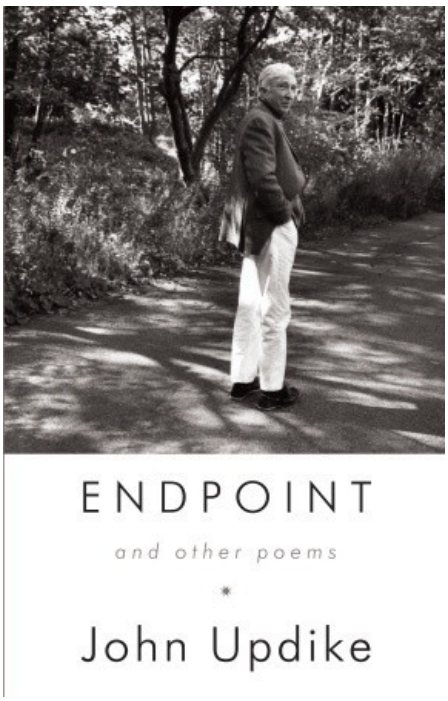

Endpoint and Other Poems

John Updike

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Endpoint and Other Poems John Updike
A stunning collection of poems that John Updike wrote during the last seven years of his life and put together only weeks before he died for this, his final book.

The opening sequence, "Endpoint," is made up of a series of connected poems written on the occasions of his recent birthdays and culminates in his confrontation with his final illness. He looks back on the boy that he was, on the family, the small town, the people, and the circumstances that fed his love of writing, and he finds endless delight and solace in "turning the oddities of life into words."

"Other Poems" range from the fanciful (what would it be like to be a stolen Rembrandt painting? he muses) to the celebratory, capturing the flux of life. A section of sonnets follows, some inspired by travels to distant lands, others celebrating the idiosyncrasies of nature in his own backyard.

For John Updike, the writing of poetry was always a special joy, and this final collection is an eloquent and moving testament to the life of this extraordinary writer.

Endpoint and Other Poems Details

Date	:	Published March 31st 2009 by Knopf Publishing Group (first published January 1st 2009)
ISBN	:	9780307272867
Author	:	John Updike
Format	:	Hardcover 97 pages
Genre	:	Poetry, Fiction, Anthologies, Collections

From Reader Review Endpoint and Other Poems for online ebook

Barbara says

This collection of poems, written during the last seven years of Updike's life, allows the reader to share in the poet's sadness as he realizes he is reaching the end of his life. The poems are intimate and emotional. Updike writes, for example, about being hospitalized, and having a needle biopsy showing his cancer has metastasized. A sense of regret and resignation flows through his poems about spending his winters in Tucson to avoid the harsh New England winters. He reminisces about his younger days in Pennsylvania where he and his friends listened to Frankie Laine at the Stephens' Sweet Shop. Most of all, as you read, you seem to be seeing the world through Updike's eyes as the small events of everyday life become subjects for his poems of reflection. He begins *Baseball* with the words: "It looks easy from a distance,/ easy and lazy, even/ until you stand up to the plate. . ." He ends the poem with these words," . . . Baseball was/ invented in America, where beneath/ the good cheer and sly jazz the chance/ of failure is everybody's right,/ beginning with baseball."

David Waterman says

Endpoint and Other Poems
John Updike
Random House, 2009

-Past, Present, and an Imminent Future

When reading this book of poetry, it becomes painfully obvious that Updike was worried about his rapidly approaching death when he wrote it. Although, perhaps he was more curious than worried. Published in 2009, the year he died, this book is constantly referencing the poet’s mortality, but in a way that feels almost lighthearted. The title poem, which opens the book, is broken into seventeen sections, most of which are dated, and each section is likewise broken up into a series of sonnets. Although the number of sonnets in each section varies, the fact that the author chose to format his poem consistently into sonnets reflects both the order and the chaos of the passing time within the poem.
In “Endpoint”, as well as many of the other poems, Updike frequently uses the past as a way to contextualize the present. He begins by referencing his childhood, recalling a moment where he lies on his “sickbed,” and then jumps quickly into the present where he reflects on his imminent death. Such comparisons continue throughout the poem’s timeline which, as the dates connote, starts in 2002 and ends on Dec. 12, 2008. As the poem progresses, the dates become closer, suggesting Updike’s rapid descent towards death. However, the poem still remains lighthearted throughout, recalling childhood fun, briefly discussing pop culture, and even concluding with a surprisingly hopeful quotation. In this way, the poem becomes a melancholy reverie on a life completed but well-spent.
The rest of the book is separated into three sections titled “Other Poems,” “Sonnets,” and “Light and Personal” respectively. In “Other Poems,” as in “Endpoint,” Updike avoids the use of meter and rhyme and instead relies more on the subtle use of sound devices to create rhythm. Nonetheless, the entire section resonates with a sense of order. This is because he tends to keep the number of lines in his stanzas and their length consistent within the confines of each poem as well as within the entire section. The effect is an ordered chaos similar to that of “Endpoint,” especially since the poems deal with similar a similar subject: the relation between the past, the present, and death.

