Hugging the middle

by Ann-Janine Morey in the May 24, 2000 issue

John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace, edited by James Yerkes

In the Disney movie *Aladdin*, the genie (Robin Williams) describes what life is like in his condition: "Phenomenal cosmic powers," he boasts in thunderous tones; "itty-bitty living space," he concludes in a squeaky little voice. I have often wondered if this isn't true of John Updike as well. He has an unparalleled gift for descriptive language. But is his version of middle-class life enough of an arena for his talents? Is there really any religious or moral depth animating his descriptions?

The question is vital to the conversation about the viability of literary realism that has long animated the study of American literature. William Dean Howells argued that a strong tradition of realistic writing was a source of national strength. The writer of realistic fiction should be motivated by a kind of ethical idealism, he wrote, holding up a fictional mirror in which a faithful representation of human life, with its complicated, ambiguous moral choices, offers readers the possibility for self-reflection and for insight into themselves and their nation.

Updike, one of our most celebrated realists, writes from the heart of Howells's mandate for literary excellence. "My books are all meant to be moral debates with the reader," Updike has commented, and he has conducted a career-long conversation about who we Americans are. For one of this book's essayists, Updike is "the most lyrical teller of the archetypal American individual story." Updike has always been frank about his appreciation for the "middleness" of American life--by which he means the material/spiritual solidity of ordinary existence--and he speaks often of how essential the sacred is in creating and reading literature.

Not surprisingly, then, several of these essays celebrate the way in which Updike finds God in the material elements and events of our world, in everything from furniture, golf and carpet fuzz to rain, light, gardens and sexual intimacy. Updike's ability to "depict the tangible, visible world with great fidelity" and find within that loving accretion of detail the integrated, if illusive, presence of Divine Being clearly

attests to his artistic achievement. This kind of praise (along with the "Updike as a Lutheran" and "Updike as a Barthian" treatments) is fairly predictable in the landscape of Updike criticism.

What gives *John Updike and Religion* unexpected depth are the places where the essayists push against the hymn to realism that has defined Updike criticism. The unfavorable response to *The End of Time*, Updike's 1997 futuristic novel, might be attributed to the ways in which the novel baffles the reader's expectations about realism, suggests David Malone. Marshall Boswell tackles an aspect of Updike's realism that some admirers would rather bypass--his consistent conversation about homoeroticism and the anal cavity as metaphors for the sacred, especially evident in *Rabbit Is Rich*.

Charles Berryman's essay "Faith or Fiction" pairs nicely with Donald Greiner's closing essay, "The World as Host." Berryman wonders if the shallowness of Updike's realism is a result of an audience-driven consciousness that reflects the superficiality of the world he shares with his readers, or a product of realism itself, which Berryman finds "well suited to record the details of physical experience but not to explore the hidden depths of religious faith or doubt." The tragic dimension--any genuine grappling with suffering--is largely absent in Updike, who, Berryman notes, spends less time on the state of his soul than the state of his skin in his memoir *Self-Consciousness*.

Greiner counters that "suffering and violence are recognized [in Updike's fiction] for what they are . . . but the still point of middleness holds firm when acknowledged as the foundation for experience." That is, the realism Berryman finds suspect Greiner reaffirms as the strength of Updike's writing, for it enables Updike to conceive of hope despite the sometimes dismal details of our lives.

Elsewhere, Ralph Wood has chastised Updike for his "moral passivity," a view that is in sympathy with Berryman's critique. Despite those who defend Updike, the question lingers and is thoughtfully debated in the strongest of these essays: Updike's realism is indeed a lovely and lovingly drawn surface, but do we mistake his artful accumulation of meticulously rendered detail for spiritual and moral thoughtfulness? Phenomenal cosmic powers! Itty-bitty living space?