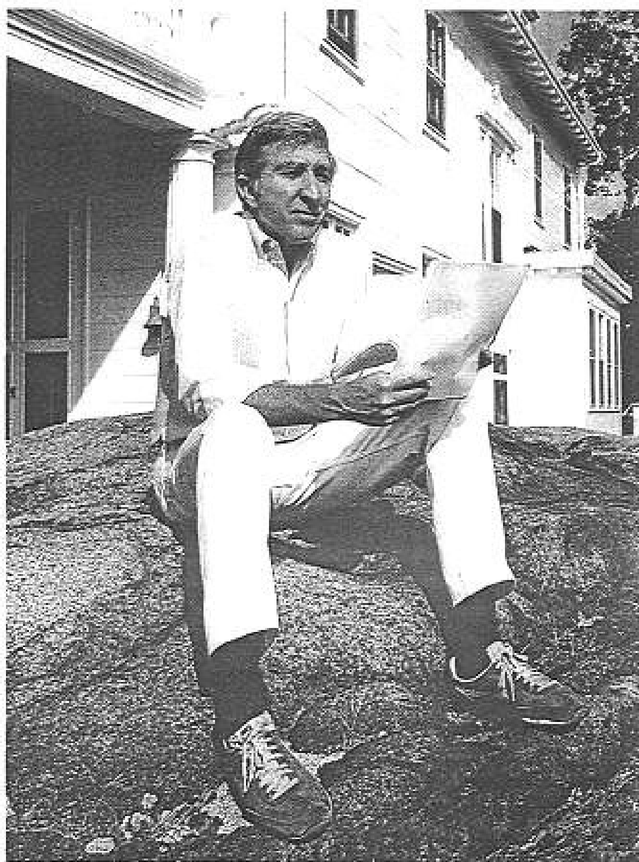
Updike in the Lion's Den

A reporter once asked Albert Einstein where he got his ideas. "What do you mean?" said the famous physicist. "Well," explained the reporter, "do you have ideas when you're sitting at your desk, or playing the violin, or taking a walk, or lying in the bathtub? *Where* do you get them?" Einstein paused, then slowly shook his great white head. "Actually," he replied, "I've only had one or two."

In John Updike's very funny new novel, ***Bech Is Back*** *(195 pages. Knopf. $13.95)*, a pretty young publishing assistant asks the famous novelist Henry Bech where he gets *his* ideas—and whether a writer owes anything to society or just to himself, and whether he's always been a neat typist and good speller. Bech, who has been besieged by autograph hunters while trying to seduce this girl over lunch, thinks sadly: "The world, by one of those economic balancings whereby it steers, had at the same time given him success and taken from him the writer's chief asset, his privacy."

Holding Forth: The world's eagerness to lionize famous writers is hardly new. Henry James reported with delight from London that he had dined out 140 times in the winter of 1878-79. Open just about any magazine today, turn on any talk show, and you'll find a writer holding forth—without Einstein's modesty or Bech's qualms—on where he gets his ideas, what he eats for breakfast and, of course, the state of the American novel. Imagine what Herman Melville, who dropped out of sight and became a customs inspector after writing his major novels, would have thought of Jerzy Kosinski half-naked on the cover of The New York Times Magazine (the other half was wearing riding boots and britches). What would he have made of John Irving scantily clad in wrestler's briefs to advertise the new magazine Vanity Fair? The force that once drove American novelists to social criticism has become, thinks Henry Bech, "sexual display." Melville, who made an average of $1,600 a year at his writing peak and was therefore one of the best-paid authors of his day, might find it hard to credit the vast sums of money that now flow toward writers whose faces flash across the country on the covers of national magazines and whose images enter America's living rooms via cathode-ray tubes.

Both the fictional Henry Bech and his creator emit eloquent groans on the subject of publicity. Bech, on his first appearance in "Bech: A Book" (1970), derogated celebrity as "the silken mechanism whereby America reduces her writers to imbecility and cozenage." He hates interviews—as does Updike, who has deftly avoided them twice by concocting clever "talks" with Henry Bech for The New York Times. When his superb "Rabbit Is Rich" came out last year, Updike "told" Bech: "I can only decry the drain on the brain, the assumption that a writer is a mass of opinions to be trucked in and carted off for his annual six minutes on the pan-American talk show . . . His duty is, in a sense, to turn his back." (The late Edmund Wilson turned *his* back by having cards printed up listing all the things "Edmund Wilson regrets that it is impossible" for him to do. The list included: read manuscripts, give interviews, deliver lectures, answer questionnaires and autograph books for strangers.)



