

REFLECTIONS

THE RAFT OF THE MEDUSA

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I've been reading *Odd Jobs*, a bulky collection of essays that John Updike published in 1991—one of many such collections that that prolific writer produced. In it I've come across a startling account of the relationship between Updike and John Cheever, his great predecessor as a chronicler of suburban angst in short stories for *The New Yorker* and other magazines.

You may be wondering why I want to discuss Messrs. Updike and Cheever in a science fiction magazine, since neither one, after all, is generally considered to be a science fiction writer. In fact, both did dabble a bit in the stuff: Cheever's eerie 1947 story, "The Enormous Radio," has been reprinted in more than one SF anthology, while Updike wrote half a dozen stories that could be called science fiction or fantasy, several of which made it into Year's Best Science Fiction collections, and even one SF novel, *Toward the End of Time*. But what interests me about the Updike-Cheever material in *Odd Jobs* is the light it casts on the general attitudes of writers toward one another, and, indirectly, on the way science fiction writers in particular relate to each other.

Odd Jobs contains no less than four brief Updike pieces about John Cheever. The first, from June, 1982, is a reverent obituary. The second, published five months later, is Updike's speech at Cheever's funeral, a longer and quite touching description of the man, with some details of their friendship late in Cheever's life, when both men were going through personal anguish and Cheever was lost in an alcoholic daze. The third essay, from 1985, adds a few notes on Cheever's earliest published work. But the fourth essay, dating from 1990, provides the big surprise: Cheever's collected correspondence had now been published, and Updike, with great restraint, tells of

his discovery of a most uncomplimentary reference to him in one of Cheever's letters: "Updike, whom I know to be a brilliant man, traveled with me in Russia last autumn [1964] and I would go to considerable expense and inconvenience to avoid his company. I think his magnanimity [sic] specious and his work seems motivated by covetousness, exhibitionism, and a stony heart."

It is a brave man who would quote, in a major magazine, a remark like that about himself coming from an important writer whom he considered to be a close friend and a colleague of the greatest ability. But Updike goes on, in what can be seen either as heroism or masochism, to quote an equally harsh assessment of himself by another of his literary idols, *New Yorker* humorist S.J. Perelman, in a published letter to comic poet Ogden Nash: "The very next morning I had to fly to Washington to a reception for Presidential scholars at which J. Cheever was a great help. Also present at this was that eminence gris, J[ohn] O'Hara, and that somewhat younger eminence and literatus, J. Updike. The latter read extracts from three works of his to the assembled scholars, which I couldn't personally hear as I was overtaken by the characteristic nausea that attacks me when this youth performs on the printed page."

Updike handles all this with remarkable grace: "The effect, of finding myself discussed with such gleeful malice in the letters of men whom I idolized, and whose works I had pondered in my teens as gifts from above and signposts to heaven, is chastening, perhaps edifyingly so." And of Perelman's view of him he says, "To think that I was, however modestly, an irritant to his exquisite sensibility is almost a source of pride. To those who yearn to join the angels, even the sound

of angelic mockery is music. And dead men shouldn't be blamed for having their private letters published." As for Cheever, Updike notes that the period when he made that comment about him was, for Cheever, a time "of financial straits and ruinous drinking," when he might well have taken a sour view of his young and wildly successful colleague, and he goes on to show that in later years "Cheever was always courteous to me and increasingly friendly and kind," giving every sign that a real friendship existed between the two men.

Writers are generally prickly, competitive characters. (Updike straightforwardly admits that Cheever's 1964 complaint that *The New Yorker* had rejected everything he had written in the previous three years left him "exultant," for it meant there would be that much more room in the magazine's pages for his own fiction.) Describing the attitude of established writers toward eager, ambitious newcomers, Updike says, "Aspiring, we assume that those already in possession of eminence will feel no squeeze as we rise, and will form an impalpable band of welcoming angels. In fact, I know now, the literary scene is a kind of *Medusa's* raft, small and sinking, and one's instinct when a newcomer tries to clamber aboard is to step on his fingers."

The *Medusa* to which Updike refers here is a French naval frigate that ran aground off the coast of West Africa in 1816. There were about four hundred people on board, but the lifeboats had room for only a couple of hundred of them. Some 147 survivors of the wreck managed to scramble aboard a hastily constructed raft, with a single bag of biscuits and two casks of water for provisions; others, likely, were driven back into the sea by those already on the raft. In the course of the terrible thirteen-day voyage that followed all but fifteen perished, some through starvation or dehydration, and some, apparently, killed in fighting aboard the raft. (The accounts of the survivors hint at cannibalism, too.) In 1818 the French artist Theodore Gericault did

a huge and terrifying painting called *The Raft of the Medusa*, grimly depicting the hideously overcrowded raft; it is one of the treasures of the Louvre today.

