



Wound down and winding up

Bech at Bay: A Quasi-Novel.

By John Updike. Knopf, 241 pp., \$23.00.

BYE-BYE" is the last phrase in this final novel of Updike's Bech trilogy. Bech, like Harry in *Rabbit at Rest*, is wound down and winding up. "Enough," says Harry. "Bye-bye," says Bech. "Ditto," Updike himself seems to echo. The end of a lot of things is limned in these last books.

Like the other Bechs, this is a very funny book. It is also brilliantly sardonic, cryptic, acerbic, pathetic, nostalgic and poignant. In fact, the fun-poking humor behind all these sentiments derives unmistakably from Updike's unrelenting Bechian parody of the celebrity American writer, which he himself, of course, embodies. In the Jewish Henry Bech, the WASP Updike has attempted to create an eccentric but basically lovable alter ego.

Through Bech Updike enjoys saying things which he cannot say elsewhere. The classic case here is the surprising and outrageously funny chapter, "Bech Noir." With the help of his computer-whiz second wife, Robin ("Twenty-six, post-Jewish, frizzy, big hair"), Bech diabolically dispatches—murders—no fewer than four of his despised long-time critics. Updike is careful to blend characteristics so that no libel suits will be filed, but his descriptions of what these Bech critics have said show unmistakable traces of the caustic criticisms well-known pundits have leveled against Updike over the years.

One also feels the author standing in the shadows in the last chapter, "Bech and the Bounty of Sweden," in which Bech by default is awarded the Noble Prize in literature. Most of Updike's ad-

Reviewed by James Yerkes, professor of religion and philosophy at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and editor of the forthcoming book John Updike and Religion.

mirers know that he has been nominated for that prize many times without success. Bech reflects the determined sentiment of a man who thinks it unlikely this award will ever come: "Now an old man, he saw through dimmed eyes. He had done what he could; he had tried to write his own books rather than books others wanted him to write."

Other Updike themes emerge, including his love of America, its basic freedoms and its immigrant history—a patriotism Gore Vidal once unconsciously derided as a loyalty "to every far-out far-right piety currently being fed us." "America has its rough spots," says a sombered "Bech in Czech." "If the muggers don't get your wallet, the nursing homes will—but it's still a country that never had a pogrom."

Updike's preoccupations with finitude and personal transience, with all their attendant religious overtones, also appear here. "Bech's seven books glimmered in his backward glance like fading trailmarks in a dark wood, *una selva oscura*, the tangled place where his consciousness intersected with the universe." Updike explored the same theme rather grandly in his recent novel *Toward the End of Time*.

Typically, Bech's writer's block appears when he tries composing his Nobel acceptance speech. Nothing Updike has written will quite touch the heart as do the book's final pages when Bech attempts to deliver the speech. A painfully anguished effort at humor culminates in an emotionally surprising scene. Updike could not have chosen a better epigraph for the book than Wallace Steven's "Something of the

unreal is necessary to fecundate the real." In Updike's capable hands, the fictional Bech becomes touchingly real indeed.

The Island.

By David Borofka. MacMurray & Back, 191 pp., \$19.50.

AT FIRST David Borofka's novelette *The Island* seems to fall into a well-worn category: that of a reminiscence about one's first summer romance. It re-creates those endless summers when we feel old enough to date but are not yet working a steady job. But Borofka deepens this subject by exploring issues of friendship and betrayal, forms of spirituality and questions about the possibilities of order in the universe.

Borofka's main character, 14-year-old "Fish" Becker, narrates the tale, providing an appropriate point of view for exploring the mysteries of existence. Fish's parents have shipped him off to stay with the family of his father's

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best friend, Miles Lambert, while the Beckers travel abroad to try to decide if they would rather get divorced or make another expensive purchase that would temporarily assuage their sense of incompatibility. With the Lamberts in Oregon, Fish experiences the close company of not one but two girls, one associated with body and one with spirit. Amanda meets Fish on the beach every night and allows him to explore her body so far and no further. Mira insists on exploring the spirit world with Fish through the medium of her Ouija board.

As in *Hints of His Mortality* (1996), a collection of stories that won the Iowa Short Fiction Award, Borofka crafts characters who are attracted to religious ritual and wonder about the meaning of things, but aren't comfortable with a commitment to faith. Mira uses her Ouija board to communicate with a dead cousin who is able to provide surprising and seemingly accurate answers about relationships and the possibility of an afterlife. At the

same time, these characters are attracted to the rituals of doctrinal religion, taking comfort in liturgical language at weddings and funerals. Rather than providing answers to questions of faith, Borofka's work evokes the mysteries of existence and remains open to the possibility of God.

In this novel the status of temporal reality, like that of the numinous realm, is not straightforward or easy to figure out. Mira's mother believes in multiple, overlapping realities. The narrative bears her out by providing two alternative versions of her pregnancy. One ends in a miscarriage caused by a train wreck, the other in Mira's healthy birth. The novel's structure, which intersperses events and perspectives from the past and the present with minimal narrative guidance, suggests that through the faculty of memory we often experience this sense of overlapping time.

Relationships are mysterious as well. Fish's mother was engaged to marry Mira's father until Miles Lambert's college roommate and best

friend, Alan Becker, walked into her clothing store. Lambert and Becker remain friends, but the consequences of the betrayal ripple through time and generations, affecting the relationship between their sons. After Freddy Lambert decks Fish, Fish tells his dad, "The next time you hit someone . . . tell me when I need to duck."

Borofka insists on the timelessness of these issues of betrayal and reconciliation by alluding to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in the title and the characterization. Miles presides over his estate like Prospero over his island. Like Prospero, he has been betrayed by those closest to him. A shipwreck brings Prospero's betrayers to the island; Fish's parents arrive at the estate after surviving a train wreck. Mira, short for Miranda (Prospero's daughter), becomes the friend of the usurper's son, echoing the friendship of Shakespeare's Miranda and Ferdinand. Miles's wife, Ariana, is "barely five feet tall, a sprite," suggesting a connection with Ariel. Freddie, loaded down with labors like Caliban, is punished for his rebellious independence. These allusions are evocative without being heavy-handed. Noticing these parallels and thinking about their possible meanings deepens the significance of the theme of betrayal.

Borofka's layers of thematic allusion remind one of the finely crafted poems and stories loved by the New Critics. His questions about chaos and order, and even Lambert's hobby of fiddling with radio parts, are reminiscent of the themes explored in Thomas Pynchon's novels: Do we live in a world ruled by entropy, or do the pieces come together in some kind of pattern? At the same time, the writing seems post-modern in its play with multiple, overlapping realities and its refusal of linear narrative. Even as it engages readers in thinking deeply, Borofka's writing is crisp, funny and inspiring.

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