Ira Wyman

Updike: Is the pen mightier than the limelight?

Both Bech and Updike are, however, adept at playing the publicity game. When Bech, who hasn't published a novel in years, gets cornered by journalists, he can't help trying "for one more degrading time to dig into the rubbish of his 'career' and come up with the lost wristwatch of truth." The extremely prolific Updike conceded in his "interview" with Bech that "you don't go into this business without a touch of ham"—and just watch the coming hoopla over the publication of "Bech Is Back."

Bech is indeed back—and in fine form in this witty sendup of a world that worships celebrity as if it were God. Unlike Updike, who is a twice-married Wasp and the author of 26 books of fiction, criticism and poetry, Bech is a Jew who has sedulously avoided "both the venture of marriage, though his suburban mistress was more than ready, and the venture of print." He wrote three novels years ago, and now, in the "celebrated impotence" of his middle years, the books "continued, as if ironically, to live, to cast shuddering shadows toward the center of his life, where that thing called his reputation cowered." The fictional Bech wrote a letter to his author that appeared as the foreword to "Bech: A Book." "Dear John," he began—then noted his resemblance to several of his Jewish brethren—Mailer, Bellow, Alex Portnoy, I. B. Singer, Malamud, Henry Roth, Daniel Fuchs and Salinger. "Withal," he added, there was in his character "something Waspish, theological, scared, and insulatingly ironical that derives, my wild surmise is, from you."

Laughter: Instead of writing in his dark apartment on New York's Upper West Side, Bech travels. On college campuses he is "hauled from the creative-writing class to the faculty cocktail party to the John D. Benefactor Memorial Auditorium and . . . back to the Holiday Inn." On a Caribbean island he spends two weeks signing 28,500 tip-in sheets for a special edition of his early novel, "Brother Pig" (the publishing house is owned by the Superoil Corp., which happens also to own a resort on the island). He goes to Canada and Australia, where cities, talk shows and sexual liaisons blend hazily into one another.

In a chapter jauntily called "Bech Third-Worlds It," the nonwriting author jets from Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya to Venezuela and South Korea, lecturing on "The Cultural Situation of the American Writer" and "The Role of the Writer in Society." Asked what he means by "American writer," he says, "Any person who simultaneously writes and holds American citizenship"—and can't tell if the laughter is with or against him. Lionized, inanely questioned and politically hassled (Venezuelan students protest a statement he once made about Vietnam), Bech has a moment of epiphany. He feels "sorry he had ever said anything, on anything, ever. He had meddled with sublime silence. There was in the world a pain

(Continued on page 71)

(Continued from page 67)
concerning which God has set an example of unimpeachable no comment."

Bech, like Updike, has been reading Melville. These thoughts about silence and God occur while Bech delivers a peroration on ironic points of light—Melville once described American writers, outside the political system, as "ironic points of light." Melville himself lapsed into sublime silence. The word "novel" means "new," and Melville's "news" (wrote Updike in a brilliant New Yorker essay last spring) was that "God was dead and life a cruel fraud." Playfully serious—and seriously playful—these references do not drag "Bech" down from the comic stratosphere to the muddy subterrain of literary allusion.

'White on White': They do whisper some questions about American novel writing: What "news" is there to deliver in the late 20th century? Is anybody listening? Has fiction reached a dead end? Can a writer lionized into cultural celebrity maintain the distance necessary to act as an "ironic point of light"? Not only Updike, but Philip Roth, Malamud, Bellow and John Fowles have all been writing books about writers recently—rather like the photographer in "Bech" who got the idea for a book called "White on White" when he dropped an aspirin in the bathtub and couldn't find it: "The idea, you know, of exploring how little contrast you could have and still have a photograph." What is it that America does to writers that makes them write so much about what America does to writers?

