

Humphreys College

NEWSLETTER SUPPLEMENT

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MISERY LACKS COMPANY

FORBES FINDINGS DISPUTED BY HUMPHREYS STUDENT SURVEY

By Howard Lachtman, Adjunct Professor, Liberal Arts

Imagine, if you will, two cities, 3,000 miles apart. City A, on the east coast of a continent, wishes to assess life in City B, on the west. To do so, it sends no reporters to investigate conditions, attempts no balanced measurement of city positives and negatives, and interviews no residents about community or quality of life issues. Instead, it compiles data that mixes local, regional, and state statistics. On this basis, City A concludes that City B is “the most miserable city” on the entire continent.

ASK STOCKTONIANS

Fantastic? Not at all. This was the method used by *Forbes* when it named Stockton “the most miserable city” in the United States, topping a national “misery index” of 150 metropolitan areas. The city of 289,000 qualified for a metropolitan list requiring a minimum population of 378,000 because government census data typically define the Stockton footprint as San Joaquin County (at 680,000). The county, however, was not the entity defined—and defamed—by the *Forbes* rating. Moreover, no Stocktonians were polled about their perceptions of city life or their state of mind. Such an undertaking would require a field of statistical variables, with participants able to select “miserable,” “somewhat miserable,” or “not miserable”—or alternative indicators that could have introduced a misery-defying happiness index!

I asked Stockton analysts about the validity of the *Forbes* measurement. “They are attempting to measure attitudes by social indicators without an adequate theory that links the two,” said UOP Professor Robert Benedetti. “You have to ask people about the nature of their lives and their emotional affinity to a place. There’s no sense of that community measure.”

Community activist Dr. Dale Stocking cited “an inadequate job” of defining statistical metropolitan area data. “I find the explanation of criteria shallow and nebulous,” Stocking said. “I believe the assessment of our area is not valid because it does not involve any quality of life factors as balancing elements. Misery is a subjective evaluation and thus cannot be properly defined by objective criteria.”

HUMPHREYS STUDENTS SURVEYED

With this in mind, I invited students in my LIT 101 class to take part in a survey I designed to enable them to evaluate their Stockton experience and judge the validity of the *Forbes* rating. I explained how ratings of this kind are more than harmless exercises; they can sour a community’s self-esteem, discourage potential investors, darken the job market and deplete tax dollars. A city’s negative reputation, accurate or otherwise, quickly becomes a tag by which it is defined. Hence, the Sacramento television newsman who prefaced his live report from Stockton by calling it “the epicenter of the foreclosure crisis and the city recently rated in a national survey as the most miserable in the United States.” He was not alone. Chicago newspaper columnist Neil Steinberg, deploring his city’s inclusion on

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

a “10 Most Miserable Cities” list, denounced Stockton as “a wretched slum.”

Many of our students indicated their belief that the city needs improvement in areas ranging from better paying jobs and family recreation options to public safety. But the majority said that misery was not a word they would choose to define their experience. Most chose terms such as “not miserable,” “somewhat happy” and “happy” to describe their lives. These initial results were subsequently confirmed over a broader field as Professors Jim DeCosta, Kevin Van Dewark and Jason Wolins assisted my research by polling their students with the form I’d prepared (it included a copy of the news report of the rating, for those who had not read it, and two *Record* editorials that acknowledged civic ills, but scoffed at the notion of Stockton as a misery epicenter). Our opinion survey was a random but revealing look at student thinking about Stockton as a hometown, work site, and college base.

FRANK RESPONSES TO FUZZY DATA

Our students gave us a view of Stockton that adheres more closely to actual experience and fills in the blank of the *Forbes* report. Some responses were frank and unsparing. One student had been a crime victim and blamed the city for her misery; another declared himself miserable because of his job and indebtedness. Other problems such as commute times and lack of employment opportunities were cited, but generally balanced by positives including close ties to family and friends, a sense of community, parks and Delta recreation, downtown improvements, new restaurant options, generally friendly people, and contentment with the college experience.

