JOHN UPDIKE IN CONVERSATION WITH JEFFREY GOLDBERG

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: My name is Paul Holdengräber and I am the director of Public Programs at the New York Public Library, thankfully now called Live from the New York Public Library, and it is my pleasure to welcome tonight two very distinguished guests. But before saying two words about them, I want to encourage you all to join our e-mail list so you might find out when Wes Anderson will be filming Wallace Shawn and Fran Lebowitz in July. For any of you who sign up today, you will be invited to that event. It will be in mid-July—it will be something like a happening. But before that, we will also have some cooking on stage—actually no, I think if I did that it would be the last thing I'd do at the Library—what a great way to go—but we will have Mario Batali here with Bill Buford and Anthony Bourdain—the title of that evening is called "Kitchen Secrets." The next day, on the twenty-second, a program called "Online Media and the Future of Journalism." It is a forum to celebrate ten years of *Slate* magazine, where we will find out through Malcolm Gladwell, Arianna Huffington, Norm Pearlstine, Jacob Weisberg, moderated by Michael Kinsley, why newspapers may go out of fashion—probably not, but they might tell us something about that. In the meantime, do sign up,

so that you actually know what events are happening next year. For instance, we will have the pleasure of having Joel Meyerowitz here celebrating—or commemorating I should say—the five years of 9/11. We will also have an evening with Frank Rich—I'll be interviewing him—and many other, many other, events you will want to be a part of.

The question really is: What prompted the author of *Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich, Rabbit at Rest,* and *Rabbit Remembered* to write *Terrorist*? I should add there's a colon after that: *A Novel*. To help us understand this, a man who has written a book also with one word as a title, a forthcoming book called *Prisoners*. Jeffrey Goldberg, I hope, will help us understand why John Updike was prompted to write this book. Jeffrey Goldberg's book is subtitled *A Muslim and a Jew Across a Middle East Divide*. He has spent a great deal of time over the last ten years with the leaders of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Taliban, Al-Quaeda, and the Islamic Jihad, and when I asked him, is it fair for me to say that you have actually been a lot with terrorists, he said, "Well, in fact, Paul, you might say I've spent a lot of time with them. It is my *métier*." I think it's quite interesting to put a novelist and a journalist of *that* nature together, and so it's my great pleasure tonight to welcome John Updike and Jeffrey Goldberg.

(applause)

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Thank you, Paul, thank you to the New York Public Library, thank you to John Updike, and a particular thank you to this great, great audience. And I know that many of you are missing the Matt Lauer interview tonight with Britney Spears, and for those of you without Tivo, your sacrifice is noted from the stage. **(laughter)**

I spent the last few days asking various friends of mine what should be my first question to John Updike, and one of them reminded me of a great story about Isaac Bashevis Singer. Singer was going to a large Midwestern university to do a program sort of like this, a question-and-answer session in front of a large audience, and the host of that session, his interlocutor, met him and said, "You know, I'm fairly overwhelmed by this, I'm not even sure where we should begin. I don't even have a first question." And Singer turned to him and said—and I won't do the accent—Singer turned to him and said, "That's very easy. All you have to do is ask me to discuss

the influence of John Dos Passos on my writing." **(laughter)** So the evening comes, Singer and the interviewer are sitting on stage, and he turns to him and says, "Mr. Singer, could you describe to me the influence of John Dos Passos on your writing?" And Singer turns to him with scorn and says, "John Dos Passos has absolutely no influence whatsoever on my writing, and furthermore, that's the stupidest question I've ever heard." **(laughter)**

So what I'd like to do is go to the second question and welcome you to the stage, and let's start at the beginning, the beginning of this process, which is about 8:15 a.m. on September 11, 2001, when you were in Brooklyn, and I was hoping that maybe you could just, by way of introducing this whole subject, tell us about your experiences and your observations on that day, and take us to the point when you decided that you were going to deal with this in fiction.

JOHN UPDIKE: Well, I woke up, and there was a sense of slight agitation within the apartment, and we were directed to look out the window, and this isn't really 8:15, it's more like 9:15 now, I forget what happened at 8:15, must have had breakfast. And I'd planned, I know, to go up to the Wayne Thiebaud show at the Whitney and then go home to New England. There was black stuff running down the side of one of the World Trade Center towers, some smoke pouring out. We didn't know what it meant, we thought maybe an accidental collision of a small plane, as happened years ago, some of you may remember, to the Empire State Building. But things developed, the television was on, the emergency was on, the plane, it was thought, it had been deliberate. We were trying to shelter the children in the apartment from watching too much TV.

About an hour later, my wife and I were on the tenth floor of this apartment building, on the roof, looking over at the two towers, which were by that time pouring out smoke, traveling over Long Island, it was the only cloud in the sky that day, was the artificial smoke, I mean the inexplicable smoke. Paper was mixed in with the smoke. We said to each other, "What can be burning so long? Why haven't they put it out?" The air was full of the sound of fire sirens and at about ten to our astonishment, while we still expected the fire to somehow be put out and solved and the whole mystery to be cleaned up, the first tower fell. And it fell like a telescope, those of you who have seen the films or even seen the event would know, it fell very tidily, just slipped down, tinkling of glass could be heard all the way across the East River, a kind of a whoomp, a whoosh,

and a cloud of smoke arose, and I knew I'd seen something quite terrible. My wife and I hugged each other, and kind of moaned. We knew there were people in that building and I knew that I had witnessed something terrible and irrevocable. I didn't see the second tower fall, either I wasn't watching or it was hidden by the smoke, but that's the extent of my witness.

