

Updike Redux

Lila Azam Zanganeh interviews John Updike, November 2010

In a previously unpublished interview, John Updike talks about Nabokov and his other literary heroes, why he wrote a book about a terrorist, and why he never expected to be a novelist.



John Updike and Vladimir Nabokov never met, but admired each other's work. Updike the critic, but also the fiction writer, was interested in politics as backdrop, but not moral judgments. In an introduction to his [Rabbit Angstrom](#) novels, he writes, "Unlike such estimable elders as Vonnegut, Vidal, and Mailer, I have little reformist tendency and instinct for social criticism." As such, Updike also seemed to be one of the few Americans who "got" what Nabokov was really after in his work. So author Lila Azam Zanganeh thought when she approached Updike for an interview four years ago.

"Updike was the only person in the American cultural context," Azam Zanganeh believed, who understood this celebration of happiness within Nabokov. In 1964, Updike summarized Nabokov thus: "Nabokov writes prose the only way it should be written: ecstatically."

Hoping to unpack some of Updike's criticism on Nabokov, Azam Zanganeh elicited a rare and lucid interview from Updike by phone in late 2006, between Updike's Massachusetts home and Azam

Zanganeh's home in New York. But beyond Nabokov and his rare approval of Updike's work (he and Salinger were among few writers who got an A+ for their stories), the conversation sprawled freely into politics (Democrats had just retaken both houses of Congress in midterm elections), Updike's writing and reading habits, his first publications, his daily routine, his love of golf, and why he wrote a book from the point of view of a terrorist.

Author of countless novels, plays, volumes of poetry, and the recipient of numerous awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes for his fiction, Updike has been described as "American literature's greatest short story writer" (Lorrie Moore). This interview has never appeared in English. Updike would die of cancer a little more than two years after it was conducted.

Lila Azam Zanganeh is the author of the forthcoming [*The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness*](#), and is a literary contributor to *Le Monde*.

—*Guernica*

Lila Azam Zanganeh: My interest in Nabokov hinges in part on the fact that he's been so misunderstood, especially in this country, because of the supposedly dark plots of some of his work. In your approach to Nabokov, you are one of the only to get Nabokov as a writer of happiness.

John Updike: Yes, you know once I did review a lot of Nabokov since there was a time when not only was he still an American author living in New York State and producing an English language notebook, but all the old books in Russian were being translated out. So there was a lot of Nabokov coming out. And I did review a short book called, I think, *Glory*.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Yes, for *The New Yorker*.

John Updike: About a summer, somehow a summer picking beets in France or whatever. I thought many things. But I've forgotten most of them. I do remember the sense of joy, happiness, and certainly his style, throughout; especially the kind of love of the world, and excitement, that its phenomena aroused in him.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: So is that what you meant when you wrote that he writes prose the only way it should be written—"ecstatically"?

John Updike: I first encountered his prose, and I think the stories as they appeared in *The New Yorker*. Not all of them appeared. But I'd never seen writing quite like this before, writing so precise and witty, and full of little surprises. And it was those surprises that gave me a kind of ecstatic feeling. I think there is a rapture in Nabokov, which you can take to be a love of life, and also a love of consciousness; a love of the motions of the mind as it deals with whatever—chess is an example. He was a contriver of chess puzzles. And that kind of joy and manipulation is there in a lot of the prose. I don't really feel the darkness, much—it's true there's a lot of dying, a lot of death in Nabokov. The end of *Lolita*, almost every character in it is either dead or going to die. But I take dying to be for a lepidopterist like him a kind of entry into immortality, just the way a butterfly on its pin, becomes deathless, in a sense, and is preserved. There's a novel I reckon called *The Eye*, in which he describes the transition from life to death. And it's a kind of metamorphosis rather than a termination.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Did you know him at Harvard? Did you ever attend some of his guest lectures?

John Updike: No, I never met the man. I was at Harvard when he was a guest lecturer. This is in the early fifties. And the lectures that were collected, some of them, were collected in his book on literature, whatever its correct title is.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Lectures on Literature.

