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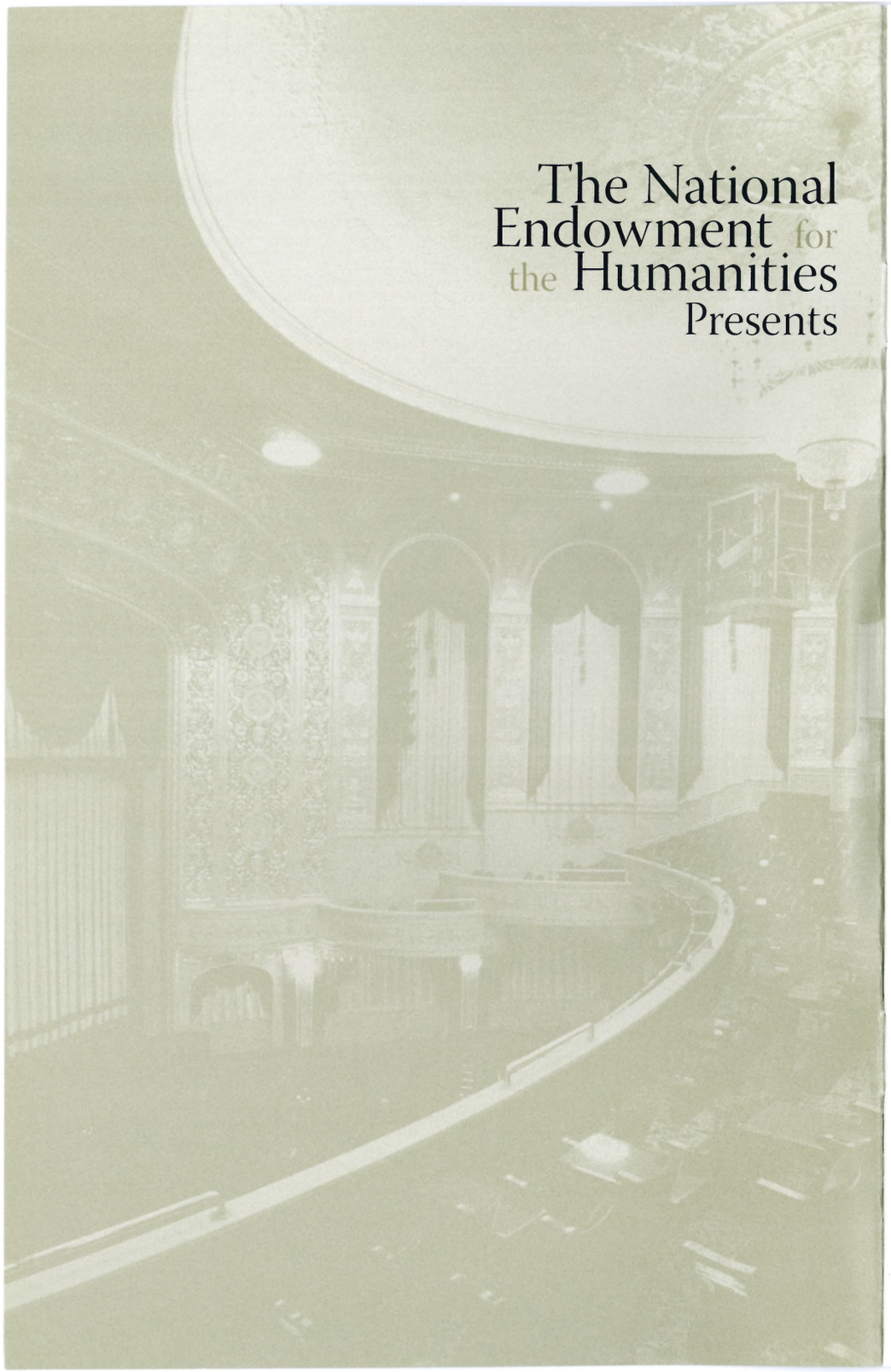

The National Endowment for the Humanities Presents

"The Clarity of Things: What Is American about American Art?"

A Lecture by John Updike
Pulitzer Prize-winning author

The Warner Theatre, Washington, D.C.

Thursday, May 22, 2008, at 7:30 p.m.

