

A terminal search for God

John Updike is perhaps the greatest living American writer. Amazingly adept at exploring the ever-changing relationship between man and an impermanent society, he is at the same time constantly sure of his language, of the sound and rhythm of words he uses to express the travails of modern man and woman.

In his latest novel, "Roger's Version," Updike has constructed a magnificent and baffling work. The story is built around the discussions between Roger Lambert, a divinity professor who narrates the novel, and Dale Kohler, a computer research assistant who has decided that modern science can, and in fact should, prove the existence of God. More honestly, the novel is built upon the methods Lambert uses to cleanse Kohler of a faith the professor finds both disturbing and amusing.

But if these debates and strategies are the foundation of the novel, the building Updike erects upon it is what makes the work so memorable.

Complicating matters are Esther, Roger's wife, and Verna Ekelof, the daughter of Roger's half-sister, who constantly calls Roger "Nunc." Verna is 19 and lives with her baby in a housing project in the same city as Roger. It is through her that Kohler comes to Roger to plead for his assistance in acquiring funding for his project, which he describes as nothing less than proving, with computers, that God exists.

This project, and the battles over it, occupy much of the first half of the novel, and Updike seems preoccupied with the mechanics of the problems Dale faces. Pages and pages are spent on minute descriptions of Dale's techniques and trials with the computer. We learn more about polygon meshes and fractal patterns than seems relevant.

But of course it is relevant. Updike has been described as "the Mozart of our technological culture," and computers are the perfect symbol of that culture. Computers are man's newest partners in the search for knowledge, and computer-talk is the newest form of language. Updike uses this language, relishing it while changing and beautifying it, describing the world of computers in lyrical tones usually left for more romantic subjects.

But even as his words bring computers to life, one gets the sense that Updike, or at least Roger, disdains the value modern man puts on them. We see computers as mere toys, subject to the whims of man.

James Surowiecki

Books

fine for constructing interesting animation graphics but ineffectual in the face of anything meaningful, if such a thing exists.

But this novel is about much more than God and computers. The ramifications of Dale and Roger's encounter form the microscope through which Updike examines the union of three different slices of modern society: Roger and Esther's comfortable upper middle-class stratum, Dale's struggling student life and Verna's battle to manufacture some sort of life out of barrenness.

This union takes place in diverse ways. Dale and Esther have an affair, grittily, almost joyously, described by Roger, who seems to take a perverse pleasure in imagining the details of his wife's adultery. Updike's works always have their share of sex, and this novel is no exception. Roger regales us with the sights, sounds and smells of the illicit affair.

Roger also, after a series of arguments and encounters that amount to linguistic foreplay, has a one-night stand with his niece Verna. There are all sorts of interesting possibilities raised by this fling, including the notion that while making love to Verna, Roger is really making love to his sister.

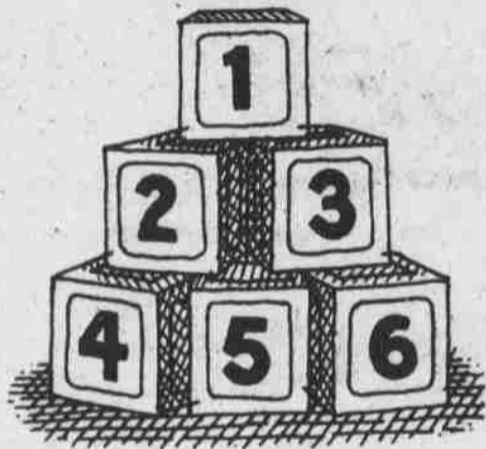
In reality, there is much more to

"Roger's Version" than first meets the eye. There are subplots involving Verna's baby and child abuse, Roger's son and the perils of comfortable living. But the central dilemma of the novel is that Lambert is the narrator, and therefore the reader, as the title indicates, is seeing the world through his eyes. We see Dale through his eyes as a nice, eager boy whom Roger manipulates and breaks. We see Esther as an insatiable woman, intent on proving her youth by devising ever-new and ever-different ways to use Dale's body.

In the same way, Verna, Esther, even the baby, all come to us through the prism of Roger's existence. There is no objectivity in the novel. We see as Roger wishes us to see. And when I had finished, it was difficult not to feel as if Roger had been stringing me along, just as he had been stringing Kohler along, playing a game with his faith and his work.

Near the end of the novel, Verna talks to Roger about Dale, saying, "He's a non-turnon. Besides, he's not evil like you, Nunc." It seemed like a curious statement at the time, but in fact Roger does come across, through all his dissembling and manipulation, as someone who is spiritually bankrupt, to whom morality is just something to hide behind. So perhaps Verna was right. In any case, it is in this whole game of confusion and subjective reality that the genius of this novel really lies.

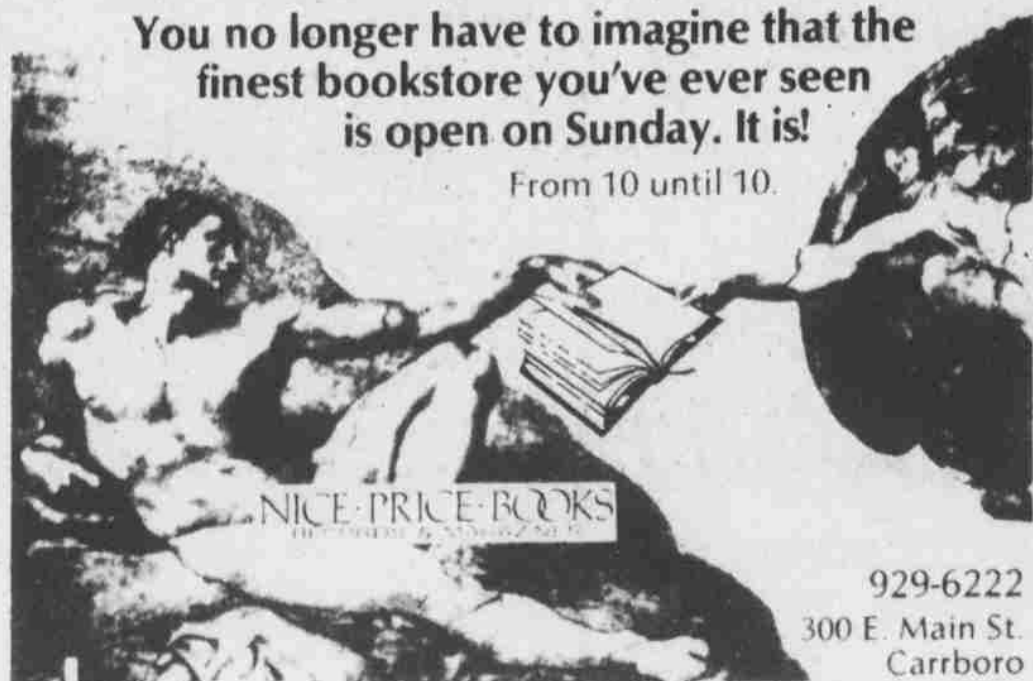
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