John Updike: But I didn't attend a single class. I didn't realize we had this marvelous man in our midst. And I was an English major, not a comp lit major. I did later go into Cambridge to hear him give a poetry reading, once. So I physically saw him and even heard his still pretty strong accent. You might know English is not predictable in its emphasis. Certain words got the wrong syllable emphasized when he spoke. But nevertheless, it was a very entertaining and magical night. My wife took his last lectures at Cornell. She was really his student, not me.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I'm curious to know how you feel about the elections. Do you feel something has changed? Has it changed your moods, your endeavors, your writing schedule in any way?

John Updike: The election hasn't changed my life, which is still bound up with the petty details of living, living and trying to write—are not always easy. But yeah, as a Democrat all my life, I'm happy to see the Democrats regain power in Washington. I don't know quite what they'll do with it. Nevertheless, yeah, I feel it's good that a corrective has been achieved against the domination of the Bush administration, and yeah, I'm kind of more cheerful and hopeful. But I was never one, you know, I wasn't a Bush Basher, really. And I find him, you know, somewhat persuasive, when he... certain programs of his... But in general, in general, I'd be happy to see the Democrats take over and be happy to see a Democrat president in two years.

A novelist properly should concern himself with the world beneath politics, the world of everyday life, and of existential crisis, rather than political crisis.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: [Laughs] Which ones, may I ask? You said some of his programs were persuasive. Are you talking about foreign policy, or economic programs?

John Updike: His economic programs don't make much sense to me, really. The rolling back of taxes on the rich doesn't seem to me likely to produce good results. Although he and others claim it does. But no, I guess I don't like the feeling that the Supreme Court might be packed enough to reverse *Roe v. Wade* and take away the right to abortion which has been part of the American scene for three decades now. Also, Iraq. I don't know. It would be nice if it weren't happening. A lot of things would be nice. I can certainly see how it was to get to the invasion, the second—his invasion instead of his father's invasion—was a potentially brilliant idea. But it hasn't worked out to be brilliant. It's turned out to be very messy and painfully bloody. And so I can't give him an A+ for that.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Do you feel America has changed in the last ten to fifteen years?

John Updike: Yes. I think that the experiment of, what might you call it, revolutionary Republicanism—the notion that it just needed a kind of little crusade to clean out the government and

make it upright and simple and inexpensive—I think all that has fallen into disillusion, the voters now are looking back toward moderate or even liberal candidates. As to the general texture of American life, well, one thing you don't have is much sense of exhilaration or feeling that we're on the brink of a "brave new world" as we did in the sixties. There's a sort of a pulling back and also a sense that young people now are a pretty grim, hard working lot, the ones I can see. They're family-oriented, and don't really have the time to... think [laughs], sort of. Or at least to think radically. We're in a holding pattern, and there is also the possibility that our position of number one has not been well used lately, and that the rise of China and India will eventually make us the kind of England of tomorrow. Anyway, that's tomorrow. Hasn't happened yet.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I came to listen to you when you were speaking with Jeff Goldberg and I was wondering, what was, as Nabokov would say, the first little throb behind *Terrorist*. There was 9/11, obviously. But you have thus far placed so much emphasis on observation, on accuracy, on precision, but also on a sense of aesthetics, which somehow has also been lacking in the contemporary landscape. Do you believe that we are in an age of political novels?

John Updike: I would hope not. They tend to fade pretty quickly, don't they? Novels about the great cause of one year become obsolete the next. A certain amount of politics naturally colors the way we live. But a novelist properly should concern himself with the world beneath politics, the world of everyday life, and of existential crisis, rather than political crisis. I was a child of the fifties, intellectually. And although we had some interest in the elections and certain issues, we were basically politically indifferent and put all of our chips on the private life. If you wanted to be an artist on the aesthetic life, well, my books are, to a great extent, about private lives, and the style is some attempt to make the ordinary interesting and even politic.

We all are a little jittery.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Within your oeuvre, why was *Terrorist* necessary? What compelled you to write a book that felt so different from the rest?