Most of my students took issue with city misery. “I really believe that individuals make what they want out of life, so you can either make the best of it or the worst,” wrote Cassandra Servin. Brianna Carlson-Fraser gave the city her OK, but added “It needs more things to keep the youth busy and it needs more attractions.” Patty Lara rejected the study, saying, “No one can really have an actual number if a public opinion survey was not done.” Chue Tong Vang agreed, saying that without such a survey of local residents, “The result of those numbers is not reliable.”

Some students disagreed with *Forbes* but agreed that poverty, lack of education and unemployment are pressing problems; others said those problems (and the crime they spawn) are common to so many American communities that Stockton should not be considered unique. Some said their lives here were not perfect, but that “miserable” was simply too strong a word for the city. As the base of our study expanded, the margin rejecting the misery rating increased proportionately. Of the more than three dozen students polled, the ratio of those rejecting, criticizing or questioning the misery rating was five to one. Three students declared themselves “miserable,” another three “somewhat miserable.” Eight said they were “not miserable at all,” ten declared themselves “happy” and 14 “somewhat happy.”

MAYOR ANN JOHNSTON: “OUR PEOPLE ARE OUR POWER”

Inviting students to assess the *Forbes* rating enabled them to decide not only the accuracy and relevancy of the study, but to recognize positive and negative elements of their own experience. It alerted them to the kind of damage that can result when a community is portrayed negatively by national media. In this case, they learned, judgment was made without regard for resident opinion or statistical balance. For these and other reasons, the majority of students polled felt the *Forbes* rating gave Stockton a reputation it did not deserve.

Their opinion was shared by Mayor Ann Johnston, who discussed the *Forbes* rating during her appearance at Humphreys on March 4. Asked whether she planned to respond to *Forbes*, Johnston said she would not waste time trying to persuade a powerful media critic that might be antagonized by the defense: “You have to be real careful when you pick a fight with those who have barrels of ink and the last word.”

On the other hand, Johnston said, it didn’t make much sense to her that the study failed to look at the community and listen to what its people had to say. “Despite the misery index, this is a good place. Stockton has its problems and

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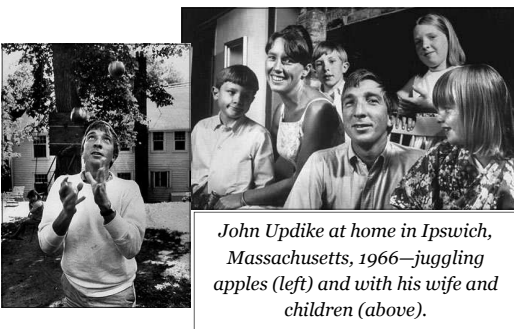
needs a lot of basic community development, but our people are our power. We have marvelous people.”

Can the rating be improved? Johnston said the door is open for *Forbes* researchers. “If they want to come here—at their expense!—and actually visit the community, I’d be glad to show them as much positive as possible. That would include the downtown marina’s boating facilities and pedestrian promenade that will open this summer and identify our waterfront as a major tourist destination.”

The last word belongs to Stocktonian David Renison: “My definition of misery is having a billionaire’s staff defining misery from skyscraper offices 3,000 miles from my home.”

JOHN UPDIKE, IN MEMORIAM

By Janet Marx, Humphreys College Student



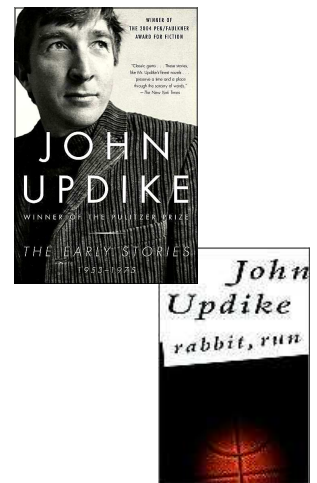
John Updike at home in Ipswich, Massachusetts, 1966—juggling apples (left) and with his wife and children (above).