The rest you—what I also remember from that day—and I am speaking as though I was the only witness, in fact half of you probably had similar experiences, was the silence in the skies as the airliners ceased to fly and only an occasional jet would rip over and there was a curious peace in Brooklyn. I walked out on the street, ashes were descending, big chunks, I guess, of insulation were making their way to Brooklyn Heights. People were sitting on Montague Street, at the restaurants, talking much as usual, and there was a sense that life was going to go on, that America couldn't be wiped out or transformed by whatever was happening across the river.

It gave me a sense of witness to the 9/11 event. I wrote a paragraph or two for the *New Yorker* for their Talk of the Town section, a special section devoted to the whereabouts of various writers on 9/11. I wrote, some months later, a short story, trying to capture a number of viewpoints of the participants, including one of the terrorists, Mohamed Atta, who had a fair amount of, by this time, information about him, his behavior in Florida, seen in a restaurant where he was drunk and had a tussle with the bouncer and pulled out his license, his pilot's license, and said, "I'm a pilot," and the bouncer said, "Oh really, for what airline?" and Mohamed Atta, out of whatever ironical perverted depths, said "American." He was a pilot for American Airlines. Anyway, this was all tied together in a short story as a way of venting my dismay that I felt that day. That's what writers do of fiction—they take what dismays them or they can't handle in three dimensions and they turn it into a story, and in some way it lessens the weight of the event. The short story probably was not a total success. It's a story I will—the *Atlantic Monthly* printed it, and someday it will be in a book of short stories.

But the theme, as you lived on in those years from 2001, headlines couldn't be ignored. There was terrorism in the Middle East, and then of course in Spain, in Madrid, and then in London, and it's certainly in the air. I don't know how New Yorkers feel, whether you feel every time you go into the subway whether or not something frightful might happen, but I think a new element

has been injected since that day, a new sense of danger and of untrust, and it's just ordinary life has been slowed down. You need to produce identity now to get into a building, to board a plane, and all that. So, the theme of terrorism was there, and I had my sense of participating in it vicariously, and I thought it would be a service to the state of the nation and the world of fiction if I tried to dramatize a young man, a young devout self-converted Muslim living in Northern New Jersey, in a not-very-promising metropolis city, and tried to dramatize him from within and show how he was slowly involved in a terrorist plot.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Now you have written your way through many minefields before. Many of them have been psychosexual, I guess you would say, but nothing is quite like the minefield of the Middle East and terrorism, and I'm wondering, when you began this project, or even now, what you were most fearful of as you did this.

JOHN UPDIKE: You're aware of being on thin ice and dealing with questions that—people have died, many people have died in terrorist acts, it's not something in a way to be joked about and perhaps it should be immune to the hand of the fiction writer. Nevertheless, I take the view that nothing really *is* immune to a fictional treatment, and that the act of sympathy, or empathy, which I was trying to exert as I wrote, would be felt by the reader as empathy on their part. There are no sub-humans in the human race. Our enemies, our shadowy enemies, people who hate us, are nevertheless human beings with a certain story to tell and a certain rationale behind their actions. So that was my effort here. I realized I might be challenged. It's a little far afield, but then the job of a fiction writer is surely to stretch himself, to reach for people outside of himself, because you can't really—I discovered early on in this trade—you can't write entirely out of the center of your own experience. There must be some act of invention, something different, something different that amuses and challenges and interests you.

For example, Rabbit Angstrom, the hero of four and a half novels, was in some ways like me. He was an American male of a certain age who had a provincial upbringing, rather like mine, but then we diverged. He was a basketball star and six-three, I was a nerd and **(laughter)** just barely six feet. And many differences: he had stayed, I had left, I'd gotten a Harvard, a college degree, he had gotten no degree, so it was exciting for me to *be* him and to, through his eyes, see

America and explore a fictional city that in many ways resembled the city near which I'd grown up.

So I felt the same process was going on here, and it was difficult at first to find the right entryway into this fiction. The book was going to be called *Land of Fear* initially, and then I changed it to *Terrorist*, decided to center it upon Ahmad, my protagonist, and was going to tell it from his point of view, first person, but that, I realized, would be much too confining, that what I really needed was a third-person view so that other characters in this New Jersey city could be evoked, and you could see things from their standpoint. The book means to be about religion and America, in a strange way, not so much about terrorism. You will learn far more by reading Mr. Goldberg's book, out in September, about—

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: October 3. **(laughter)** Just technically speaking.

JOHN UPDIKE: —about the actualities of terrorists as they operate in the Middle East. A homegrown terrorist is not impossible. We see them in Canada, in a way. Various Americans—youths—can be drawn, they can be drawn to anything drastic enough. We're living amid an undercurrent of despair that affects the young and I think anybody who will tell them what to do will get some attention.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: You don't associate John Updike with the expression "Ripped from the Headlines," but this cell that was uncovered in Canada a couple weeks ago resembles, in some way, what you're writing about. I'm very curious about the process of researching what might be in the head of an eighteen-year-old half-Egyptian, half-Irish American teenager in New Jersey. You after all are not an eighteen-year-old Egyptian American in New Jersey. **(laughter)** And I'm wondering the literal process of how you did this, because you really do, in fact, this character really does resemble people I know and have met, and it's surprising to the degree to which you can animate this person. How did you do it? I mean, I know you read the Qur'an deeply, but take it from there.

JOHN UPDIKE: And the newspapers. And they are full information about terrorism. I was especially interested in the whole phenomenon of suicide bombing, not so much that it occurs, but that there are so many willing volunteers for it that al-Quaeda claimed that they were being overwhelmed in Iraq by foreign volunteers to blow themselves up. They couldn't handle enough, they couldn't *process* the numbers that were applying, and, in this country, you have these high-school massacres, most of them caught, nipped in the bud, but not all of them, and the one in Columbine was successfully—if you call the deaths of thirteen or more people successful—successfully carried out. So what is there about death that the young aren't as afraid of it as I was at eighteen and still am at seventy-four. What is it that seeks self-destruction? What despair in their prospects is it?