THE 37TH ANNUAL JEFFERSON LECTURE IN THE HUMANITIES

PRESENTATION OF COLORS
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WELCOME, ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, AND INTRODUCTIONS
Bruce Cole, Chairman
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PICTURING AMERICA VIDEO
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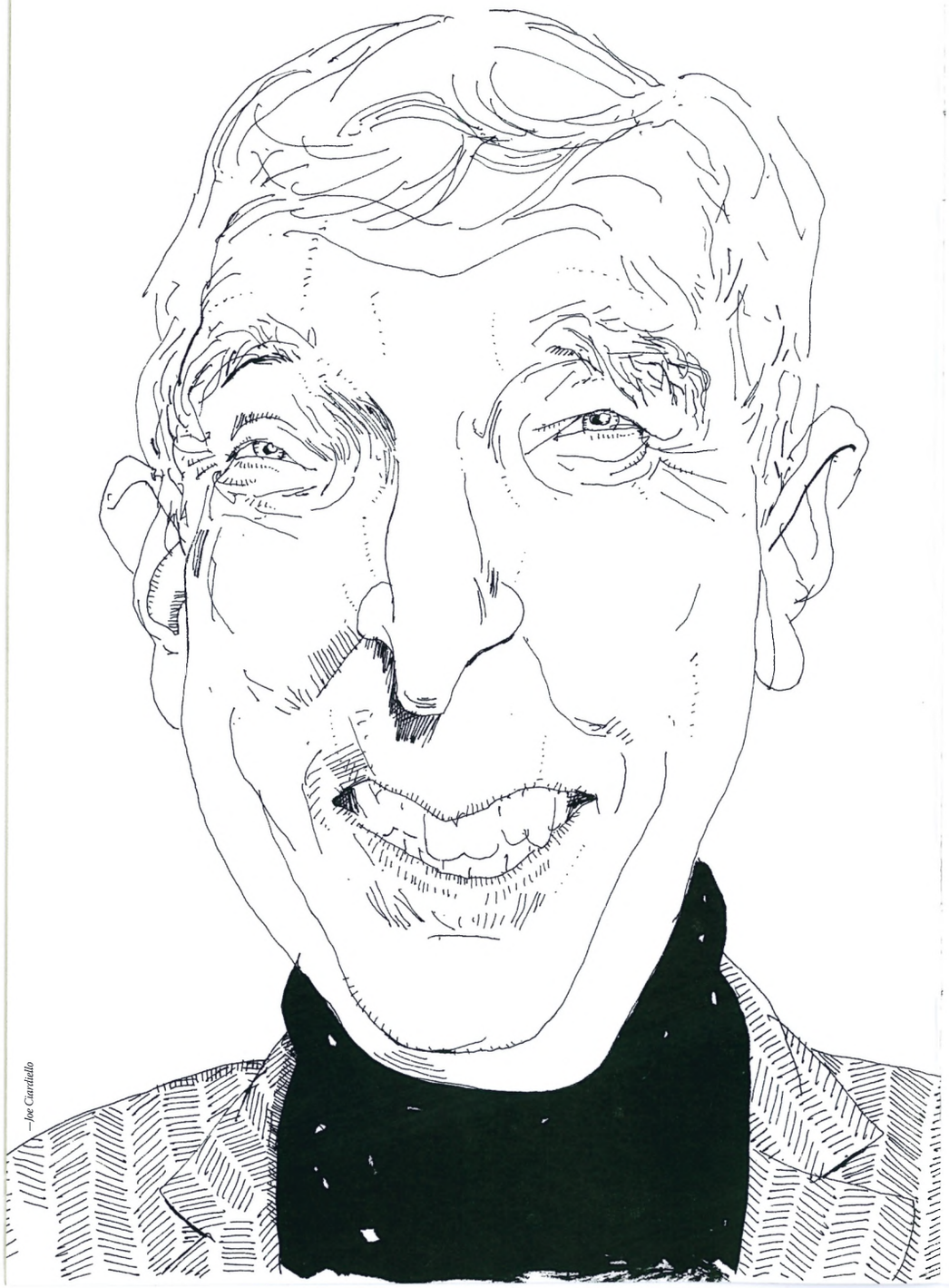
LECTURE
John Updike

RECEPTION
The Willard InterContinental Hotel
Grand Ballroom



—Joe Ciardiello

JOHN UPDIKE

HIS PEN RARELY AT REST, JOHN UPDIKE HAS BEEN PUBLISHING fiction, essays, and poetry since the mid-fifties, when he was a staff writer at the *New Yorker,* contributing material for the "Talk of the Town" sections. "Of all modern American writers," writes Adam Gopnik in *Humanities* magazine, "Updike comes closest to meeting Virginia Woolf's demand that a writer's only job is to get himself, or herself, expressed without impediments."

