Magical realism

Oct. 7, 2008
GLENN C. ALTSCHULER, THE JERUSALEM POST

The Widows of Eastwick
By John Updike
Alfred A. Knopf
303 pages; $24.95

"They have taken quarters in the Lenox Seaview Apartments," writes a stocky woman bent over a battered desk on the third floor of her sloppy, shabby house. "The fat sympathetic one, the dark unsympathetic one, the sexy pretty one rendered nervous by being so. All old and shameless and useless, vermin underfoot. Kill them."

In his sequel to The Witches of Eastwick, published 25 years ago, John Updike has brought Sukie Rougemont, Jane Smart and Alexandra Spofford back to the seaside town in Rhode Island where they had made babies and deferred to their husbands until there was little left for them "but to ride a broomstick and cook up spells."

They've returned to be together, to revisit the scene of their "primes," and make amends, perhaps, for their "prime-crimes." By focusing on "the fretful nag of living, the intricate bridge of rope society suspends above bottomless non-existence," they know they'll be less likely to go crazy in a universe that "holds vast volumes of nothingness." By reconstituting their coven, their "cone of power," they hope to protect themselves - and each other - from harm at the hands of their enemies.

The Widows of Eastwick is by turns funny, philosophical, suspenseful and sad. At 76, Updike remains America's greatest writer, invoking his distinctive brand of magical realism in an elegantly written, occasionally crabby, often moving meditation on original sin, aging and atonement.

Deftly, almost imperceptibly, Updike establishes a moral and aesthetic framework for his story. During a tour of western Canada, soon after her second husband dies, Alexandra listens intently as the bus driver explains that every snowflake and raindrop forms around a tiny piece of dirt in the air: Glacier snow melts, compresses and becomes ice - but the impurities stay there.

"Suppose the heavenly dirt runs out?" Alexandra asks herself. And if everything - snow, sediment, rock - keeps compressing, will the world get heavier and smaller until it becomes a black hole? Women, Updike implies, have the courage and curiosity to give voice to cosmic concerns. Men, out of their own limited, practical knowledge, always try - and fail - to resolve them or set them aside. And the relationship between the stain embedded in each of us and the truth, beauty, justice and human communion we seek remains a mystery.
Accused of condescension and misogyny for *The Witches of Eastwick*, Updike provides in *Widows* a penetrating and poignant portrait of the domestic lives of women, married and single, so many of whom feel disempowered or warped. Not for the first time, Updike "disses" the generations born after World War II. Alexandra, Jane and Sukie, he writes, were disappointed to find that their town had been "taken over by grandchildren," as the people they once knew, disliked and loved sank "below the subsurface of DNA."

Now, the fluorescent and neon shop lights "played eerily on the teenage faces passing by - Eastwick's children, flaunting their growing power, ignoring the old woman sitting on a parked car, vying for attention from their peers with female shrieks and boisterous boyish jokes, testing the depths of freedom." They don't know what lies ahead of them: "sex, entrapment, weariness, death."

America's kids are clueless. Burned out from "hooking up," Sukie suggests, they just don't realize that sexual repression "was the key to the kind of energy people used to have." When they marry, Jane chimes in, Gen Xers grow "tiresome." Toned-up young mothers "drive their overweight boys in overweight SUVs to hockey practice 20 miles away," and young fathers help "itty-bitty wife" with the housekeeping. Wondering how - or whether - they actually produce their "precious children," Jane concludes that the death of sin is more troubling than the death of God.

Updike's description of the terrors of growing old is chilling. Jane's no longer sure what it means to be free. "You have to be born, you have to die," she muses. "You're never in control."

Alexander's nightmares concern cancer - with her own cells turning against her, blocking her organs with "senseless secret cauliflowers of flesh" and attacking the intestines that kept "excrement out of sight and smell, adding shame to pain."

Fear, she feared, fed cancer - and she was afraid. When she looked down at her hands she saw "two fat lizards" - scabbed and mottled by sun damage, and wracked with arthritis. "These were the hands of a stranger, someone she wouldn't regret leaving behind." She thinks her "magic's about used up."

Updike won't allow his widows to shed their guilt or go gently into that good night. "There is no revision of the last accounting," he insists, "no reconstitution, no revisiting, no assuagement. There is at best blessed oblivion, which ends desire and fear and their unholy agitation."

As they - and we - await it, Updike advises absorption in "the daily happiness of a real life resumed."

Alexandra watches her grandchildren pricking their fingers on a Peruvian creche of clay dolls she sculpted with a deft touch. And the lonely widows, bound to one another by shared experiences and deep feelings, plan their next trip together.

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