The city is called—the fictional city is called—New Prospect, I picked the name just because I thought it went with all the News that are around us—New York, New Jersey, New Haven—this is the new land, full of hope and resources and New Prospect was an industrial city that thrived, as I conceived it, from the colonial era on, but now no longer thriving, factories are empty, things are made abroad. What do young men—where do the young people turn? It's not impossible, I thought, that this particular boy, who had converted himself in part as a reaction to his mother and his environment, which he found sleazy—both the mother and the environment—he converts himself at the age of eleven, which sometimes *is* an age of decision in this way, to Islam, committed himself wholly to it, studies the Qur'an, is influenced by the Imam, who has the usual radical Islamic line to feed him along with Quranic lessons. You mentioned research. I did have to re-read the Qur'an and find some verses that I thought might be in his head, since the Qur'an is often memorized, taken more literally, I think than the Bible in the Judeo-Christian culture.

And, otherwise, I don't know, Jeffrey, I was eighteen once and can remember it somewhat. I have not lived in northern New Jersey, but I have been through it many times, **(laughter)** so out of bits and scraps of experience and a lot of guessing based upon your gut sense of what is possible to human beings, you try to make your way into a novel and, after a while, if you're lucky, it develops a kind of momentum of its own, and the last third of this book, in which a certain suspense is generated, one hopes, felt very much good, it felt good, I liked the people

who were acting and reacting, and I was not displeased with the total book, but I knew it *was* a departure and kind of a risky topic to treat.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Let's stay on the Qur'an for a second. One of the extraordinary things about this book is the depth to which you go in quoting fairly obscure passages—obscure to Western readers—and I'm curious what you think of the Qur'an as a work of literature.

JOHN UPDIKE: Hard to judge without knowing classical Arabic, but I did want to present to the reader of this book some passages from the Qur'an, so they would get a taste of this often-alluded-to work, which not so many of us have actually read. I wanted to—the language, if you've ever heard it spoken, if you've ever traveled in the Middle East, has a music all of its own, a kind of insinuating twangy music, and to hear the call to prayer from the minaret at dusk—it's penetrating, it gets to you, it does something to you that maybe church bells once did but don't do anymore. So I re-read it and found with the help of a Harvard graduate student from Lebanon who was versed, very well-versed, in Arabic and the Qur'an, and he helped me provide the transcription into the Roman alphabet of Quranic Arabic. I didn't want to throw Arabic script into this book—that would be too weird—but I thought a little salt of the actual language of the Qur'an, provided with translations, because if you have a character who's allegedly taking Qur'an lessons, then you're obliged, I think, as a novelist to show him taking Qur'an lessons and to show himself and the Imam interacting.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: You know, I—it's interesting, people talk about this book as a departure for you, but in many ways, it's not. At various points—those of you who have read it—the Muslim protagonist, and a number of the other Muslim characters, speak very vehemently and eloquently about the soullessness of America, the rampant materialism, the indolence and obesity and sloth of America, and it's a vivid reminder of, among other things, Rabbit Angstrom's downfall from almost literally over-consumption, and I'm wondering if you find a legitimate echo in the ideology of Islamism, a legitimate echo in some ways of some of the Calvinist ideas that you've worked into your books in the past, or maybe you're just a good writer and faked it really well, but it's so *vivid* in this book, the critique of American capitalism is so vivid, that I couldn't help but wonder if you felt some of this.

JOHN UPDIKE: I wonder too about all that.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Well, then I'm glad I asked. **(laughter)**

JOHN UPDIKE: I'm an American and as writers go a pretty patriotic one. I love this country, really. All the promises it makes of opportunity and reinventing yourself, all that, has kind of come true for me. On the other hand, my fiction, especially the novels, don't present, in some, a very pretty picture of America or of Americans. Rabbit Angstrom, as he goes through his life, makes many of the observations that that my Ahmad does only less harshly and not so puritanically, but he too feels America is degenerating, running down, not itself, gotten messy, gotten fat. Jack Levy, the guidance counselor in this novel, sort of sees the same things and all I can plead is guilty to taking a sometimes dim view of the evolution of America as I've seen it. I think here's a nice line in a Don DeLillo novel called *White Noise* in which one character quite abruptly asks the protagonist, "Do you think it's TV that's made us all so much dumber?" and there *is* a dumbing-down, you feel, in culture. The quality of movies—it's hard to match movies you saw when you were an impressionable adolescent with movies you see now, but the movies I saw when I was an adolescent did not seem adolescent, the ones I see now seem very adolescent and mechanical. Mechanical, soulless, you used that word, not a bad word. Certainly the standard, as I understand it, critique from our Islamic critics are that we are godless, but in addition to that, racist and sex-obsessed. There's an Arabic word, in fact, about what we are, a word which I can't recall, it basically means that we are against God, we are not on the right side, so you have this boy and his kin abroad, feeling that they are in a battle where they're fighting on God's side, and the enemy, the Great Satan, is the West, but especially America.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: I don't mean to draw you into a political dispute that's been ongoing since 9/11—well I sort of do. There's a debate in Washington, and it's a serious and ongoing debate, between those who believe that they hate us for what we do and those who hate us for what we are. It breaks down as sort of a left/right split, although there's permutations. Reading this book, I couldn't help but feel that there you are taking, in a literary way, the side of those who believe that Islamists hate us for what we are, that it's not simply about X or Y or Z policy,

that there's some, there's a critique of the entire structure that's going on. And I wonder if you've given that a lot of thought.