John Updike: I thought I was in a position to understand, or at least imagine the other side. To see through the eyes of a devout, young, somewhat naïve Muslim. To see through his eyes, America, as it must look as an impure, not to say obscene and disgusting morass of overeating and oversexness and, well, everything, everything. And also a kind of dead end. The city of New Prospect, named in a mood of American hope, proved to be a pretty dreary prospect, at least as far as the young men of Ahmad's generation. So anyway, I thought I could write a sympathetic novel about a terrorist, a homegrown terrorist who is seduced, it's true, by others into contemplating favorably an act of mass murder. But you know, the point of my book is that I'm not writing about an evil terrorist, or really writing against terrorism. I'm trying to see it from a terrorist's point of view. And in the end, he's one terrorist, and maybe a kind of unique case. It's an American terrorism... and procedures against terrorism are now woven so securely into the fabric of our daily lives. Anybody who flies certainly is acquainted with the security of airports. One more inconvenience, and who knows, in a city like New York, you live in New York, I think...

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Yes.

John Updike: The fear of something else happening must be somewhere in there, in your

subconsciousness all the time. So yeah, life is, in that sense, changed since 9/11, or really since before, in that new kind of possibility, nothing is quite free of danger now. We all are a little jittery.

There's an image in one of the books with a German background of a lawn sprinkler waltzing with a rainbow in its arms. That is so apropos and funny and accurate.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: *Seek My Face* came out recently in France for the rentrée littéraire. Is *Seek My Face* more intrinsically John Updike? I think you published it in 2002 in America. Was that more the texture of your own, familiar world?

John Updike: Well, I have been an eighteen-year-old, but I've never been a, whatever she is, a fifty...

Lila Azam Zanganeh: A painter.

John Updike: Fifty-eight-year-old, yes... So in that sense, it's more of a leap. But also, you know I've tried to write a novel every other book. The last one was my twenty-second. So you always ask yourself, well, what do I know that I haven't already said, more than once, often? And in the case of *Seek My Face*, it was an attempt to show the moment of American ascendancy in the visual arts, or in the pictorial arts, to see the abstract expressionist moment in the mid-forties and up to the mid-fifties, I guess, to see that, through a woman's eyes. There were a few women, actually — Joan Mitchell is one — attached to the abstract expressionist movement. But it was basically a boy's show, and very masculine, very macho, rather chauvinist in its sayings. And I got to just thinking about what would it have been like to have been a woman involved with these people. There's a lot of things I don't know and a lot of areas where I wouldn't attempt a novel or even a short story. But I've been an art reviewer, and a sort of would-be artist years ago. So I knew something about art and also something about the artistic vocation as a substitute, as a kind of religious vocation. My heroine was raised as a Quaker, and winds up after many styles, with a very austere sort of Agnes Martin kind of painting. She winds up as a Quaker. And, you know, the notion of light, inner light, light in general, yeah, it's an attempt to describe, I suppose, an artistic vocation.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Nabokov too had trained as a painter when he was an adolescent in St. Petersburg. Do you feel that your perception of light, which is something that is prevalent in your work, has been influenced by your interest in painting?

John Updike: I think any training in art, and any aspiration to be an artist, you do learn to look at things a little better, a little differently. And when you try to paint realistically you realize how complicated and elusive the visual world is — you know, what is that shadow? what color is it? — that kind of thing. So, yeah, I suppose it makes your inner vision as you try to conceive of faces and rooms and themes and costumes, and makes all this a little — what? — a little more meaningful to you as you write. Joseph Conrad famously said that the object of the writer is to make us see. And he, at his best, certainly does that. And Nabokov almost always gives us images to contemplate, images to see — a brilliant visual sense and ebullient, brilliant use of visual metaphor. Just offhand, there's an image in one of the books — with a German background — of a lawn sprinkler waltzing with a rainbow in its arms. That is so apropos and funny and accurate, that [it] knocks your breath out of you.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: How does one write *so* much? How do you do it?

John Updike: By not doing much else, is the key. I didn't want to be a teacher, and didn't think I'd be very good at it or very qualified so I did not choose teaching, either at the college level or even at the high school level. My father was a high school teacher. But I wanted to avoid duplicating his life. So I said I'd rather be a hack professional writer than no writer at all. My approach has been to, you know, treat writing as a sort of profession like dentistry or financial investment and putting in regular hours, not maybe as long as 9 to 5 but say from 9 to 1:30, so even if you write rather slowly you do accumulate a lot of manuscripts by doing it every day.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Are you a slow writer?

