

(7) The New Yorker Fiction Writers

John Updike, John Cheever, Donald Barthelme, Joyce Carol Oates

American Magazines

- Magazine Platforms
- magazines have been forming the American literature since the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries
 - newspaper supplements also publish fiction, but their impact is lesser as they are distributed on a regional basis
 - the boom of weekly and bi-weekly magazines began in the 1920s to 1930s and dissolved in the mid-1980s
 - **The Saturday Evening Post** (since 1821): among the most widely circulated weeklies, publishing much fiction
 - *Harper's Magazine* (since 1850): among American oldest continuously published monthlies of general interest
 - *Cosmopolitan* (since 1886): began as a family magazine, turned into literary, then women's magazine (1960s)
 - *Collier's Weekly* (1888–1957): a pioneering magazine in investigative journalism, a platform for muckrakers
 - *Esquire* (since 1932): a men's monthly, open to new authors and to publishing essays and social commentaries
 - *Playboy* (since 1953): a men's monthly founded by Hugh Hefner, reputed for its interviews with public figures
 - *Rolling Stone* (since 1967): initially a hippie magazine, now a bi-weekly on music, politics and popular culture
- Literary Magazines
- academic journals: **The Sewanee Review**¹ (1892), *The Southern Review* (1935), *The Georgia Review* (1947)

The New Yorker (since 1925)

- History
- originally a weekly magazine set up by the journalist **Harold Ross** (1925), who edited it until his death (1951)
 - published accurate reportage, urbanely humorous and satirical articles, lively reviewing, stories and poetry
 - exercised a considerable influence over American **journalism** and **humorous** writing from 1945 to the 1970s
 - ranked as a very prestigious magazine and the most profitable for writers whose work was commissioned
- Content
- catered mostly for upper middle-class urban readers, mostly from the North, tended to conform to their taste
 - preferred psychological stories about family affairs, marital problems and children and parents relationships
 - avoided controversial and scandalous subjects, did not venture into publishing taboo topics like violence or sex
 - getting published was at first difficult for humorists, as two were on the staff (E. B. White, James Thurber)
- Contributors
- **E. B. White** (1899–1985): story writer, humorist, essayist, critic; author of 'The Hour of Letdown' (1951)
 - **James Thurber** (1894–1961): story writer, humorist, cartoonist; author of *Fables for Our Time* (1940, updated fables), *The 13 Clocks* (1950, a children's fantasy) or *A Thurber Carnival* (1960, a revue based on his writings)
 - contributors: the poet **Galway Kinnell**, the Southerners Richard Ford, Elizabeth Spencer and Peter Taylor

John Updike (1932–2009)

- Writing Subjects
- author of novels, short stories, poetry, literary and art criticism, a life-long prolific associate of the *New Yorker*
 - a chronicler of 'American, Protestant, small-town, middle-class' life, which he portrays with subtle **realism**
 - confronts the everyday common questions as fidelity, responsibility or religion, also responds to topical issues
 - tends to expound upon characters from his earlier novels to reintroduce them in the later decades of their lives
- Characters in Tension
- makes his characters inhabit the boundary between the intensity of life and the inevitability of death, between dreams of freedom and the comforts of a compromised suburban environment, living in a situation of tension
 - believes that tension is a peculiar feature to a person, a truly adjusted person is not a person at all, so that his characters all perform and pursue their maladjustments, enacting the beauty and the terror of their own **duality**
 - his characters are obsessed with waste, human and universal, with decay of human bodies and things of nature
- Escaping the Void
- sets the possibility of love against the **dread of the void**, suggesting that 'a man in love ceases to fear death'
 - offers also the comforts of the customary, routine and structure, though these may feel like a prison at times; the void may be both terrifying and liberating, the structures of our routines both comforting and claustrophobic
 - describes in his whole work the imminence of the void, the dread fear of death and the dim possibility of grace
- Writing Style
- makes use of sly allusion to myth, folktale and fairytale, at times playfully mixes genres or temporal planes
 - favours rich, unusual and sometimes arcane vocabulary conveyed through the eyes of 'a wry, intelligent authorial voice' that extravagantly describes the physical world while remaining squarely in the realist tradition
 - recognizable for the severe **elegance** of his prose that combines the demotic and the exalted, the documentary and the magical, detailing the contemporary American suburb while suggesting the existence of another world
- Poetry
- The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures** (1958)
- collects his intellectual witty poetry on the absurdities of modern life, originally published in the *New Yorker*
- Novels
- The Poorhouse Fair** (1959)

¹ Based in Sewanee, Tennessee, the oldest continuously published literary magazine and academic journal in the United States.