Quite possibly, judging by the references to him in the letters of Cheever and Perelman, *New Yorker* contributors of fifty years ago did regard the relentlessly productive and frighteningly talented Updike as an ominously threatening competitor, rather than as a gifted young colleague who deserved a warm welcome. I don't know. I never sought to find a place for myself in the New York literary scene.

But within the world of science fiction I was certainly as ambitious a young writer as there was, back when I was making my debut in the middle 1950s, and I was more prolific even than Updike, then. My name, and the names of my myriad pseudonyms, could be found on the contents pages of every SF magazine from *Astounding*, *Galaxy*, and *Fantasy and Science Fiction* at the top end of the field to *Amazing Stories* and *Imagination* at the pulpy bottom. If I had been greeted by my senior colleagues the way Updike had, I surely would have had my fingers sorely stomped as I struggled to climb aboard the raft. But that was not what happened.

When I was still in my teens in 1953 the writer and editor Harry Harrison, who had commissioned an article on SF fandom from me, took me under his wing and gave me invaluable advice about agents, editors, and how to conduct a writing career. Then Randall Garrett, a well-known writer of the era, came to New York, landed by a lucky accident in the same little hotel near Columbia University where I was living, and struck up a collaborative relationship with me, taking me downtown to all the SF editors and giving my fledgling career an enormous boost. In 1955, when I had begun to sell my first few stories, I attended the World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland and, under Garrett's mentorship, was introduced to most of the famous writers of the era—Isaac Asimov, Edmond Hamilton and his wife Leigh

Brackett, Fritz Leiber, E.E. Smith, and others. They greeted me cordially, making me feel welcome among them. I remember with particular pleasure a long amiable conversation with James Gunn, a writer whose work I held in especially high esteem, in which he laid out for me the rewards and pitfalls of trying to write science fiction professionally, as I had already resolved to do.

In the year that followed, I graduated from college and set up in business as a full-time writer, and came into contact with more of the established pros: Fredrik Pohl, Lester del Rey, Gordon R. Dickson, Cyril Kornbluth, James Blish, Damon Knight, Algis Budrys, and the rest of the glittering roster of that time. I was ten to twenty years younger than most of them, but they accepted me as a friend, or, I suppose, a kind of mascot, and, even though my stories were now appearing by the dozen in the magazines, never once did I feel that anyone was trying to push me off the raft. Indeed, cagey old Lester del Rey transformed my entire career for the better about 1958 with just a couple of sentences of shrewd advice.

So far as I know, it has always been that way in science fiction: the older writers extending helpful hands to the new ones. I recall Cyril Kornbluth, circa 1957, telling me that he saw it as an obligation to do just that. Harlan Ellison has had any number of proteges over the years; so have Gardner Dozois and Joe Haldeman and George R.R. Martin, and other senior figures of the field, and so have I. I could cite many other examples. Damon Knight brought the Science Fiction Writers of America into being in 1965 with the goal of providing an informational interface between the veteran pros and the beginners. It has been enormously useful to them. Not long after, the annual Clarion Writers' Workshop was launched as an event where hopeful beginners could learn from working writers, and a little later came the Writers of the Future contest, founded by Golden Age SF writer L. Ron Hubbard: dozens of major writing careers, over the years, have come from

these two enterprises.

I do wonder, after having read the Updike/Cheever material, how I would feel if the Collected Letters of my old friends came into print and I were to discover, all these decades later, that they had secretly feared and despised me as a cold-hearted literary climber. But I don't think they did. They treated me as a friend, and I believe they meant it. In any case, the Collected Letters of science fiction writers are published very rarely, if at all, and I may never have Updike's experience of coming across a letter such as Cheever's. H.P. Lovecraft's letters have been collected, yes, but he was before my time. There's one volume of Robert A. Heinlein's letters (I am not in them), and several of Philip K. Dick, who does mention me here and there, but not in any harsh way. (He complains to someone that I'm making more money than he is; but he did that to my face, too.)

Some of the correspondence of the great editor John W. Campbell has been published, too, and there's a reference to me in a 1959 letter from Campbell to E.E. ("Doc") Smith that pleased me very much when I came across it: "Bob Silverberg is a kid: a nice kid, whom I like, just as I did Ike Asimov some 20 years ago. . . . Bob needs time and experience; Ike did, 20 years ago. Ike is no longer a kid; I respect and like him as a man. Bob will get there." Campbell, of course, was an editor who was publishing my stories, not a writer who might have seen me as a dangerous competitor. But he could have said, as John Cheever in a dark moment said of John Updike, "Bob Silverberg's work seems motivated by covetousness, exhibitionism, and a stony heart." He didn't. I suspect there are no such ugly surprises waiting for me in the letters of the writers who welcomed me to the field half a century ago. Perhaps John Cheever was a very complicated man to have as a friend; or perhaps science fiction writers tend to be nicer to each other than *New Yorker* writers are. It could be that both statements are true.