John Updike: Probably not the slowest around. I'm not as slow as Flaubert. But I'm a lot slower than Joyce Carol Oates—or mystery writers. I'm always interested in how other writers do it, what their quota is, if they have a quota, what their hours are. John O'Hara, a writer I admire, worked at night—he worked from midnight till one. But yeah, I've heard of writers who do 5,000 words a day. I try to do about a thousand words a day. It depends on what you're writing, of course. In the beginning of a novel, where I am now, you go very slowly because you're trying to feel your way into the heart of the thing, and also you're naming characters and trying to create incidents that will resonate through the length of the book. If you're writing a book review, and a fraction of the review is quotations of the book. Then once you get the first paragraph written it goes pretty quickly. I have been known to write a-few-thousand-word book reviews in one day.

There were a lot of family magazines, so-called, that don't exist now, like *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. These were my first glimpses of the heaven of print.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Do you read in the afternoon?

John Updike: You know, I should; that's a good idea. Maybe now the winter's here, or almost here, I will. But I sort of have other things to do. You're sort of sick of words by the time you have your writing day done. And I live on a few acres—there's always outdoor work to do. I try to play golf about twice a week, and there are various errands so that the day tends to get used up by the writing first, and then the other activities. So I don't really settle to reading until the evening. So I read rather less than I should, and certainly a lot less than a lot of New York intellectuals do. They're the ones who—somebody like Richard Howard really reads a lot! [Laughs] I read, you know, maybe a book a week, on average.

I'm not fast. Because it depends on the prose, of course. You can read some prose faster than others. But in general the kind of prose I enjoy is prose that should be savored and read fairly slowly. I think of a page a minute as being a reasonable pace. But some prose, some big pages take more than that.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: What about the craft of writing? I mean you are extraordinarily prolific both in fiction and also in your critical writings. How does that coexist mentally in your world? Is it a completely different ecology? Do you take out different tools, do you feel like a different writer when you're writing, for instance, art criticism, and then novels?

John Updike: You have a different voice, certainly, for reviews. The reviewer is not a know-it-all. He knows a lot, and there's a kind of directness of what you say. You are just giving opinions basically to an imaginary reader. Whereas in the fiction you're trying to carve some kind of world. You're trying

to make something that will stand upright, and that you can walk around, and that can be explored through several doors. And so, it's a much more intricate undertaking, and at least at first, goes slower than journalism. But, you know, after a while, when you get your world, your little world, in place and built, it can go quite rapidly. You want your people to talk, but you don't want only talk. Some books are pretty much all talk. But I try to give pictures, as you say, and create a thick enough world so that the talk, the dialogue, comes as a relief for the reader.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Why do you do journalism?

John Updike: For the... well, for the money, I was going to say. But, more than that, maybe more sinisterly than for the money, it's just a way to be in print, and to assert a print presence. I was not surrounded by... I was raised in the provinces when the most exciting modes of reading matter were in the magazines that were down at the local drugstore. We began to get *The New Yorker*, but you know I was about 11. But even before then there were a lot of family magazines, so-called, that don't exist now. Like *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. And these were my first glimpses of the heaven of print. And I remained something of a magazine writer ever since. I never expected to be a novelist. I knew there were novelists, and that novels appeared, and my mother was trying to write a novel. But I was intent just to try to get into magazines and I was rather slow to undertake writing a novel.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: What are your great loves in literature?

John Updike: I began my adolescence reading rapturously. And somewhere Proust describes the joy of reading when you're young, and that the days best spent seem to be those entirely spent reading a book.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Yes, yes! I've just read that—in the arbor of his house.

John Updike: Right! You read that?

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Yes!

