminable mutual exposure of a marriage!” Still, in the dialectic of marital darkness, our human cultural villages provide “a surface order” without which our dark terrors inside and out of marriage would suffocate us.

Updike suggests that most humans tend to reach similar conclusions about sexual experience, in and out of marriage. An honest novelist describes an imperfect world, he would argue, aiming to reveal some facets of that world in a new light, and the damning/redeeming madness of sexual passion is an inescapable facet of the real world.

Interestingly, Updike is willing to retain at Owen’s journey’s end at least one of what the narrator calls “the evidential truths of the Christian religion,” namely “that there has been a lapse or slippage in the world and things are not quite as they should be. We feel made for a better world, and the fault is ours that this is not Eden.” Here is the dialectical tragedy of “*mea culpa, mea gloria*,” my sin confirms my created glory.

One cannot quarrel with the novel’s advocacy for a “surface order” which preserves us from madness, nor with its recognition of a vestigial argument for original sin. Nevertheless, the novel shows no recognition of a possible infused or cooperative divine grace that could help fortify humans within the crippling sexual passions that create so much suffering. Owen, at least, shows no sense of this, his latter-day faithful church attendance notwithstanding.

The issue is not whether such grace would solve the problems of human sexuality, but whether in this imperfect world there cannot be a deeply redemptive awareness of God, both inside and outside the church, that does not deny our tragic entrapment in moral failure, sexual and otherwise. Without this recognition, we lack the sometime possibility, as Updike himself put it in his memoir *Self-Consciousness*, “to possess that Archimedean point outside the world from which to move the world.”