Self-Consciousness: Memoirs, published in 1989, paints the landscape of his boyhood in Shillington, on the outskirts of Reading, southwest of the formerly solid mill town and extending into Pennsylvania Dutch farm country. But Updike's interests pulled him north and east—first, toward the Reading Museum, within walking distance of his hometown (the fictional Olinger, which is the setting for many early short stories), and then, with a full scholarship in hand, to Harvard University, where, as an English major, he did a thesis on seventeenth-century English poet Robert Herrick, and graduated summa cum laude in 1954.

He has had a sustained and sustaining interest in art, beginning in childhood when he had his first drawing lessons and, as a devotee of comic strips, wrote a perspicacious fan letter to the creator of "Little Orphan Annie," Harold Gray. Much later, at the Harvard *Lampoon*, of which he was president in his senior year, he was still at it. In one of his *Lampoon* cartoons, two apparent seekers of universal awareness sit cross-legged and side by side, both clad in loose, open garb most appropriate for meditation, and one says to the other, "Don't look now, but I think my navel is contemplating *me.*" During that senior year, *Lampoon* staff recall, he wrote about two-thirds of every issue. At Harvard he took art classes

with Hyman Bloom, a painter who was associated with a style known as Boston Expressionism. Then a Knox Fellowship gave Updike the wherewithal to study for a year at the Ruskin School of Drawing & Fine Art in Oxford, England. Painting had taught him, he once said, "how difficult it is to see things exactly as they are, and that the painting is 'there' as a book is not."

In *Just Looking,* 1989, and *Still Looking,* 2005, Updike gathered the impressions he's been making over a lifetime of observing painting and sculpture. In an essay in the former he captures in limpid prose Vermeer's achievement in paint in *View of Delft*: "an instant of flux forever held." And in the latter, in a chapter on Jackson Pollock, Updike glimpses, and so we do, too, the essence of what Pollock's drip-painting could accomplish—"an image, in dots and lines and little curdled clouds of dull color, of the cosmos." His interest in art has also shown in his fiction. One of his later novels, *Seek My Face,* 2002, follows the lines of the life of an aging painter who often lived in the shadows of her more famous husband, also a painter. In *The Witches of Eastwick*, 1984, the novel's hero, the devil, in the form of one Darryl Van Horne, is an ecstatic collector of Pop art. "I suppose," Updike has said, "since I was an aspiring cartoonist once, I could 'relate,' . . . to the Pop art imagery. *Witches* takes place in a post-Pop art time, so in a sense dust has gathered on the movement, which was fairly short-lived." Harold Bloom has called *The Witches of Eastwick* one of Updike's most remarkable books, as all of his "themes and images coalesce in a rich, resonant swirl." Of *Witches* Updike himself remarked that "the touch of magical realism gave it a kind of spriteliness for me."

About his fiction in general he has said, "My only duty was to describe reality as it had come to me—to give the mundane its beautiful due." When considering the entire scope of his work, readers of American fiction are most often put in mind of Harry Angstrom, the character from the Rabbit saga with whom Updike seemed for many years to be on closest, if often contentious, terms. American novelist Joyce Carol Oates has written that Updike is "a master, like Flaubert, of mesmerizing us with his narrative voice even as he might repel us with the vanities of human desire his scalpel exposes." British novelist Martin Amis has seen the hand of a master in *Rabbit at Rest,* 1990, marveling, "This novel is enduringly eloquent about weariness, age and disgust, in a prose that is always fresh, nubile, and unwitherable."

Avid readers and admirers also point to many other works in his eclectic oeuvre as masterpieces, including *The Centaur,* 1963, set, as are the Rabbit novels, in Pennsylvania and winner of France's prize for best foreign book; *Couples,* 1968, set in the fictional Tarbox, modeled after Ipswich, Massachusetts, where Updike and his first wife and family moved from Manhattan in 1957; and *Roger's Version,* 1986, which magisterially sets a middle-aged divinity professor and a computer whiz kid bent on proving the existence of God on a metaphysical collision course.

He is known to many first as an author of short stories, with dozens having graced the pages of the *New Yorker* before being published in collections. Many other readers know his shorter fiction either through the O. Henry Prize Stories or anthologies of American literature, where they would have entered into the at times sad, at times triumphant thoughts of, say, a certain check-out clerk at the local grocery store, "A & P" serving as a model of dramatic irony for at least two generations of English literature teachers.

