



The Music School

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The Music School is a place of learning, in which a sheltered South Dakota boy meets his roommate at Harvard, a rebel with whom he will have a violent—and ambiguous—physical encounter; a warring married couple, Richard and Joan Maple, try and try again to find solace in sex; and Henry Bech, an unprolific American writer publicizing himself far from home, enjoys a moment of improbable, poignant, untranslatable connection with a Bulgarian poetess. In these twenty short stories, each evidence of his early mastery, John Updike brings us a world—a world of fumbling, pausing, and beginning again; a world sensitively felt and lovingly expressed; a world whose pianissimo harmonies demand new subtleties of fictional form.

The Music School Details

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Deborah says

Great! insightful

ej cullen says

Read this years ago and was enthralled. Upon re-reading, still good but maybe just a little too stilted and show-offy for my taste. Updike is still good company though.

Ivan says

FIRST LINE REVIEW: "Do you remember a fragrance girls acquire in autumn?" Oh, that Updike! I'm always amazed by his ability to reveal so microscopically the everyday, but with a freshness of insight that makes the common appear alien. Often brilliant, often frustrating. Much like this daily walk we all take through life. Good stuff, this. For the patient reader who wants to fine tune his/her sense of smell (along with the other senses).

Bob Newman says

An Uneven Collection

John Updike at his best is hard to beat. The gem-like brilliance of his observatory powers dazzle me. His choice of words, the power of his phrasing all can leave me amazed. How could anyone write like that ? And at such a young age too. Certain stories in this collection from the 1960s took my breath away. "A Madman", about an encounter with an extremely eccentric Englishman on a first trip to Oxford not only captures the feel of Americans out of their culture, of English life, and the old ways of that university town, but also of all such encounters with persuasive crazies anywhere in the world. Unbelievably good. I loved the 1950s, small town feel of such stories as "The Indian" and "In Football Season", which will serve forever as memoirs of the atmosphere of even-now bygone times. The former, about Ipswich, Mass., close to home for me, resonates even more. "The Bulgarian Poetess" too struck a chord with me---the story of a love never taken up, a future glimpsed only through a door never entered. What a writer ! Yet I can't say that I liked all these stories unequivocally. Some of them seemed too much "insider" stuff, fit only for people who shared the same slice of classical knowledge that the writer carries. Others harped a little too dismally on the disappointments and futility of marriage, or the dubious pleasures of adultery---always, in Updike's view---the view of a reluctant puritan---a losing proposition which cannot really bring satisfaction to any party. Couples thrashing around in the sea of inevitability quickly become old hat; if they get nothing but pain out of it, why do they do it so often ? That may be his question too, but I don't think he answers sufficiently. Some of the stories seem to be rather self-indulgent, as if the author said, "You know, I can write a story about anything. Just name the most obscure topic or theme you can think of and I'll write you a story on it. Now watch this !" Cool, but will it have much meaning to others ? These are some of my criticisms. On the whole, though, this collection can provide both pleasure and interest. It is nearly fifty years old, but only few collections written since then can equal it.

mark says

I enjoyed several of the pieces in this collection of short stories. Updike has a distinctive style and seems to strive for psychological intensity, using really creative imagery in his descriptions. I did get tired of the married-couple-going-through-an-affair story, which he wrote in at least 4 different ways, maybe more that I can't recall right now. "The Christian Roommates" was probably the easiest and funniest story, though he didn't seem to know how to end it. I suspect that he laced all stories with subtle symbolism that I was too impatient or lazy to try to uncover.

Emer Tannam says

I'm giving this two stars because I've already read a lot of John Updike, and there's a limit to how many stories about cheating spouses I can read. This reflects more on me than it does on the book, however.

Andrew Murawa says

I'm just not an Updike fan, short stories or otherwise.

Steven says

Some stories were very good and some not-so-good. I think Updike excels when he focuses his writing on the emotions and small/intimate actions of his characters, and that things become overwrought when he tries to write grandiose prose in places.

Stronger stories were 'Christian Roommates,' 'My lover has dirty fingernails,' and 'the Bulgarian poetess.' 'The Hermit' was weaker, as were a few others which I'll get around to naming tomorrow. 'The Dark' was rather interesting, and also for being so markedly different from his other stories in tone and content.

Caleb Mitchum says

What a wonderful read!

Updike's prose is generally wonderful. Such careful careful placement of words. Such diversity of vocabulary. And such insight into many aspects of the human conditions. One could see this collection as an essay on the human condition at its publication.

That being said, there is a lot of inherent homophobia/anti-feminist material in this writing. There are patently misogynist/homophobic portions of this work, like any other Updike work, unfortunately. It is, in my view, a true misfortune that a great writer such as Updike lacked the empathy to wrap into his narratives these communities.

However, the reading was still enjoyable for me (a professed and proud homosexual). Such wonderfully constructed prose, outside of sexual references. I find myself perpetually repelled by the philosophical aspects of Updike's writing, but positively entranced by his style. If you are able to observe both sides of the coins simultaneously then you are in for a wonderful read with this incredibly collection of character inspections.

Sophie says

This is one of the best short story collections I have read in a long while.

"It seemed that he and Joan were caught together in a classroom where they would never be recognized, or in a charade that would never be guessed, the correct answer being Two Silver Birches in a Meadow."

"All my life people have been expecting me to faint. I have no idea why. I never faint."

"Spring infiltrates a city through the blood of its inhabitants."

"He felt as if he were leaning backward, and his mind seemed a kind of twig, a twig that had deviated from the trunk and chosen to be this branch instead of that one, and chosen again and again, becoming finer with each choice until there was nothing left for it but to vanish into air."

"If I had any dignity I'd be dead or insane."

"I remember how I used to read a newspaper and care and it seems like another person."

"I'm really all right, except right now. My fundamental impression I think is of the incredible wastefulness of being alive."

"He escorted a squat powdered woman who looked as though she had put on her lipstick by eating it."

"and the existence of languages other than English, the existence of so many, each so vast, intricate, and opaque, seemed to prove cosmic dementia."

"While of course great caution should attend assertions about evidence so tenuous, so disjointed, and so befouled with the mud of phlegm and fatigue, each fragment seems hollow in the same way; and a kind of shape, or at least a tendency of motion which if we could imagine it continuing uninterrupted would produce a shape, might be hypothesized. But we will be on firmer ground simply describing their surface layers of days."

"Care is crucial; days, though in sum their supply of rubbish seems endless, are each an ingument of ghostly thinness."

"There was a light above him he could not rise out of the surrounding confusion."

Jen Knox says

Only two of these stories really gripped me. The book is worth reading, if only because no story, no matter how gripless, is devoid of Updike's brilliant, beautiful way with words.

Aaron says

Some of the work in this collection of Updike stories is spectacular. Favorite stories are the two "Maples" stories - "Giving Blood" and "Twin Beds in Rome". Also impressive are "At a Bar in Charlotte Amalie" and "Have Is Plowing Now". Enjoyed this collection immensely. Updike's consistent command of the language - and his intelligence, and ability to "imagine" scenes outside of his "comfort zone" of thinly-disguised autobiographical stories - is impressive.