JOHN UPDIKE: I hadn't heard it phrased so nicely, but I would say yes, insofar as I am entitled to any view on these grave and complicated matters, I do think they hate us for what we are than for what we do. Which means that there's nothing we can *do* that's going to significantly, at least for the immediate future, assuage the hatred. There are policy points. I remember when in that same *New Yorker* Talk of the Town section in which my little description appeared, Susan Sontag, the late, wonderful Susan Sontag, opined that we must realize that what happened on 9/11 was the consequence of certain actions that we had taken. The people were indignant, I mean this was no time to tell us this, it was thought. And what were those actions we'd taken that are to blame for the outrage of 9/11? But certainly our backing, our staunch backing, of Israel is one of the things that continues to infuriate them, and indeed seems to make them madder as we go along. At moments it seemed some sort of peace or truce or arrangement was possible. I'm afraid that moment, for the time being, is gone. Osama bin Laden's energetic efforts to undermine the West began, I think, with a resentment of our troops being in Saudi Arabia. They were there, after all, to protect, as I remember it, to protect Saudi Arabia from Saddam Hussein, who having conquered Kuwait, might well decide, "Well, that was good, but Saudi Arabia would be even better." So actions which from this side of the ocean look benign or at least practically defensible annoy them—annoy? annoy isn't the word—*anger* them to an unappeasable extent. We represent materialism—materialism would deny the deity, would deny Allah, and our style of life, our vaunted freedom, our summer clothes, our bathing suits, all this is seen as a deep affront, deep affront, to the true faith.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: I'm glad we could have worked this conversation around to the Saddam/Al-Quaeda connection so quickly. I want to ask you something. There are moments in this book when I detect a faint hint of sympathy for the predicament of the Bush administration—faint **(laughter)** but nevertheless there. There's a line. One of the characters, if you don't mind, is the secretary of homeland security, a slightly passing character, and he's complaining about the way he's going to be perceived. There's a lot of Internet chatter about possible terrorism, and he's worried about raising the threat levels, and he says, "I'll be knocked

for this. If nothing happens, I'm a scaremonger. If it does, I'm a lazy leech on the public payroll who allowed the death of thousands." And I got the sense there and in a couple of other places that you're grappling with some of the difficulties of managing America in an age of terrorism, and this, of course, brought me to recall that you were one of the only writers—in the—writers of note in the sixties to support the Vietnam War, at least for a time, at least until Nixon came along, but I think you were sympathetic to Johnson and his predicament, and I'm wondering if you could talk about the current moment, and I don't mean to put you on the spot about politics, but it's fun.

JOHN UPDIKE: It happens.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: As you know, it's what I have to do, and I'm wondering if you could talk about this moment and if you feel as if George W. Bush might be working our way out of these problems or working our way deeper into these problems?

JOHN UPDIKE: I was trying to find another section, but I think I remembered. Oh yeah, the secretary, right after the passage that Jeffrey so eloquently read, the secretary muses aloud—he's talking to his undersecretary, who happens to be the sister of Jack Levy, and Washington does play a part in this novel's progress. "'Those people out there,' the secretary muses aloud, 'Those people out there, why do they want to do these horrible things? Why do they hate us? What's to hate?'" And there's a lot of *me* in that plaint, I don't think that's a foolish thing to say though it may be an obvious one. I think America thinks of itself still as a very benign country whose good intentions are obvious, and whose good results can be seen in many places in the globe, so, yes, I don't envy the secretary of homeland security, whoever he is, his job, as my fictional one says, to defend 300 million people, each with their own ideas, and their own love of freedom, and their own determination to be free, to act freely. There are so many ways in which another atrocity could be perpetrated, even if we have, even if turning airplanes into bombs as was done in 9/11 is not repeated, there certainly are many other targets and even a couple of men with machine guns in an American mall could create havoc.

So, yes, it's worrisome, it's worrisome, his responsibilities. I didn't vote for George Bush, but, to be fair, I think in the immediate wake of 9/11 he was a pretty good rallying point. He said some good things. He's a relatively simple man who said simple things and maybe there are moments when simple things are the only things a president should attempt to say, but the events since then are certainly not good. I would hope though, since I stuck with Johnson a little longer on Vietnam than other people did, I suppose I should stick with this administration a little longer than many people do. I don't think an immediate withdrawal from Iraq is possible, and it's not impossible that some kind of decent government will emerge from all this slaughter and conflict.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Let's talk for a couple of minutes about faith, which is obviously a theme that you've been working on for many years. I get the sense from reading you that you believe that, if there are many Muslims in the world who are a little bit too attached to God, America might not be close enough to God. Does that make any sense to you? Does that track? Talk about it in your own experience.

JOHN UPDIKE: Americans are among—the United States is probably the most religious Western country left. Europe has pretty well given up on the Christian faith, although they have all those beautiful cathedrals. We still go to church at rates that astound the Europeans, and they think rather funny, really. So yes, we are a religious nation insofar as there can be such a thing, but it is also a country where religion and government were pretty distinctly separated in the initial Constitution and I think that is one of the many nice things about the Constitution. Islam does not have a tradition of the separation of religion and government. From Muhammad in Medina they were *one* thing and, in many Islamic states, they are still one thing and that is one of the difficulties I think we have with these countries, the extent to which they cannot say "Yes, God is great, but also we have to govern here reasonably a whole bunch of people, none of whom have exactly the same point of view. Also, the book is saying, and I don't want to really speak for the book, because a book should speak for itself, and an author becomes, once it's written to his best ability, the author is no more wise on the subject of the book than somebody else. All he knows is what he thought he was putting into it, not what the reader was getting out of it.