“Sonnets,” as the title so appropriately suggests, is comprised of 18 sonnet poems. As with “Endpoint,” this leaves the poet little room for structure variation, but it does give him plenty of room for reflection. This tends to be the theme of the section, with special emphasis on cities that Updike has visited. In stark contrast with this and the rest of the book, “Light and Personal” consists mostly of poems with both rhyme and meter. The use of rhyme and meter gives the poems, which are mostly about silly or innocuous topics, an airy quality which is largely absent from the rest of the book.
The fact that the poet ends his book with this section is not surprising. Despite his reliance on melancholy themes, he consistently peppers his poems with humor and wit, probably as a way to distract from the imminence of his own death. Who can blame him? No one wants to think about death, especially when they’re dying. This final section seems to be the poet’s reminder to his readers that they should take it easy before they can’t take anything anymore.

Anna says

This being my first John Updike book, I didn't really know what to expect; I was, however, pretty impressed. He was able to make the most mundane things into the most fascinating, simply by his phrasing. I can honestly say that I enjoyed this book of poems. My only side note, and I do not mean this in a negative way, is to not read this when you are feeling a little sad. I say this because the whole novel revolves around Updike's impending death, and this can become a little depressing, especially read when already feeling down, or even when read at night. Overall, I would recommend to anyone who likes fairly straightforward poetry with undertones of regret and sorrow.

Here are some of my favorite pieces:
"Signals beyond their ken transported us--Jack Benny's stately pauses, Errol Flynn's half-smile, the songs we learned to smoke to, ads in magazines called slicks, the comic strips, realer than real, a Paradise that if we held our breaths, we could ascend to, free" (17). ~From "Endpoint"

"How many starved hours of struggle resumed in fits of life's irritation did it take to seal and sew shut the berry-bright eyes and untie the tiny wild knot of a heart? I cannot know, discovering this wad of junco-fluff, weightless and wordless in its corner of netting deer cannot chew through nor gravity-defying bird bones break"(53). ~From "Bird Caught In My Deer Netting"

"Yes, the body is a hideous thing, the feet and the genitals especially, the human face not far behind"(72). ~From "Lucian Freud"

"It came to me the other day: Were I to die, no one would say, 'Oh, what a shame! So young, so full Of promise--depths unplumbable!' Instead, a shrug and tearless eyes Will greet my overdue demise; The wide response will be, I know, 'I thought he died a while ago.' For life's a shabby subterfuge, And death is real, and dark, and huge. The shock of it will register Nowhere but where it will occur"(93). ~From "Requiem"

Terry says

Althought I usually complain about publishers putting out excerpts or very thin anthologies disguised as "gift books"--like the Auden collection put out solely to tie to the movie Four Weddings and a Funeral--I actually

would have preferred the publisher put out the long poem "Endpoint" out as a separate book. Although I cringe to speak ill of the dead, the back half of this book is sort of...thin. I used to wonder how on earth Updike was so ridiculously prolific, until I realized he was one of those people who happen to turn their everyday observations into, you know, sonnets. While that's an arguably admirable quirk of personality, it doesn't mean that all those resulting poems should be published or anthologized. Which means to say I don't think the "lighter" work collected in the second part of Endpoint and Other Poems in a sort of let's-throw-everything-in-including-the-kitchen-sink manner really belongs together with "Endpoint", which is poignant and heartbreaking and immediate. It's the use of turning-everyday-observations-into-art at its best. So the book feels sort of lopsided to me, and the work as a whole suffers slightly.

Robert Beveridge says

John Updike, **Endpoint** (Knopf, 2009)

The first John Updike book I read was *Midpoint*, his 1969 collection of poetry, published when he was thirty-seven. I was going to try and make some sort of inane comparison with *Endpoint*, Updike's final book, published posthumously, but I figure that fact that *Midpoint* actually ended up almost being an exact midpoint makes any point I was going to make there far more elegantly than I would have. And while Updike's poetry has gotten a great deal more conservative over the years (I know a magazine editor or two who use the sonnets in *Midpoint* as examples of how avant-garde formal poetry can be they'll accept for publication), Updike to the end never lost an ounce of his sense of the wonders inherent in the English language, and how to shape those wonders into something ineffable (Campbell McGrath, at a posthumous reading of the book, said Updike's use of language is comparable to sound effects in a film; indeed):