John Updike: Wonderful section, and certainly describes adolescent reading at its peak. I read mystery novels, and sometimes fiction, and an occasional serious book. I read a little Mark Twain. Found that almost too real. I basically read for escape from my own world into other worlds. And I was attracted to people who wrote funny books, books that made me laugh. James Thurber was a childhood idol. Robert Benchley, various New York and *New Yorker* writers. I was an English major at college, and more or less liked everything I was assigned. I was not a rebellious or contrarian student. But Shakespeare, of course, was an especially great revelation. And out of college I discovered Proust for myself. I hadn't been a French major or anything so I read him in English. But was enraptured that he could make these sentences do this. There was an English writer called Henry Greene who also wrote amazing sentences, very unlike Proust, but amazing. J.D. Salinger was a new writer when I got out, by the time I was out of college. And I read him with great interest because he seemed to me to be really opening new territory or to be seeing America in a new way. And of course Nabokov was also a revelation in what... What a writer, I guess, what a young writer is looking for are new ways to write, or a fresh way to write, and Salinger, Nabokov, Proust, and Henry Greene are the ones who woke me up most vividly.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: So in terms of your language and texture, do you feel a kinship with Nabokov's prose? The flesh of it, the colorfulness, the vividness.

John Updike: I don't think I can aspire to the particular sheen of Nabokov's brilliance. There is a sense of wordplay that if I tried it that much it would be I think distracting. Writing is trying hard to do two things, as I see it. One is to be entertaining in itself. Any page of good prose has something of the quality of a poem. It's interesting in itself even if you don't know the story or quite what you're reading. It has a kind of abstract dynamism. But also it is trying to deliver images and a story to a reader, so in that sense it should be kind of invisible. And I think I'm a little more invisible than Nabokov is. But the beauty and the comedy, and the poignancy often, of his prose, are something I'm happy to imitate if I can.

There is a cruelty in Nabokov, which—you know, life is cruel, so why can't a writer be cruel? But in that case, it seemed to me to be too much, and in some ways the book was very aristocratic.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I read that you weren't a great fan of *Ada*.

John Updike: I thought the book was [coughs]—sorry I think I may be losing my voice.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: No problem.

John Updike: Yeah, you can find my review of *Ada* somewhere in one of those big books of my reviews. I thought it was too much of a good thing in that his, what you might call his narcissistic side, the self-reveling side, the preening, you know that word "preening": the hero of *Ada* is Van Veen, which is also like Van Vain, and there was a kind of vanity and a preening and a dandyish cruelty. There is a cruelty in Nabokov, which—you know, life is cruel, so why can't a writer be cruel? But in that case, it seemed to me to be too much, and in some ways the book was very aristocratic. Maybe as a democratic American I resisted that. I preferred *Pale Fire*, which is also very intricate in its underpinnings. But, with the poem, actually delivers something that I could recognize in the American landscape. That is the college town and the homely daughter of a brilliant man, etc. There is something there that I could see, whereas there isn't so much in *Ada* that I could see, really. It was all kind of dandy.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Is that the reason you liked *Lolita*? Because you could picture it well? Because of the American landscape?

John Updike: I liked the first half better than the second half. Once you get into the area of Quilty and Lolita being, you know, absconded, kidnapped, as it were, by this other man... Nabokov begins to write little poems and the whole thing becomes a little arch. I thought all the time that Humbert and Lolita are together—and the early seductions and then the travels, the very uproarious travels through America are classic, really, and tell Americans a great deal about their own country which nobody else could have told them.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You mentioned Salinger. Was his a new voice because of the adolescent voice? How did Salinger strike you as an innovator at the time?

John Updike: I had a writing teacher called Kenneth Kempton who actually was the most commercially-minded of the writing teachers I had. He thought the idea of writing a short story was to get it into a magazine. But he would read us aloud stories he liked, and he read us a couple of Salinger's—a story like "Just before the War with the Eskimos." In it there was an affectedness and something diagonal or sideways about the energy of it. And the openness and the kind of hidden religious search going on. All that seemed so different from the short stories of the thirties and forties and the stories that are taught as American classics. Instead you found a whole new level, I thought, of sensitivity and responsiveness. So it wasn't so much *Catcher in the Rye*—which is really a long short story. But some other short stories that really excited me.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: "A Perfect Day for Bananafish"?

John Updike: Yes, that one I liked, although not as well. I'm not sure I ever understood it. Nor do I much like stories or novels that end in the suicide of the chief character. That seems to me... I mean even if you've attempted suicide, nobody has *really* done it and survived. So in that way suicide seemed to me almost an experience that no writer should attempt to describe. But, no, [laughs] it's a classic. And there's a story called "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes"—funny title, but they're all funny, those titles—that I liked quite well.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You once wrote about reading, "I read to come and steal," which reminded me of T.S. Eliot, talking about poets. And he said good poets are thieves, or good poets steal. Can you tell me something about that? Do you read to glean things here and there? Do you read with a professional interest?