But the religion…faith is necessary to many people. It creates optimism, health, purpose. It's a way of removing our heaviest anxieties—death and possible misfortune—but if you take it seriously to the point of murdering its alleged enemies, or sending people to paradise direct, no pausing, and it's not just the trainers of the suicide bombers who send people off to paradise, you have American parents, Christian parents, killing children when they're really depressed or distressed, often there's an element of insanity in this, but they're dispatching children to paradise, too. And I don't think—I think we're meant to take this world a little more seriously than that. That this world, whether created or a magnificent accident, is what we have and should be reverent toward and whose rules we should try to abide by, and a religious zealot thinks this world is impure and second-rate, second-rate compared to the world that is to come. Somewhere in Mohamed Atta's papers that he left behind after executing his successful mission was the phrase, "this thing called the world." Makes it very small, doesn't it, this thing called the world, as if there are other things, better things, better things than *this* thing called the world, and when you get to seeing the world as a little disagreeable black pea in space, I think you're in danger of becoming a murderous and dangerous person.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Could you talk about your own faith for a moment? Because I know you're a regular churchgoer, and I'm wondering if you could put that into the context of your work, not only this book, but also an echo of it, *The Beauty of the Lilies*, I think, this is a clear echo of some of that.

JOHN UPDIKE: Yes. "An irregular churchgoer" is how I might describe myself but I plead guilty to going to church. I've always found it comforting. I switched denominations. Born a Lutheran, raised a Lutheran, became a Congregationalist, my first girlfriend was a Baptist chaplain's daughter.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: That must have its challenges.

(laughter)

JOHN UPDIKE: We tried to meet them **(laughter)** and wound up an Episcopalian—

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Not because of that, obviously.

JOHN UPDIKE: I became very content within the Episcopalian brand of Protestantism. You don't need to know that, and indeed I don't much want to talk about it, but I never could quite let go of the Lutheran God, something about it, without being an especially devout young man, unlike my hero Ahmad, I was not especially pious. My head was in books and becoming a creator of some kind of art, either drawing or writing, that was my paradise. Nevertheless, even in college, when attendance drops way off, generally, I continued to go to church now and then. For me, it gives me energy and courage and relieves some anxieties, and when I've had religious crises, which have been a few, it was with a sense of panic and claustrophobia that I couldn't really move, I couldn't move, if anything so terrible as total obliteration was waiting for me, and I couldn't be, I felt, believing this myself or creative. So you might say that my religion is a kind of license that I've given myself to enjoy life and be creative.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Let me turn to a couple of literary questions, if I might. This is your first suspense novel. Are we going to see more of these?

JOHN UPDIKE: I think not.

(laughter)

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: And why would that be?

JOHN UPDIKE: You hope for some suspense in any work of fiction. I mean, the idea is to create, in the first sentence or two, questions in a reader's mind—

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: This is the first appearance of a truck bomb in a John Updike novel. I think.

JOHN UPDIKE: —and lead them on to answers and more suspense in other words to keep the reader engaged and teased so that every piece of fiction I produce is meant to be in some way suspenseful. But yes, there hasn't been quite so much threatened violence as exists in this book, nor has their been a plot involving evil imams and sinister, shadowy people who appear in New Jersey cottages and ambiguous men from Florida in white suits, who seem to be controlling a flood of money. All of this is rather thriller-esque, isn't it? It was enjoyable to try to write this way, to try to construct a plot that could be believed as you went along, if you read rapidly **(laughter)** but, no, I enjoyed thrillers as a young man, and mystery novels, read a lot of Eric Ambler and some John Le Carré, and so on, but I seem to feel that fiction ought to be a little more existential than that, it should be about being human, the tensions and paradoxes and unspoken agony of being a thinking animal. To be a human being is to be intrinsically under some stress between the appetites, the imperatives, our desires—our virtually boundless desires—and the real bounds that being a social animal creates. So *Rabbit, Run* was about that, about a guy who bursts the constraints of his responsibilities. *The Centaur* was about a man who, while complaining loudly, plodded on under his responsibilities, and this tension is always in my mind to a greater or lesser degree, and that's what I try to dramatize in my fiction.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: This is your fiftieth, or fifty-first book, I believe.

JOHN UPDIKE: Well, Jeffrey, it depends on what you call a book. **(laughter)** There have been five children's books which are so short that I can hardly count them at all as books, and there are collections like *Golf Dreams,* a collection of writings about golf which, most of which, have already appeared in other books, so do we call that a full book or a half book? But I'm getting on towards sixty books, yes.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Sixty books.

JOHN UPDIKE: I would never have dreamed as a child, as a young man, that I was going to write that many books. But I set up shop rather innocently, naively, as a professional writer, I didn't want to teach, I wasn't sure I *could* teach, my father had taught, and that was enough

teaching, I thought, for two generations, and so I don't really do much else but write and I write every morning and the books—the manuscript pages—do pile up.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Do you plan on going—keep going? What's next for you? Can you tell us?

JOHN UPDIKE: I bided my time while waiting for this book to come out by assembling some critical pieces I've written. I'm, some of you may know, a book reviewer as well as a book producer, and review books, and try to write critically also about art and continue to try to be in a way a student, a college student who gets assignments and turns in the paper on time.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Most of us have noticed that Philip Roth is experimenting with shorter novels. I was wondering if you're going to try to experiment with shorter novels yourself.