• his first novel, on a carnival, a ‘brainless celebration of the fact of existence’, another way of fighting the void
The Centaur² (1963)

Ageing
Teacher

- one of his most appreciated novels outside of any of his series, won the author his first National Book Award
- alludes to the myth of Chiron, the first centaur and revered tutor, to give the story a ‘counterpoint of identity’
- focuses on an ageing schoolteacher, George Caldwell, coming to terms with his decline and imminent death
- reflects on a time ‘when consciousness was a mere pollen drifting in darkness’ and his own annihilation, finds himself preoccupied with the wasting of nature and bitterly insists on the fact that ‘things never fail to fail’
- contrasts the resigned and depressed attitude of the older man with the youthful aspirations of his son, Peter, who dreams of becoming a painter and shares with his father the wish to escape the limitations of his hometown

Of The Farm (1965)

Country
v. City

- set in Pennsylvania, where the author was born and grew up, and where most of his early fiction takes place
- focuses on a moderately successful man from the suburbs in his mid-thirties and his relationship with his second wife as well as his mother whom he visits on her neglected farm that she stubbornly refuses to leave

Couples (1968)

Sexual
Morality

- set in New England, Massachusetts, where the author lived from the 1960s and where he sets his later fiction
- exposes the issues of the evolving sexual politics of the time against the background of East Coast suburbia
- follows a group of ten couples balancing between the Protestant morale and the flexible sexuality of the 1960s
- centres at a dedicated carpenter, Piet Hanoma, who fends off a sense of the void by handling solid materials

The Witches of Eastwick (1984), ***The Widows of Eastwick*** (2008)

Witches
& Satan

- the earlier novel of the series mixes the past and the present by making three mischievous suburban divorcees enjoy sexual adventures with Satan, the later book reintroduces the witches and trails them into their old age

Memories of the Ford Administration (1992)

Two
Presidents

- contains parallel narratives, one includes observations on sexuality during the Presidency of Gerard Ford in the 1970s, the other consists of a tale of a professor’s research on the nineteenth century President James Buchanan

Terrorist (2006)

09/11
Attacks

- responds to the cultural shifts that occurred in the United States after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001
- centres at an American-born Muslim teenager and seeks to explore the worldviews of religious fundamentalists

The Rabbit Pentalogy: ***Rabbit, Run*** (1960), ***Rabbit Redux*** (1971), ***Rabbit is Rich*** (1981), ***Rabbit at Rest*** (1990), ***Rabbit Remembered*** (2001)

Rabbit
Pentalogy

- underlying the series is the magic of the story of Peter Rabbit, a half-rabbit, half-human from children’s books
- each of the books of the pentalogy maps one decade of American life, following the protagonist until his death
- concentrates on Harry Angstrom, a former local basketball champion, whose nickname Rabbit looks back to those glorious times, to the success that he is unable to recapture when bound by marriage and small-town life
- at the end of the first book Rabbit is confronted with ‘impossible alternatives’, to return to his responsibilities, the pleasures and pressures of the suburbs, to both his wife and mistress, or to follow the road out of the city
- the protagonist sees death either way, he cannot make a choice and so he engages in simple motion and runs, which makes the ending indecisive and evasive, but also implies balancing and existing between the two roads
- the series continues in the protagonist’s separation and reconciliation with his wife in the next book; his inheritance, his wife’s drinking trouble and his son’s school trouble in the following; his retirement and death
- the last book of the series is a novella set after the protagonist’s death and focused on his illegitimate daughter
- both *Rabbit is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest* won the Pulitzer Prize, the former also won the National Book Award

The Bech Trilogy: ***Bech: A Book*** (1970), ***Bech is Back*** (1982), ***Bech at Bay*** (1998)

Bech
Trilogy

- humorously traces the tribulations of the eponymous protagonist, a moderate Jew and an unsuccessful writer

The *Scarlet Letter* Trilogy: ***A Month of Sundays*** (1975), ***Roger’s Version*** (1986), ***S.*** (1988)

Hawthorne
Revised

- inspired by the motives of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), explores the issues of religion and sexuality

The Same Door (1959), ***Pigeon Feathers*** (1962), ***Olinger Stories*** (1964), ***Museums and Women*** (1972), ***Trust Me*** (1987), ***Licks of Love*** (2001), ***My Father’s Tears and Other Stories*** (2009)

Short
Stories

- some of his about a dozen published collections of short stories, the latest of them published posthumously

John Cheever (1912–1982)

Writing
Subject

- connected for a long time with the *New Yorker*, parted with it as his work grew darker and less simply realistic
- considered the precursor of John Updike, whom he influenced, and with whom he shared the **suburbia** theme

² In Greek mythology, the centaurs are half-humans and half-horses, caught between the two natures both physically and mentally.

