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Aristi Trendel

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## REFERENCES

New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2013, Pp 270. ISBN-13: 9781571135117 (Hardcover)

- 1 John Updike scholarship seems to be thriving. After *The John Updike Encyclopedia* by Jack De Bellis (2000) another volume of encyclopedic nature has come out this year: *Becoming John Updike: Critical Reception, 1958-2010* by Laurence W. Mazzeno, President Emeritus of Alvenia University, whose volumes on Austen, Dickens, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold make his latest one a classic. As its title indicates, the book presents critical reception that covers both journalistic and academic responses to Updike's various writings. One would expect *Becoming John Updike* to be a book to be consulted rather than to be read. However, readers who wish to have a panoramic and comprehensive view of Updike's critical reception over the years could read the volume in one go. It is quite ironic that Updike's death in January 2009 made things easier for the critics since an entire corpus rather than a corpus in process appears more manageable in a way. Updike's corpus is very impressive, but it has found its match - fifty-two books, hundreds of essays, thousands of reviews and the above mentioned encyclopedia. Mazzeno's book is the first to fill the book-length reception gap. Although it may not seem surprising that a talented, prolific American writer such as Updike calls for prolific responses, Updike's double appeal to general readers and to academics, which Mazzeno highlights, can account for his brilliant career. Being both a popular writer commanding reviews in magazines such as *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle* and the darling of academics in a sustained way is not a very common phenomenon. It is certainly not unrelated to the controversy over Updike's greatness which Mazzeno manages deftly throughout the book. The four citations/

epigraphs in the introduction prepare for the contrasting views accommodated in the coming pages.

- 2 However, Mazzeno's chronological study of Updike's critical reception though it makes ample room for the negative or hostile criticism, whether journalistic or academic, arranging for a continuum of responses achieves a synthetic account that rarely creates an overall negative image of Updike's work. In the ten chapters that make up this study the author first offers a dense overview that allows the reader to apprehend the major developments in the period under examination and then proceeds through a tapestry of citations and brief summaries of the authors' ideas to gauge the various responses. Mazzeno does not hesitate to adopt caution when he thinks it is necessary as in the case of Updike's highly controversial novel *Brazil*: "It may be too early to determine where *Brazil* is likely to stand in the Updike canon, but two judgments by academics writing soon after the novel was published suggest that it will remain controversial" (120). Although Mazzeno's voice may sound very self-restrained while he steps back to provide space for a host of critical voices, he also gives his own view discreetly as his assessment of Updike's poetry indicates; Mazzeno fully embraces Elisabeth Matson's acclaim of the author's poetry: "Unfortunately, few critics followed up on her observations, and more than forty years later most readers retain the impression that Updike was little more than a clever versifier" (32 emphasis mine). Indeed, he does mean to have the final word as his own commentary shows in the discussion of *Terrorist*, "If critics like Kakutani and Hitchens are put off by Updike's portrait of a terrorist, it may be that Ahmad's simplicity and shallowness do not square with their idea of the exalted extremist ideology that must (for them) lie at the base of such abominable behavior" (174). Very wittily though the very last word is given to Updike or rather to his most popular character, Harry Angstrom, along with Mazzeno's final assessment of Updike, as he seems to endorse James Schiff's observation in the close of his Introduction to the inaugural issue (2001) of *John Updike Review*: "Updike left us with an immense trove of elegant, playful, and intensely serious writings that are waiting to be read, reread, discussed, and debated" (4). For scholars, that should be –to borrow Harry Angstrom's famous last word– 'Enough.'" (193) Mazzeno touching upon the issue of Updike's prolificacy attempts to determine whether it was blight barring Updike from the Nobel prize or blessing ensuring continuing critical attention. In spite of the ambiguity of the "famous last word," Updike seems to have earned a place in literary posterity. It is rather regrettable that Bernard Rodgers's 2012 voluminous collection of critical essays, *Critical Insights: John Updike*, that contains reprints and original work by Updike's scholars, is mentioned without any commentary. It is even more regrettable that James Yerkes's literary website devoted to Updike, *The Centaurian*, which hosted and promoted Updike scholarship for 14 years and came to an end in 2009, is not mentioned at all. Although readers who expect to find a lengthy analysis of critical works are bound to be disappointed, Mazzeno's book is certainly an invaluable volume in Updike scholarship for scholars and even for inquisitive readers as well as a tribute to John Updike's work. The book covering mainly the US, a similar study outside the US and the English-speaking world would be complementary.

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AUTHOR

**ARISTI TRENDEL**

Maine University, Le Mans, France.