JOHN UPDIKE: The shorter novel is very appealing. I like two-hundred-page novels. I think that if you can't say what you have to say in two hundred pages you probably are trying to say too much. I've written a few short novels. *The Poorhouse Fair*, my first novel, was short, a little novel called *Of the Farm*, that hardly deserves the title of novel, but for the moment I seem to need about three hundred pages to turn around in. Two hundred—well, *Gertrude and Claudius* was about that length, and it's sort of what a French novel often is, you know, something that you can read in a few hours, you can even read it in a prolonged sitting. But now that Philip Roth has claimed the short novel genre, I don't want to muscle in. **(laughter)**

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Well, you know, I was wondering, I was wondering as I was reading this, if, I mean, several years ago, I had this image that came to me of you and Roth meeting once a year somewhere in a farmhouse in Connecticut, and dividing up the world **(laughter)** and you saying, "I think I'd like to write about a Jewish guy," and he saying, "Well, I'm going to do a Christian this time." So here you are in North Jersey—industrial, decaying North Jersey—which is associated with Roth. I'm wondering, talk a little bit about Roth if you could.

JOHN UPDIKE: [silence]

(laughter)

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: It's funny when that's the—not what do you think of the Qur'an is the less sensitive question than what do you think of Roth? **(laughter)**

JOHN UPDIKE: No, he's terrific. I've been aware of Philip almost as long as I've been writing and read with admiration and pleasure most of his early works. Not all of those. He's a very dedicated, admirably dedicated and *concentrated* writer who has sort of invented a second life for himself. He's broadened out, the last six or so novels are more various, have more characters who live. It used to be there was only—I don't want to talk too much about this—it used to be only the Roth alter ego and sort of peripheral people, most of whom were exasperating. But now he really picks a broad canvas, and has done Christians. I though the Catholic wife in *American Pastoral* was terribly well and sensitively done. So he's really seemed to be almost limitless in his powers of invention and projection, so my hat's off to Philip Roth.

I came to writing at a time when American Jewish writers dominated. They had for a long time lacked a voice in American fiction. Throughout the thirties it continued to be a basically WASP enterprise, and with Bellow and Malamud and then the younger Roth and many others it seemed almost as though you had to be a Jew to be a real American writer, and here was I, stuck with being a rural Lutheran, **(laughter)** so I wrote the best I could and in a way to ease the situation of my awkwardness, I did invent a Jewish writer who I wrote quite a few short stories about. Henry Bech was me pretending to be Jewish **(laughter)** and I tried to pass and—

(laughter)

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: And how's that going for you?

(laughter)

JOHN UPDIKE: I tend to invent these favorite characters of mine who then I kill off or neglect, and Henry Bech, I had—I discovered three books about him *Bech: A Book, Bech is Back* and *Bech*—what is that word—*Bech, Bech Becalmed*? No, not becalmed. Isn't this awful? Senility in action.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: *Bech at Bay*.

JOHN UPDIKE: *Bech at Bay* of course! And in parallel to the Rabbit books too, *Rabbit is Rich* was followed by *Bech is Back*, for example. These three books plus one other made twenty, and Everyman Library, which is partly owned by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., offered to put them all in one book, which I did do, the *Complete Bech*, so now any impulse to write another Bech story is balked by the fact that I've already written the *Complete Bech*, **(laughter)** so I think he's sort of dead as an invention, but he's served me well, and was my opportunity to write amusingly about New York, a city I left precipitously at the age of twenty-five, and thought someday I'd come back, fully armed and ready to cope, but I never did, but so I'm kind of guilty about not being a New Yorker and by writing about a new Yorker, a real New Yorker like Henry Bech, I eased my discomfort and guilt.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: I want to ask you one more question. I just wanted to note for the audience that we will be taking questions. There are microphones on either side of the room, and after the event, Mr. Updike will be signing copies of *Terrorist*—he will not be signing any Rabbit books that might be in tote bags or anything, but he will be signing in this room.

At the Book Expo a few weeks ago in Washington, you created quite a stir with a call to arms for the independent bookseller and a call for a struggle in a way against Google. Could you talk about that? And talk about the place of the novel—I'm really fascinated by that—I mean when you were coming up, the novel was *it*, and there's so much noise now and I'm wondering if you could share with the audience a couple of your observations that you made to such acclaim at the booksellers' convention.

JOHN UPDIKE: Well, I was told I was going to address some booksellers, me and two other authors, and I didn't know what to say to them, but I did find this article in the *Times* magazine outlining a computer enthusiast's—Kevin—who was it?—Kelly, who writes and edits for *Wired* magazine, projected a future of blissful universal Googling that would be like the library at Alexandria, which was burned down millennia ago, and this would be like that only bigger and better, all the world's books both in print and out would be put into digital form and become available to anybody who had a computer. This and literature as we know it would become instead a kind of flow between the various composers of a kind of symphony of voices on the Internet and snippets would come and go, snippets may be taken from somebody's writing, but, as far as I could gather, un-ascribed, un-credited, un-paid-for, so that I said to the booksellers, you and I are done for if this scenario works.

Mr. Kelly did attempt to make some place for the writer in this new world in that he raised the question of how will writers make a living. They will make a living, it turns out, by personal appearances **(laughter)** and making themselves accessible to readers in a one-to-one relationship. How the fees for this would be worked out, he didn't say, but it seemed to leave a lot of writers very frayed and worn out so that's all I said and it's sort of an ignorant speech to give, in a way, because what do I know about the electronic future? It is amazing what these computers do and ever more amazing what they can do, still, it does bode ill for the book as a saleable artifact and for the entire pleasure of books, which my life has been based on. I loved books as a boy, I continued to love them through college. I thought they were magical. I began to produce them and thought that was magical. So if the era of authorship and books is at an end, I'm, on the one hand, sad for those of you who had hoped to be writers but glad that I had my life before this grisly end.

(laughter)

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: What a *lovely* thought to end this thing. Let me ask you one final question, which is: could you discuss the influence of John Dos Passos on your writing? **(laughter)** Ladies and gentlemen, John Updike.