Updike is, of course, also an accomplished literary critic, whose reviews and essays are as much distinguished by their breadth of understanding as by their charitable disposition. Examples of his critical acumen frequently appear in the *New York Review of Books*, and he received his second National Book Critics Circle Award in 1983 for *Hugging the Shore,* including such gems as the micro-essay

"A Mild 'Complaint,'" which skewers the misuses and 'misusers' of 'scare quotes.'

He has also applied his habile wit to poetry, composing early on a collection called *The Carpentered Hen* in 1954. Three more tomes of verse followed. *Collected Poems, 1953-1993*, comprises what he calls his "beloved waifs."

After having met Katharine White, fiction editor at the *New Yorker* during his year of study at the Ruskin School, he began submitting stories regularly to the magazine and then settled in an apartment in Manhattan for his two-year stint there.

Migrating from Gotham to Ipswich, he thrived amid salubrious sea breezes and continued to publish at the rate he set for himself early in his career, about a book a year. It was during this time, roughly 1957 to 1970 that he published *The Poorhouse Fair, Rabbit Run, Pigeon Feathers, The Centaur,* and *Bech: A Book,* introducing readers to his irreverent alter ego, Henry Bech.

If minute attention to craftsmanship has always been a hallmark of Updike's work, so have inventiveness and creative unpredictability. After moving to Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, with his second wife, Martha, in 1982, he brought forth work that differed widely in subject matter and setting: *In the Beauty of the Lilies,* 1996, a multigenerational, twentieth century-spanning family saga summing up increasingly secular, movie-mad America; *Toward the End of Time,* 1997, set in a near-future, post-nuclear war New England with menacing undercurrents; *Gertrude and Claudius,* 2000, concerned with the earlier life of Hamlet's mother, Claudius, and Old Hamlet; and *Terrorist,* 2006, featuring the radicalized Islamist teenage son of an absent Arab father and an Irish-American mother.

In the half century he has been writing he has garnered many literary prizes, awards, and honors, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, twice each; the Pen Faulkner Award for Fiction, the Rea Award for the Short Story; and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is among a select few who have received both the National Humanities Medal and the National Medal of Arts. Albright College in Reading (the fictional Brewer readers first encountered in *Rabbit Run*) bestowed upon him an honorary Litt.D. degree in 1982.

Along with his finely tuned regard for painting, which has often provided the visual element for his fiction, there has been a deep and abiding appreciation of the reading life in general and a love of the book in particular. He has alluded to an imagined reader of his, ideal or otherwise, as being a teenaged boy who happens upon one of his books on the dusty shelves of some library one afternoon looking for literary adventure. In a speech two years ago at the American Booksellers Association convention, he encouraged beleaguered booksellers to "defend [their] lonely forts. . . . For some of us, books are intrinsic to our human identity."

In fall 2007 Updike came out with a collection of essays, *Due Considerations*. A new novel, *The Widows of Eastwick,* is due out in fall 2008. After so many words, is America's leading man of letters even marginally at rest? No, he is still looking and still writing.

—*Steve Moyer*

THE JEFFERSON LECTURE IN THE HUMANITIES

Established by the Endowment in 1972, the Jefferson Lectureship is the highest honor the federal government bestows for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities. The lecture, traditionally delivered each spring, provides the opportunity for an outstanding thinker to present matters of broad concern in the humanities in a public forum. The lecturer is chosen each year by the National Council on the Humanities. Former lecturers include Lionel Trilling, Erik Erickson, Robert Penn Warren, Paul Freund, John Hope Franklin, Saul Bellow, C. Vann Woodward, Edward Shils, Barbara Tuchman, Gerald Holton, Emily Townsend Vermeule, Jaroslav Pelikan, Sidney Hook, Cleanth Brooks, Leszek Kolakowski, Forrest McDonald, Robert Nisbet, Walker Percy, Bernard Lewis, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Bernard Knox, Robert Conquest, Gwendolyn Brooks, Vincent Scully, Toni Morrison, Stephen Toulmin, Bernard Bailyn, Caroline Walker Bynum, James McPherson, Arthur Miller, Henry Louis Gates Jr., David McCullough, Helen Vendler, Donald Kagan, Tom Wolfe, and Harvey Mansfield.

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The Army of the Potomac –
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In *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,* 13 July 1867
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