

How Dinner With John Updike Ruined My Teaching Career

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

Christmas Eve, 1989, I had dinner with John Updike. I was invited when someone canceled at the last minute. To me it was the chance of a lifetime. I'd taught his stories and poems forever in my English classes.

When I was in graduate school, I'd lived in the same town as Updike. He had movie star status, but I never saw him. I worked in a restaurant where he drank a Heineken once at the bar and the bartender got his autograph for me: "For Diane who waitresses and teaches all at once -- John Updike." And one night when I wasn't working he came in for dinner and the manager saved me the carbon from his American Express. I could see his signature if I held it up to a light.

Introductions in the living room were awkward. I talked about the custom of Christmas trees being strange--something I'd never thought before--while standing next to an exceptionally beautiful one. It was an odd thing to say and people noticed.

In the dining room, when I found my place card to the right of Updike's at the head of the table, I was thrilled. I wanted desperately to impress him and now, seated so close, I had another chance.

I said to myself, here you are, here you are, having dinner with a writer who's in the Canon with Shakespeare, Joyce, Twain, Woolf, Dickens, writers whose work English teachers devote their whole lives to teaching. It might as well have been Geoffrey Chaucer sitting next to me and I guess that's what I was thinking because I

blurted out, "You've been alive and well in my classroom for years!" I have no idea what I meant.

He looked troubled by the thought. I was mortified.

The rest of the dinner I couldn't talk or eat. I thought about saying something about the napkin but it seemed dumb, and I wasn't sure he'd be too happy about that carbon. I pushed spaghetti around on my plate while everyone waited for me to finish. I remember nodding yes whenever Updike asked if I'd like more wine. I'm sure he felt relieved when the evening ended.

As the holidays passed, I tried to describe the event to my friends. "It's like I met Elvis," I told them.

At the time, I taught freshman comp at a college in Vermont. After Christmas break, I sat at my table in the corner of a tenured Professor's office and the Professor, who had liked me okay first semester I think, asked which Updike story I was using.

"A&P," I said and couldn't resist adding, "I had dinner with John Updike. On Christmas Eve."

"Oh," he said. Disappointment crossed his face.

He thought I was lying. John Updike? Christmas Eve? Right.

The Professor never mentioned it again and I was transferred to another campus after that semester. "Declining enrollment," they claimed. But I don't know what the big deal was. It's not like I said I'd been charming.