(applause)

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: I believe, I can't quite see, there are microphones on either side of the room, there and there. I'd love to hear your questions, please keep them *questions* if possible.

JOHN UPDIKE: Jeffrey, there's a woman down there who's had her hand up. Do you want to call on her?

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Yes. The woman with a hand up.

JOHN UPDIKE: That's you.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Just project—it'll be fine.

Q: (inaudible)

JOHN UPDIKE: Okay. The lady would like me to give you and her reasons to be optimistic about this present world.

(laughter)

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: And do it in thirty words, if you can.

JOHN UPDIKE: My little lifetime has encompassed World War II and the long period called the Cold War. Both posed dangers to the United States and to, indeed, the world's people. Something like sixty million died as a direct result of World War II. The Cold War threatened to bring nuclear holocaust. I don't see anything in the present messy world to be compared to these two threats, these two dangers, really. I think, yes, our relationship with the Arab world is exceedingly troubling, the Middle East is an exceedingly troubled area, and you can find trouble almost everywhere when you read the newspaper because it *is* there and also the news is mostly bad news. Good news does not get reported. The good news about this country, I think, is that

it's a population unabashedly immigrant and proudly free, and even French—we once had a French boy staying with us, and he said, after walking around in Cambridge with our son, he said, "Americans dress as if they're not afraid." I love that. We dress as if we're not afraid, and I still think this country has a lot of resilience and *will* in it that will last for a while. I feel good about the United States.

(applause)

And by extension and more ignorantly, I feel kind of good about the world. We were recently in India and we had put off—my wife and I had put off going for years because we didn't want to face the poverty that we knew was there. We didn't want to be tormented by liberal guilt while in India and it *is* there, still. It's a very poor country, a lot of people are living on the street. Yet there is a *joy*, a hope in India, the computer revolution has been transferred to a degree to India, I think the country's finding itself, in a way, and China in another way, so I think the world picture isn't entirely gloomy. It always seems gloomy, it's easier to see the bad than the good, but I feel a lot of good in the situation as it now exists.

Q: Hi, thanks, I have recently been hearing the Rabbit novels described as your best work, your essential work, and having read many of them, I am surprised that this is sort of emerging as the books to read, and I'm wondering which of your novels you would like to be represented by.

JOHN UPDIKE: Thank you. It is true that I am the author of the Rabbit books and a bunch of others whose titles you can't think of. **(laughter)** But the Rabbit books, maybe, it's not an entirely—maybe I deserve this. They wrote themselves fairly easily, I loved discovering the present tense. Somehow when you dismiss the past tense, you're free, you bounce along, things just happen in front of you without being explained. I think explaining is pretty deadly in fiction and the present tense eliminates the need for that, and also I was lucky in this locale, the county, Diamond County, I think it's called, where the four novels, four and a half novels take place, is *my* home turf. It's Berks County in Pennsylvania. And there is a warmth that a child feels and he also feels that the people around him are impressive, they're enormous, these are grownups. Nobody you meet in later life is going to seem quite as big to you as the people that you knew in

childhood, and so working with this childhood soil, they were pretty fertile, it was good ground for me to delve in, I discovered, I didn't know this before I began, but in fact the people talked easily, they interacted amusingly, the landscape, the cityscape was always there to be described and, so, yeah, I can't quarrel with it.

It is sad for me in a way that so many other of my books may be passé. *Couples* was my only really best-seller, my attempt to describe the American middle class and its adjustment to the sexual revolution, the disruption of many marriages, the general loss of a sense of the sacred and sacred vows, all that has been the fuel of many other novels. There's a trilogy upon *The Scarlet Letter*, where the triangle interested me, and each point of the triangle got a voice in an individual novel. Some of my later novels amused me fearfully, there's a science fiction novel called *Toward the End of Time*, about basically dying, but dying in a future where you might be glad to *be* dead. So yes, yes and no, I'm pleased, and yet I hope my other books can be enjoyed and read too.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Can I just point out with, well, I guess it's *vicarious* immodesty, that *Terrorist* is entering the *New York Times* best-seller list at number eight next week. **(applause)** Why don't we go over there for a question, to that microphone, ma'am.

Q: Yes, I would have thought that you would have thought that *Centaur* was the very best of your novels but that's just a personal opinion. For someone who is such a genius with language that it's almost poetry in reading so many of your sentences I was wondering who is the author that you think writes most in that vein and what do you think of Lawrence Durrell as someone who writes like you?

JOHN UPDIKE: You know, I read the *Alexandria Quartet*, I believe I read it through, years ago, and didn't notice a striking resemblance, but often the outside eye can see better than the author what he writes like. My models in postwar style have been, I think, Bellow, foremost. Wonderful prose. Slangy, erudite, he does it all at once, and nobody else can do it like Bellow could. John Cheever was a friend of mine, and both in person and on the page, he was a marvel quick wit, quick images, a truly funny man with a lot of sadness in him, which also was in the

fiction. And he wrote about suburbia in a way to make it seem mythic. Eudora Welty and her disciple Anne Tyler both are terrific writers who take the ordinary, they accept the ordinary, they accept the mundane, and make interesting stories out of it.

And that truly is the challenge in a way to the writers of a basically peaceful country like the United States. How do you make interest out of ordinary, mundane, not terribly eventful lives? How can we make a something like *Anna Karenina*, say, out of our own materials? Where can we get that kind of majesty that the Russian novels have so effortlessly? Where can we get the kind of social liveliness that the English novelists of the same century showed? But there are many fine American stylists, but subject matter, I think, is more of a problem for us. What is worthy of writing about in a democracy, in a leveling society like ours?

