Rabbit lives

by James M. Wall in the January 3, 2001 issue

Nelson Angstrom works as a mental health counselor in an Adult Day Treatment Center. On Christmas morning he learns that one of his clients, Michael DiLorenzo, has committed suicide in a desperate attempt to flee the voices in his head. Nelson is the son of Rabbit Angstrom, the central character in a series of John Updike novels that began with *Rabbit Run* (1960) and ended with Rabbit's death in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990).

In a long story in *Licks of Love*, Rabbit is back, alive in the memories of his family, especially his widow, Janice, and Nelson, who has converted his drug addiction into a job as a counselor. This story continues the saga of a man who reached his personal peak as a high school basketball star. Although unlike Rabbit in physical bearing, Nelson is very much his father's son in his hunger for intimacy, and he is as "sexually haunted" as his father.

Critics of Updike complain that he lacks a social conscience, that he focuses too much on his characters' inner lives and not enough on the social conflicts that raged through the nation during Rabbit's lifetime. The critics are wrong. Updike is not uninterested in social struggles; he is recording the anguish of lives that can't invest emotion in others because their own lives lack meaning.

Each chapter in Rabbit's life is told against the background of current events. Rabbit is affected by societal conflict and change, but he is not an active player. He receives, he doesn't initiate. When a crazed revolutionary left over from the 1960s burns down his house, Rabbit—in a burst of extreme absurdity—exceeds even the bounds of the sexual revolution by sleeping with his son's wife. Rabbit is a survivor, a man with enough self-awareness to agonize over his failures, but not enough to escape his sense of hopelessness.

Rabbit is the embodiment of the American male who not only "doesn't get it" but lacks the moral courage to get it. He is too busy keeping his own head above water. Updike draws considerable feminist wrath for Rabbit's assumption that women are subservient vehicles for love, but this response doesn't deter Updike. For him, Rabbit

is not meant to participate in social debate, but to serve as testimony to an America that has lost its central core of meaning.

Although he's been dead for ten years, Rabbit is alive in the memories of his family. In *Licks of Love*, Updike places the Angstrom family at a millennium Thanksgiving celebration. Retired insurance salesman Ronnie Harrison is now Janice's husband, and they live in Rabbit's old home. Ronnie is a "good husband" to Janice, but he lashes out at anyone who doesn't agree with him that Bill Clinton is evil incarnate. (The Clinton presidency, doomed from the outset to crash into the moralism of Clinton's political enemies, is an irresistable topic for Updike.) The real focus of Ronnie's anger, however, is Rabbit's "love child" Annabelle, born out of wedlock to an earlier Rabbit conquest.

Ronnie hates Rabbit for a myriad of reasons, including the fact that Rabbit slept with Ronnie's first wife and was once married to Ronnie's present wife. Annabelle, now a 40-year-old nurse, provides a focus for the anger which he unleashes, first at Clinton—"Nellie, he lied to us, the American people. He said right out on television, 'I did not have sex with that woman, what's-her-name.'"

Annabelle responds to his tirade with "I think he's an excellent president." Washing dishes together, Ronnie is emboldened by wine and murmurs to Annabelle, "It must feel funny, being the illegitimate daughter of a hooker and a bum."

In Updike's novels, people know and talk about public events, but they experience them as background noise, things happening to other people, props for dinner table conversation. "He lied to us" becomes a catch phrase that embodies anger hidden deep within.

In *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, Todd Gitlin says that "the more vociferously a term is trumpeted in public, the more contestable it is under scrutiny. The automatic recourse to a slogan, as if it were tantamount to a value or an argument, is frequently a measure of the need to suppress a difficulty or a vagueness underneath."

The background noise, enhanced by 24-hour-a-day cable news channels with their frantic style of reporting, masks a national conflict that is far more critical than the "constitutional crisis" much promoted during the election recount which held our attention for so many weeks.

Updike gets it right. Without anything in which to believe—and as Rabbit says in an earlier book, without the cold war to energize us—we are trapped in meaninglessness. The background noise serves only to fill up mental space. What really matters is personal, as Nelson Angstrom discovers on Christmas Day after hearing of the death of Michael DiLorenzo:

> The end of this very short day has begun to darken his windows before he has the heart to microwave the shepherd's pie and turn on the Oahu Bowl. Hawaii beats Oregon, 23 to 17, and on the six o'clock news Jerry Seinfeld has married at last, the Hubble Space Telescope is back in working order, and some Sikhs have hijacked an Indian plane for no clear reason and are jerking it all around the sky. Michael DiLorenzo is not mentioned. He is strictly local news.