Not Bech. He's not writing at all. At middle age he is scared—primarily of death and marriage, but also of adventures, diseases, strange men and loose women. Wanting to feel safe, he marries his suburban Wasp, Bea, and they settle into that familiar landscape of wedded unease known as Updike country. They travel to the Holy Land (so did Melville), which Bech dislikes (so did Melville). Bech compares his marriage to this Zionist state—"a mistake long deferred, a miscarriage of passé fervor and antiquated tribal righteousness, an attempt to be safe on an earth where there was no safety." When Bea speaks for him, he feels startled, "as if one of his ribs had suddenly chirped." Yet he decides "the holy land was where you accepted being. Middle age was a holy land. Marriage."

Bech moves into Bea's house in Ossining (the New York suburb where the late John Cheever lived), though he has "the true New Yorker's secret belief that people living anywhere else had to be, in some sense, kidding." There he feels distinctly uncomfortable with Bea's Wasp friends: "Money ... as these Wasps possessed it, seemed something rigid and invisible, like glass ... Whereas money under Jewish hands was yeasty; it grew and spread and frolicked on the counting table ... Being among the goyim frightened Bech, in truth; their collective chill was the chill of devils."

Portrait of the artist: Flight of fancy

From comparative finance, it's a short hop to comparative religion: "Their [Christian] God, for all of His colorful history and spangled attributes, lay above Earth like a whisper of icy cirrus, a tenuous and diffident Other Whose tendrils failed to entwine with fibrous blood and muscle; whereas the irrepressible Jewish God, the riddle of joking rabbis, playing His practical jokes upon Job and Abraham and leading His chosen into millennia of mire without so much as the promise of an afterlife, this God beside Whom even the many-armed deities of the Hindus appeared sleek and plausible, nevertheless entered into the daily grind and kibitzed at all transactions."

Wilson: No interviews, no autographs

Culver Pictures

God again. Jewish, upper-middlebrow Henry Bech isn't passionately interested in God the way Harry Angstrom is in Updike's "Rabbit" books. Lower-middle-class Lutheran Harry (nicknamed "Rabbit"), running away from his pregnant wife in the very ordinary landscape of Brewer, Pa., feels that "somewhere behind all this, there's something that wants me to find it." Updike's genius with Rabbit lies in his ability to make that hungering quest so sympathetic and real in a character who is not articulate or intellectual, a man who does outrageously cruel things to the people he supposedly loves, a man who cannot, in fact, love because he's too busy trying to see his own reflection in God's—and women's—eyes. An Episcopal minister, insouciantly named Eccles, tells Harry, "It's the strange thing about you mystics, how often your little ecstasies wear a skirt."

Readers and critics have accused Updike of being obsessed with sex. Maybe—but I think he is using Harry Angstrom, and Piet Hanema in "Couples," and Richard Maple in "Too Far to Go," to explore that modern search for "something behind all this ... that wants me to find it." Melville—and many others—may have announced the demise of God, but nobody has managed to excise the desire for something beyond death and daily life, a desire that has in the 20th century shifted its focus from God to sex. In women—in sex itself, love, marriage, procreation and adultery—Updike's men look for a power, an answer, a magic to grace the quotidian.

Idols: Bech, who is after all a parody, doesn't engage too seriously in these metaphysics. He finally writes a best seller, flacks it, makes a million dollars, sleeps with his wife's sister and gets divorced. The hunger in the "Bech" books, handled lightly, is not for God or sex—it's not really even Bech's hunger. Updike here is targeting the desperate hunger of a public that makes idols of its celebrities, worshiping at the empty altar of fame, trying to invest poor old half-baked Bech with the powers and magic that once accrued to God.

Skating on charmingly thin ice, the real-life eminent Updike quotes real-life eminent critics on the fictional Bech: his new best seller is "'The squalid book we all deserve,' said Alfred Kazin in *The New York Times Book Review*.... 'Not quite as *vieux chapeau* as I had every reason to fear,' allowed Gore Vidal in *The New York Review of Books*." Vogue splashes "Bech Is *In!*" across a picture of Bech modeling a corduroy coat and wool turtleneck. Time, after ignoring the book in favor of a diet-cookbook roundup, comes around to "Bech Surprises."

Add one more—for "Bech Is Back": "'God, Sex and Superstars,' headlines *Newsweek*. 'Updike's latest is a trenchant, comic lark'."

JEAN STROUSE