John Updike: Yes, often. I think what Eliot said was bad poets, or maybe weak poets imitate, strong poets steal.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Yes, good poets steal.

John Updike: Yeah, you're always looking for something. You know, this image I mentioned. There's an image in one of the first Nabokovs I read, was the pencil sharpener, which said "Ticonderoga, Ticonderoga." Ticonderoga being the brand of a pencil. But to listen to what a pencil sharpener is saying was a kind of image you would love to have created yourself. I don't think I would steal that, it's so special. But I have stolen images, I think, in the course of my work, when I thought nobody would notice. Sure. At first, I think trying to form an approach to writing you look for a model. And I named four or five that meant a lot to me at a formative point in my life. But after you're formed, then basically you kind of read for things so admirable that you wish you had done them and you're not above maybe stealing them, if you can find a good place to hide them.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Sure but that's sort of the artistic process, even through music or painting, it's constant stealing and placing in new angles, in a way.

John Updike: The young people ask me about becoming a writer, and they really haven't read, not even read bad stuff. They haven't experienced reading as happiness, as it were. So without some knowledge of what other writers have done, it's very hard to find your own way, I think. We're all thieves, I suppose.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You mentioned the activity of reading. Reading as a dandy, reading as an amateur. Are you concerned about—as a writer, and as such a prolific writer in America today, are you concerned about the future of reading? Are Americans still reading? Or is it a cliché to think they're not?

John Updike: Undoubtedly it's become something of an automatic thought that Americans don't read in the way they used to. And maybe I've said it more often than I should, and there are some, clearly, Americans who do read, young Americans, even. And that the much-decried computer, the PC, is not just a substitute for reading, but in some cases simulates reading. But I didn't see my children when they were young, nor do I see my grandchildren now reading the way I did—you know as a way to get out of a boring afternoon. They have too many other alternative things, and they don't really have much spare time. The average American child is thoroughly programmed to do this and that—little league, piano lessons, judo lessons, on and on, the sort of idle roaming through the printed world isn't possible anymore. I wasn't the greatest young reader who ever was. I was a normal sort of boy who liked to run around and play games and go to the movies. But I did manage to read enough so that I wanted to do it myself. I wanted to be on the production end of this product. Today, all the universities and the colleges report that people, they get eighteen-year-olds who really can't read or write or have any feeling for grammar, and that we are heading into a post-literate age. So yeah, I'm worried that the kind of modernist, late-modernist writing that I aspired to do, may be just a little too tough for today's average young reader.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Your style has such a singular texture, your attention to detail, the accuracy, precision. But there is also a great sense of humanism and lyricism which seem to be quite singular in the American landscape. Do you feel that you've become, I almost want to say an isolated character in American fiction with that sense of humanism in the contemporary backdrop, so to speak? Are you appreciated as such?

John Updike: [Laughs] I think it's true to say that I—you know there was a mode in the sixties or was it the seventies of black humor—there were a lot of black humorists and darkness and a kind of reflexive gloom, which many writers seem to give off. And I'm relatively cheerful, you'd have to say... The expression of joy or of praise or of gratitude to be here, gratitude for the world, excitement at being conscious to the degree that we are conscious, all that plays into my work and may make me a relatively anachronistic or old-fashioned kind of writer. There certainly is enough gloom and tragedy, in even my writing, to go around. But it's never only that. It's always something, if it's only in the words themselves, there's something celebrative, to celebrate the world as it is. So yeah, I don't know too many people exactly like me. But then writers are never exactly like each other. A writer who I feel close with was the late John Cheever, in a way. Although we were different writers, he had a kind of intuition and brilliance that I don't think I have, but I like to—we saw somewhat the same world, I think.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Maybe in the post-post-experimental age, you know, the joy of consciousness will make a powerful comeback, with a vengeance, in the literary world.

John Updike: Look forward to that! We're in a post-almost everything!