- undervalued due to his deceptively bright tone, the core of darkness in his stories used to be scarcely taken in
- appreciated for his powers of social observation, as a cheerful chronicler of suburbia and keen social historian
- preoccupied with fictional dissections of middle Americans, bends toward a witty satire and mordant moralism

Suburbia
Disappoint-
ment

- examines the theme of the American dream and the mystery of its **unfulfilment** in his disappointed characters
- questions why 'in this most prosperous, equitable and accomplished world' everyone seems to be disappointed
- portrays the suburbs as a state of mind, almost a pastoral utopia that seems cut off from suffering and tragedy
- presents glimpses of alcoholism, lust and family combat hiding behind the impeccable manners and decorum
- infuses his stories with much unhappiness, perpetually observes bitterness, disappointment and latent violence
- makes some of his stories on the other hand shimmer with recollections of summers past and boyhood dreams

Divided
Characters

- shows characters as **divided** souls, schooled in duty and self-restrained, fuelled by lust and passionate longing
- records the conflicts between sex and marriage, freedom and home, between instinctual need and family life
- divided between a celebration of the nuclear family and an attraction to the figure of the outlaw and deviant
- suggests that freedom is a pressing need, but not as strong as the need for family bonds and social acceptance
- allows for the characters to be redeemed by moments of transcendence in love, nature, language or memory
- informs his characteristic vein of comic melancholy with a feeling of hope and some promise for the future

Surrealist
Tendency

Short Stories ***The Enormous Radio and Other Stories*** (1953)

- the title story deals with a couple whose radio allows them to listen to the conversations of their neighbours

Short
Stories

The Wapshot Chronicle (1957)

- at once a wistful and comic account of a wealthy but declining Massachusetts family, modelled on the author's
- the scattered storylike episodes combine nostalgia for a lost Eden with the sense of a world gone terribly awry
- uses his often recurring themes, including his grim sense of Puritan origins, his fierce rivalry with his brother, his parents' painful marriage, his father's feeling of being superfluous and his own fear of turning homosexual

Family
Chronicle

Falconer (1977)

- a controversial novel dealing with an university professor and drug addict who serves a term for the murder of his brother and who struggles to retain his humanity in the prison environment by beginning a homosexual affair

Homosexual
Fratricide

Short Stories ***The Stories of John Cheever*** (1978)

Short
Stories

'Goodbye, My Brother'

- contrasts the gloomy puritanical brother with the life-affirming narrator in a story on the Cain and Abel theme
- the one brother is harsh in his judgements and morosely indifferent to his family and past, the other brother manages to find beauty and rebirth when he is looking out at the sea where his sibling sees only death and decay
- the narrator extends his tolerance to everyone except his brother, failing to realize how much he resembles him
- the exasperated narrator murderously strikes his brother from behind, in a sense of expelling him from the family, subduing his own dark alter ego and for a moment restoring the family to a sense of paradise regained

Fratricide
Theme

'The Country Husband'

- focuses on the quiet misery of suburban marriage in a story of a family man who feels he is taken for granted
- the protagonist survives an air crash but his family is too preoccupied to pay any attention to what happened, he goes on to commit a series of transgressions representing his attempt to regain freedom and the state of joy
- the protagonist manages to be rude to the town's social arbiter, to blacken the family's standing with its conforming neighbours and to fall in love absurdly with the baby-sitter, feeling that nobody understands him
- the story concludes with the husband and wife quarrelling and almost separating but reconciling again quickly
- the title alludes to William Wycherley's farce *The Country Wife* (1674), in which a man feigns impotence in order to seduce unwary women, but presents a country husband who is really rendered impotent by conventions
- the husband is trapped in a world which he however chose himself, so in the end he chooses to return back to it

Suburbia
Impotence

Minor Novella ***Oh What a Paradise It Seems*** (1982)

Minor
Novella

- his last published work, a minor novella focusing on an ageing man who is rejuvenated by an unusual romance

Donald Barthelme (1931–1989)

Views
on Art

- allied to the work of art as object, an opaque system of language rather than a transparent account of the world
- committed to the displacement of the writer from the work and the displacement of the work from the world

³ In his journals the author explores his own anarchic sexual itch, especially homosexual feelings, to which he occasionally yielded.