“Today, the author hits three score thirteen,
an age his father, woken in the night
by pressure on his heart, fell short of. Still,
I scribble on. My right hand occupies
the center of my vision, faithful old
five-fingered beast of burden, dappled with
some psoriatic spots I used to hate...”
(--”The Author Observes His Birthday, 2005”)

You can take it as a whole and probably miss some stuff, but if you want to isolate something, just read through that slowly, emphasizing the s sounds, and then pause and consider the landscape Updike has created in that short section. It's hilly, gently so, and windswept, and has a few tufts of dead grass here and there but is otherwise barren—and endlessly fascinating. I ended up liking this just as much as I did *Midpoint*, which was quite a pleasant surprise given the relentlessly autobiographical nature of much of the material here. Highly recommended. ****

Susan says

Loved many of these poems, esp. the birthday poems at the beginning. Some of the later ones got a bit too involved with wordplay, seemed a bit overdone. (This is apparently Updike's biggest fault, but I still love his

beautiful writing.) Overall feeling was that Updike was just waiting to die... and it was very illuminating to read these last poems, written from a point of life that not many people have written about (for instance, on IV in a hospital when your relatives are all visiting to say goodbye). Kind of reminded me of the description of being born that starts "The TIn Drum." The very ends of life.

Rebecca says

My first Updike, if you'd believe it. I heard about this from *The Violet Hour* by Katie Roiphe, one chapter of which concerns Updike's last illness and death. My favorites of these poems are the ones that tell stories, and the choice of vocabulary and use of alliteration, especially, is always flawless. "Endpoint" includes reflections written on six of his last seven birthdays, reminiscences from his Pennsylvania childhood, and the dawning knowledge that his lung cancer would kill him.

Of the other poems, I most liked "Levels of Air," describing the insects and birds he sees at different heights in the sky; "Chambered Nautilus," about the many rooms one occupies in life; and "To a Well-Connected Mouse," an update of Robbie Burns based on the genetic similarity between man and mouse. [5* to "Endpoint"; 4* to "Other Poems"; 3* to "Sonnets" and "Light and Personal" = 4* overall.]

Some favorite lines:

> Nature is never bored, and we whose lives
> are linearly pinned to these aloof,
> self-fascinated cycles can't complain,
> though aches and pains and even dreams a-crawl
> with wood lice of decay give pause to praise.
> Birthday, death day—what day is not both?
> (from "March Birthday 2002, and After" from "Endpoint")

> All would be well, I felt, all manner of thing.
> The needle, carefully worked, was in me, beyond pain,
> aimed at an adrenal gland. I had not hoped
> to find, in this bright place, so solvent a peace.
> Days later, the results came casually through:
> the gland, biopsied, showed metastasis.
> (from "Needle Biopsy 12/22/08" from "Endpoint")

> Baseball was
> invented in America, where beneath
> the good cheer and sly jazz the chance
> of failure is everybody's right,
> beginning with baseball. (from "Baseball")

> Salt water, just beyond, is steely blue,
> bedecked by mooring-balls and colored buoys,
> beneath a sky where tufts of cirrus hang
> like combings from a pampered, moon-white dog.
> (from "Claremont Hotel, Southwest Harbor, Maine")

Gary Baughn says

Four stars only if you like Updike to begin with, and also only if you like reading poems. I usually like anthologies of poetry on an occasional basis, but Updike has always fascinated me, and this last collection of his, although it concentrates on his impending death, has enough of his wit and eye for detail to make up for its mostly single-minded focus on health issues.
Besides, who else would have poems about Doris Day, Payne Stewart and Monica Lewinsky? Not to mention one poem contemplating Helen of Troy's intestines.
I loved the Rabbit, Run series of novels, which he wrote only because he could not get rich writing poetry, which now, having read this collection, I think was our loss, not his.

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ej cullen says

Updike found mastery within the short story. His novels, though flawed, are nevertheless always good reading. His poetry, uber- witty and urbane, rarely (but sometimes) rises to the level of the clever, insightful, gifted vision of the schoolboy and scholar that always, from his strongest work sprung forth. This thin volume of poems, a follow-up to the more playful 'Midpoint' (1969), he wrote when he knew he was dying. The final poem to his wife, "For Martha, On Her Birthday After Her Cataract Operation," is at once sad and joyous, - as, with the gift of his prose, he often made this humble reader:

My blue-eyed beauty, now you see
Through plastic sharply, courtesy
Of Dr. Saintly Shingleton
And all his green-clad crew, who spun
Their miracle, ten minutes' worth,
In time to celebrate your birth
In fine detail; O Martha mine
Come count your candles: sixty nine
- No more, no less - alight upon
A cake of love from your own
John

Liz Gray says

Updike's last collection of poetry (he died in 2009) was written during the last seven years of his life, and the poems range from contemplations of mortality, reflections on the people and places of his youth, and a series of sonnets inspired by places both distant from and close to home. Updike's language is wry, pointed and sometimes wistful, but never in a cloying way. My favorite lines are found in "Endpoint," the first section, in a poem titled "Spirit of '76:" "Be with me, words, a little longer; you / have given me my quitclaim in the

sun, / sealed shut my adolescent wounds, made light / of grownup troubles, turned to my advantage / what in most lives would be pure deficit, / and formed, of those I loved, more solid ghosts." Luckily for us, words stayed with him until the very end.

Jennifer says

A few poems I enjoyed, but it wasn't great for me.

Curtis says

John Updike said that his writing career began in 1954 when the New Yorker accepted one of his poems. However, most of us think of Updike as a novelist. After all, he won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice-Rabbit is Rich (1981) and Rabbit at Rest (1991). He also won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award for fiction. I didn't expect much from Endpoint: And Other Poems. However, I was curious how the iconic writer summarized his final days via this posthumous volume of poetry. The "Endpoint" poems were written during the last years of his life, they are sensitive and poignant. One of those poems is titled "Oblong Ghost 11/6/08." This poem stands out because it struck me as terribly sad and terribly true. It is a reminder that the world outside stops for no one.

Oblong Ghost 11/6/08

A wakeup call? It seems that death has found
the portals it will enter by: my lungs,
pathetic oblong ghosts, one paler than
the other on the doctor’s viewing screen.
Looking up “pneumonia,” I learn
it can, like an erratic dog, turn mean
and snap life short for someone under two
or “very old (over 75).”
Meanwhile, our President Obama waits
downstairs to be unwrapped and I, a child
transposed toward Christmas Day in Shillington—
air soft and bright, a touch of snow outside—
pause here, one hand upon the bannister,
and breathe the scent of fresh-cut evergreens.

The "Other" poems in this collection are a mix bag; but, still effective and introspective. I liked this book much more than I thought I would. Endpoint: And Other Poems opened me up to another side of Updike. This book motivated me to explore more of his fiction, essays and criticism. Updike was more than just a great novelist. It is ironic (or maybe by design) that his career began and ended with poetry.

James says

John Updike is justly remembered as one of the great American novelists. He also published eight volumes of poetry. I picked this up from the library because I have appreciated a couple of his poems I've read (like the one about resurrection). The title of this collection comes from the first section, a poem (or series of poems?) about Updike's last several birthdays and his final illness. There is also a section of 'other poems' that have poems of Updike's remembrances of friends, reflections on old age, arthritis and colonoscopies, stolen paintings, nature, life and pop culture. There is also a section with Updike's sonnets, and 'lighter and personal poems.

I feel sheepish only giving this three stars. Updike is a very good poet and there are some standout poems; however I found the poems less consistent the further I read. Endpoint is great, so are many "other poems." The sonnets weren't earth shattering and the light, personal poems merely clever. If this book is like an LP. The front side is loaded with hits, the b side has character but no singles.

Mike Lindgren says

It was always hard not to be secretly a little annoyed at the late John Updike for being… well, so good at everything. The famous novels aside, memoir, travel reportage, children's literature, humor, literary criticism and essays on everything from Renaissance painting to Boston Red Sox great Ted Williams poured from his typewriter.

Despite seven previous collections of verse, dating back to 1958, he was perhaps least known for his poetry. "Endpoint and Other Poems" may change that. The slender volume, rushed to publication by Updike's longtime publisher, Knopf, is an accomplished if slightly schizophrenic affair. The title sequence, a series of linked poems written in the months leading up to his January death from cancer, is as measured and poignant as any verse in recent memory.

The language is beautifully cadenced, displaying the same feel for the music of words that made his prose so distinctive and memorable. Death is "a pin-sized prick of light winked out," while the poet's memories "in their jiggled scope collide / to form more sacred windows." The ugliness of aging, of hospitals and CAT scans and bedside visits is transformed by the rhythms of Updike's verse and the keenness of his observations. He made even dying sound stylish.

The other sections of the book include charming but basically slight meditations and sonnets on such mundane subjects as television, plane travel, baseball, and, er, a bathroom act that my father still refers to using a basketball metaphor. These are fun, in limited doses.

