

HELEN ALLAN

SHORT STORIES BY JOHN UPDIKE

John Updike, *Problems and Other Stories*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. Cloth \$12.95. 260 pp.

This collection of short stories is Updike's first for seven years. More's the pity, as he is a master of this medium, evocative at times of Hemingway and a masculine, space-age Katherine Mansfield. Collections have been sandwiched in among novels like the famous Rabbit series, *The Centaur*, *The Coup*, and plays and poems.

The collections are usually spiced with a few short-short stories that are quintessentially Updike and give a strong flavour to the offering. Such, in the present volume, are 'Commercial', 'Minutes of the Last Meeting' and 'Problems'. The latter is well chosen as title story, posing as it does nightmarish examination questions on life. The final sentence sets the flavour for the book: 'Problem: Something feels wrong. What is it?'

Many of the longer stories in this book emphasize the author's concern with, and compassion for the dilemmas of family life, particularly in Middle America today, as he sees it in 'How to Love America and Leave it at the Same Time'. This is a theme we have met before both in his novels and in earlier collections of short stories, such as *The Music School* (1967). Updike likes to explore the feelings of a given family moving through dizzying spirals of marriage-children-separation-divorce-remarriage, and as he does so the name of the family continually changes. And we find ourselves asking a question: who is this family? Is it Updike's family, our own family, or the whole benighted family of man?

In *The Music School*, we see the looming of marital trouble. Two bitter-sweet sketches, 'Twin Beds in Rome' and 'Avec la Bébé sitter' prepare us for what is to come. By the time of *Problems and Other Stories* the inevitable has occurred. In 'Separating' things have come to the point of no return, and the children have to be told. It is really no news to them. We have met them in 'Son', 'Daughter, Last Glimpses of' and indeed in all the stories, for they are well loved and highly visible. And

the poor, driven father feels, as he says in 'Guilt Gems', 'a ceaseless guilt . . . for having called them into being at all.' Yet they are survivors, and at times are more than a match for him. He knows, as he remarks in 'The Egg Race', that 'he had left them . . . only a little before they would have left him'.

'The wives get the houses' is the laconic opening of 'Domestic Life in America' which, with the furtively nostalgic 'Atlantises' give us a taste of what life is like after the 'easy, no-fault' divorce celebrated in 'Here Come the Maples'. A telling example of the husband's bemusement is his absent-minded kiss for his wife after the divorce is granted. He had forgotten to kiss her at their wedding.

The *dramatis personae* are numerous. Everyone is drawn into the family's eddy of pain – the second wife, her children, her husband, even the family pets. Grandparents have their say, sometimes posthumously, for we read in 'The Egg Race' that 'Ferguson would never have done it if his father had been alive'. Finally in 'Fairy Godfathers' we formally meet the two his-and-hers psychiatrists, those priestly contemporary advisers whom we have glimpsed lurking behind the scenes in earlier stories.

Updike's morsels of human drama are always meaty, never saccharine. Rarely are they more meaty than in the brilliant tangential story, 'Transaction'. Here we leave the whirling family circle and go off, at a not irrelevant tangent, on a little escapade where we are voyeurs at a far-from-brief encounter with a pragmatic prostitute. Here at last, in a hotel bedroom with mirrors, Ferguson-Ferris-Maple-Updike, or is it we ourselves, find the answer to one problem at least: What is the lowest common denominator of sex?