Pop Art
Methods

- presents his stories and novels as witty, formally elegant and sly commenting on themselves as being **artefacts**
- uses a verbal collage full of odd juxtapositions and unpredictable swerves, a linguistic equivalent of Pop Art
- picks up the shards and **fragments** of modern life, as postmodernists do, and gives them the quality of surprise
- absorbs the trash of common experience, the output of television, books, political speeches and ordinary talk

Playful
Language

- varies narrative modes, moves from parodies of narrative structure to playful lampoons of cultural institutions
- omits or fragments the habitual arrangements and separations of **language** through which we seek to control it
- raises important questions but stubbornly refuses to address them, uses them only as triggers to amusement
- refuses to press for development, which makes the short story a more natural medium for him than the novel
- fluctuates between immersion in trash culture and the impulse to evade it by the means of irony or nostalgia
- appreciated for his sportive fantasy and verbal trickery, though there is also melancholia underlying his work

First
Novel***Snow White*** (1967)

- his first novel, includes a parodic comment on the currently fashionable ideas of the work of art as open and the reader as its co-producer by including a questionnaire for the readers to specify their preferences for a book

Short
Stories***Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*** (1968)

- a collection of stories, epitomized by the claim of one of the characters, 'fragments are the only forms I trust'

'The Balloon'

- his most widely anthologized story, which may be considered a metaphor for the amorphous nature of his work
- an enormous balloon appears over the city, delightfully random, amorphous, floating free and changing shape
- people argue over its meaning, children play on it, adults write messages on it and authorities try to destroy it
- the ability of the balloon to change shape pleased especially 'people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned', the presence of the balloon generated both pleasure and ruefulness, a wry regret as it floated free over the city
- the balloon is a paradigm of the art object, a free-form product, resistant to understanding or interpretation

Second
Novel***The Dead Father*** (1977)

- his second novel, includes a hilarious passage on the 'true task' of the modern son, which is to reproduce the father, 'but a paler, weaker version of him', to move 'toward a golden age of decency, quiet and calmed fevers'

Joyce Carol Oates (b. 1938)Writing
Styles

- reputed for her great prolificacy, has published over fifty novels and another fifty collections of other writings
- produces novels, short stories, children's books, fiction for young adults, poetry, plays, essays and criticism
- classified as a realist writer and a social critic concerned with the violence of contemporary American culture
- attracted to testing the limits of classical myth, popular tales, fairy stories and established literary conventions
- drawn towards the **Gothic**, blends a realistic treatment of everyday life with horrific and sensational scenes

Writing
Subjects

- the common preoccupation of her fiction, whatever its form or focus, is showing crises and characters at risk
- focuses on ordinary characters whose lives are vulnerable to threats from society or their inner selves or both
- her characters either find **violence** erupting from their surroundings, or they feel so frustrated by the barren or grotesque nature of their lives and their social circumstances that they eventually erupt into violence themselves
- portrays characters as victims of forces beyond their control or comprehension, though they may not realize it
- sets many of her novels in 'Eden County', a location based on the area of New York State where she was born
- her early fiction focuses on rural America with its migrants, social strays, ragged prophets and wrecking yards
- her later writing moves to satirical meditations on suburbia and to exploring the brutal lives of the urban poor

Early
Novels***With Shuddering Fall*** (1964)

- her first published novel, concentrates on a disastrous love affair of one couple in the setting of rural America

A Garden of Earthly Delights⁴ (1967)

- her second novel, shows a woman protagonist determined to escape her haphazard life of violence and poverty and her relationships with her father, a bitter migrant farm worker, with her wealthy married lover and her son

Expensive People (1968)

- her next novel, abandons the rural setting in favour of a city, satirizes the mediocre lives of suburbia dwellers

Master-
piece***them***⁵ (1969)

- winner of the National Book Award, explores the struggle of the working class to achieve the American Dream

Short
Story***'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'*** (1970)

- a much anthologized story, shows an all American⁶ girl fatally at ease with the blandness of her adolescent life,

⁴ The title alludes to a painting by Hieronymus Bosch called *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1504), a triptych on Biblical scenes.

⁵ The title is styled with lower-case letters.

- Later
Novels whose sense of security proves a dangerous illusion as she becomes a victim of a caller mistaken for a friend
- Generation
Gaps ***Wonderland*** (1971)
• a novel about the gaps between generations, structured around the stories of Lewis Carroll's children's books
- Hopeless
Love ***Childwold*** (1976)
• a lyrical portrait of the artist as a young woman, a story of a middle-aged man falling in love with a young girl
• the title refers to the name of the fictional distant and impoverished region to which the man feels attracted
- Red
Scare ***You Must Remember This*** (1987)
• commemorates the conspiratorial obsessions of the 1950s and the Red Scare as triggered off by the Cold War
- American
Racism ***Because it is Bitter, and Because it is My Heart*** (1991)
• dramatizes the explosive nature of American race relations, set before the upsurge of the civil rights movement
- Love
Affair ***Black Water*** (1992)
• a powerful novella, examines the fatal attraction of a young girl for an older man, referred to as 'The Senator'
- Marilyn
Monroe ***Blonde*** (2000)
• an extended novel, plunges into the internal life of Marilyn Monroe, though insists on being a work of fiction

⁶ 'All-Americans' refer to the members of a honorary sports team, the best amateur players of a given season for each team position.