Q: Just a very short question. Such a great and prolific writer like you has read so many reviews of your books, I don't know if you have a reaction by now to any review. But I'm curious to know what you thought of the review in the *New York Times.*

JOHN UPDIKE: The daily *Times?* Well, Michiko Kakutani and I have danced many a round together **(laughter)** and her reviews of me seem petulant and—petulant—and she gets on a subject, a point of the book, one tiny point of the book, and won't let it go. **(laughter)** And she is censorious, censorious, I never feel in her much of an effort to say, "Well, that's true, but this is good about the book, or this book does that." I don't feel this so keenly when she reviews other authors.

(laughter)

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: You must take heart that she has a similar relationship with Philip Roth, though.

(laughter)

JOHN UPDIKE: That was heartening. **(laughter)** She was even harder, I thought, if I can judge degrees of hardness in her reviews, harder on Roth than on me. But, she is not easy to please and in a way a bad review keeps a writer honest. I've been on tour with this book for two weeks and met a lot of people and faced some audiences and mostly what I get is flattery and how nice and loved your stuff and all this so you begin to think that you're a pretty swell fellow **(laughter)** and Michiko Kakutani brings you back to reality in a very healthy way. **(laughter)**

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Let's do two more questions. One over here.

Q: Since both you guys have written for the *New Yorker*. Mr. Updike started in the fifties and Mr. Goldberg now in the 2000s, I'm just wondering on your thoughts about the two different editors, one famous, William Shawn, and now an up-and-coming, one of my favorite reporters and editors, David Remnick. How has it changed? What was it like then and now?

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Could I just note for the record that there are at the *New Yorker,* where both of us write, there are two classes of writers: there is the John Updike class, which consists of John Updike, **(laughter)** and then there's the Everybody Else class of writer which includes yours truly. I'm going to let him answer that first.

JOHN UPDIKE: Don't, please, that's not true. I'm still very rejectable **(laughter)** and still very grateful when I can get something into the magazine. I love the magazine. It came into my life when I was about eleven and I thought, "This is several orders better than any other magazine. It's wonderful." And it's been a delight to me to be a contributor. Shawn was a somewhat eccentric man, quite shy, authentically shy and authentically fearful, full of phobias, who wore a vest in the middle of summer, and was also the quickest reader I've ever seen and one of the shrewdest. He was a genius, really, as an editor. He made—he took Ross's excellent humor magazine and turned it into a world-class serious magazine, while keeping a lot of humor, also. He was, as I say, recessive. I rarely had a prolonged conversation with him but whenever I talked to him at all I had this feeling of being in the presence of a terribly wise person who knew everything, even though he said little.

Shawn left when the magazine changed hands, was bought by the Newhouse Corporation. Bob Gottlieb, who had been my editor at Knopf, funnily enough, edited for three years and was easy-going, very bright, quite funny, given to antics and snap judgments and I thought carried on much the way Shawn would have approved of. Little changed. The Newhouse Corporation, I think, resisted the lack of change. Let's put that another way. The Newhouse Corporation *wanted* change. The magazine was not making money, as far as I know, and felt like a kind of an old number, a back number. They brought in Tina Brown who was my, the editor for six years. She did make changes, some of it good, but she was very much out for buzz. She was out to create headlines and very keyed into the movie world, fashion world, all that. She was a real New Yorker, in a way, whose real heart seemed to me to be slightly elsewhere and she did resign.

And now we have Remnick, an amazing guy, very bright, quick, who is trying to and indeed succeeding in running the magazine, making it a little more journalistic. Certainly there's been more headlines created under Remnick than I've ever seen given the *New Yorker* before. Sy Hersh's exposes make headlines everywhere. Remnick does this, does manage the magazine week by week and at the same time continues to exist as a writer. An amazing achievement, really. I think there's no other editor who hasn't had to sacrifice their own creative streak, but I think it's in good hands, the magazine is prospering, I believe. Reached a million in circulation, which it never had before, and I'm glad that bright young people came along to salvage the magazine and guarantee its continued life into the future, well past my own.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: I would only add that the *New Yorker* is kind of a miracle, especially now, you know, the Google onslaught, the onslaught of, I mean, David's reaction to the rise of blogging is to assign longer pieces and ask for deeper, ever-deeper reporting and ever-more-careful editing and he has done that and also made it a successful, viable, financially viable magazine, so *that* I think is a miracle. Why don't we just go over here for a last question.

Q: Hello. One question I had—you spoke tonight about what you witnessed on the rooftop in Brooklyn and how that brought you to this novel. You also spoke on the radio this morning about how being in, I believe it was the Lincoln Tunnel, also added to knowing that you had a story to tell. Has there ever been something, maybe not of that magnitude, but something that you've

been witness to and have carried with you but have not yet found the character for, found the story for, but you still have that witness that you can see being perhaps a novel in the future.

JOHN UPDIKE: Good question, I'm trying to think of a possible answer. Human experience is a strange thing, day by day you store up impressions. All of them, we are told, are stored *somewhere* in the brain and you certainly feel even at the end of fifty books and twenty-two novels that you've left almost everything unsaid, that the key thing, you somehow missed it, you haven't got it, and that's why you keep writing, in part, is in the hope that you will find this buried treasure that you describe. The only way to find it is to keep digging, really, and sometimes you strike a very happy rain, vein. Rabbit Angstrom was a happy discovery in a way, the character of the ex-basketball player, the American athlete who has nowhere much to go. Henry Bech was happy in his way. If I knew the answer to your question I would probably go home and write it. Yes, I'm sure there's a great deal in my life, a great deal of material, that could still be worked into fiction. And only by continuing to write can I hope to discover it and use it.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Thank you very much, John Updike. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

(applause)