On a scale of difficulty, with 1 being your average limerick and 10 being "The Faerie Queen," these poems check in at a friendly 5. Updike's strong suit as a writer was always the precision of his observations; a line describing the tentative light of early spring as "just trying brightness out" or a "fabled velvet death-black sky / salted with stars" sticks bracingly in the mind.

Some minor objections remain. "Endpoint" has a cleaning-out-the-drawer feel to it, with the sublime side by side with the silly. The shorter pieces, as amusing as they are, carry a whiff of the self-satisfied cleverness that detractors of The New Yorker magazine claim is the house style. Traces of Updike's flaws linger

underneath the keen intelligence and virtuoso wordplay. He was a bit of a male chauvinist, to be sure, and his basic stance on life and society was fundamentally reactionary. His attitudes were molded by the 1950s - a decade vividly recalled here in light-handed elegies for Frankie Laine and Doris Day. And while his curiosity never abated, an elderly fussiness peeps around the edges of some of the poems.

All that aside, " Endpoint" serves as a worthy if faintly anticlimactic coda to a towering career in American literature. As an epigraph to one of the poems, Updike has taken a line from a letter that his editor William Maxwell wrote to him: "Please go on being yourself." That he did, right up until the end. We readers are the richer for it.

From the CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER, April 19, 2009

Donovan Richards says

Would You Rather

If you had your choice between a quick, painless death and a long, drawn out, painful death. Which would you choose?

For me, there's no easy answer. On one side, a quick death allows for an elimination of pain. Let's be honest; pain is no fun.

But with a quick, painless death, you don't have a chance to say goodbye. You don't have a chance to finish the last tasks on your bucket list, to say goodbye to those closest to you.

Nobody wants to face death; I can think of nothing more unpleasant. Yet there's something poetic about the opportunity to say goodbye, to right your wrongs, and to come to grips with the end of life.

Interestingly, the theme of facing inevitable death is the central refrain of John Updike's final collection of poetry, *Endpoint and Other Poems*.

In Consideration of the End

Through beautiful lyricism, Updike opens the window to his pallid decline.

The principle poem in the collection is "Endpoint". An agglomeration of poems spanning the last decade of his life, Updike uses descriptive language and sharp observations to portray the final stages of a life.

"Mild winter, then a birthday burst of snow.
A faint neuralgia, flitting tooth-root to
knee and shoulder-joint, a vacant head,
too many friendly wishes to parry,
too many cakes. Oh, let the years alone!
They pile up if we manage not to die,
glass dollars in the bank, dry pages on
the shelf. The boy I was no longer smiles" (3).

As the poem unfolds, Updike reveals his innermost thoughts. The reader perceives a man coming to grips with his demise, a person understanding inevitable decline and preparing others for life after he's gone.

Expectations of the End

Yet no matter the expectation and inevitability of death, the thought of it remains absurd. It is the one universal experience for which we have no reference. When someone dies, we can't interview them; we can't gauge the feeling. Strange is the thought of leaving tangible evidence behind.

"Endpoint, I thought, would end a chapter in
a book beyond imagining, that got reset
in crisp exotics type a future I
—a miracle!—could read. My hope was vague
but kept me going, amiable and swift.
A clergyman—those comical purveyors
of what makes sense to just the terrified—
has phoned me, and I loved him, bless his hide" (24).

Aside from "Endpoint," Updike's other poems approach death from many angles. Whether observing the passing of time through music, nature, or a power tool, aging and the end remain present on Updike's mind. Consider, the sonnet, "Tools".

"Tell me, how do the manufacturers of tools
turn a profit? I have used the same clawed hammer
for forty years. The screwdriver misted with rust
once slipped into my young hand, a new householder's.
Obliviously, tools wait to be used: the pliers,
notched mouth agape like a cartoon shark's; the wrench
with its jaws on a screw; the plane still sharp enough
to take its fragrant, curling bite; the brace and bit
still fit to chew a hole in pine like a patient thought;
the taps rule, its inches unaltered though I have shrunk;
the carpenter's angle, still absolutely right though I
have strayed; the wooden bubble level from my father's
meager horde. Their stubborn shapes pervade the cellar,
enduring with a thrift that shames our wastrel lives" (79).

While on its surface, Updike ponders the business plan of the tool industry, the underlying notion of the poetry ponders the relationship between a long-lasting tool and its owner as he fades.

The Art of Death

Eventually we all will face death. Some might hope for a quick and painless death. The thought of enduring pain is too much. But for others—Updike included—facing demise results in high quality art. Updike's poetry is beautiful, introspective, and lyrical. His poems during his final days are touching.

If you are a fan of poetry and the observations of a man coming to grips with his death, *Endpoint and Other Poems* is for you.