John Updike lived a life which many envied but few dared to live. He lived a life that will forever vibrate throughout American history and culture. His books have inspired, motivated, and intrigued many readers. They have been read by both the elite and the common folk globally. His leading themes included America, religion, and sex. Updike wrote about these subjects with blatant truth, yet poetically penned. He dared to write of the decline of America’s values, frivolities, and the emptiness of their new god: Materialism.

Born March 18, 1932, John Updike died January 27, 2009 of lung cancer. He was a novelist, poet, short story writer, art and literary critic. He wrote for *The New Yorker* for 45 years and was one of the last great authors of the twentieth century. His death is a great loss to the literary world. He published more than fifty books – twenty-two novels, fifteen short-story collections, seven collections of poetry, and five children’s books. He won two Pulitzer Prizes and two National Book Awards, among many others.

Updike’s writings exemplify American life and the meaninglessness of the American Dream. For example, in a series of books that begins with *Rabbit, Run*, the protagonist becomes wealthy, but loses everything else. He places more value on things, but uses people to achieve power, gain control, and coerce others to his way of thinking. His series, *The Rabbit*, includes four novels, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), and *Rabbit Remembered* (2001), portrays the characters in detail.

His writings greatly impacted the literature of the second half of the twentieth century and will continue to be read by many. His love for America transmitted to his writings with the longings of father to see his children happy, safe, and secure. Reading an Updike’s novel is like reading the history of suburban America from the heart of an Ameri-



(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

can. Updike will be remembered for his determination, interesting story lines and characters, and for his ambition to fulfill a lifelong passion of writing.

Many years ago, I had the pleasure of reading an Updike's novel. I was recovering from a very serious car accident. Being in a coma for a long while and suffering severe head injuries, I was introduced to *The Rabbit, Run*. This book taught me that material conditions are meaningless if one doesn't have self-respect, high principles, and integrity. *The Rabbit, Run*, with its bluntness overlaid by poetic truth, inspired me to believe in my dreams.

Updike spent his last moments with his wife and four children. In the end, he completed a collection of short stories (*My Father's Tears and Other Stories*, 2009) and a book of poetry (*Endpoint and Other Poems*, 2009).



Pulitzer Prize winner John Updike
in Paris, France in 1986

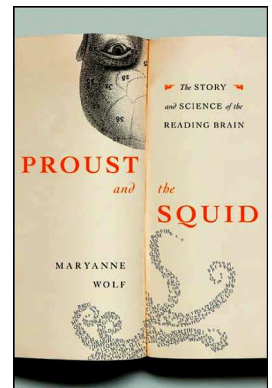
The photographs are from the John Updike Photo Gallery located on the "Academy of Achievement" Website
< <http://achievement.org/autodoc/page/upd0gal-1> > .

FROM THE NEW BOOKS IN THE LIBRARY...

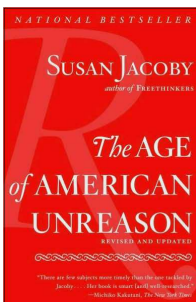
EDUCATION

Maryanne Wolf. Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain. Harper, 2008

The author specializes in Child Development at Tufts University. She serves as a Director of the Center for Reading and Language Research. In her latest book, she integrates psychology and archaeology, linguistics and education, history and neuroscience in a path-breaking look at the development of the *reading* brain. Wolf seeks to chronicle it from both the early history of humanity and the early stages of an individual's development ("unlike its component parts such as vision and speech... reading has no direct genetic program passing it on to future generations"). Along the way, Wolf introduces concepts like "word poverty," the situation in which children, by age five, have heard 32 million fewer words than their counterparts (with chilling long-term effects). The final part of the book covers the complex topic of dyslexia, explaining "what happens when the brain can't learn to read." As for the future, Wolf argues, "Knowing what reading demands of our brain and knowing how it contributes to our capacity to think, to feel, to infer, and to understand other human beings is especially important today as we make the transition from a reading brain to an increasingly digital one."



Susan Jacoby. The Age of American Unreason. Old Street Publishing, 2009



The author is the program director of the Center for Inquiry-New York City, and *The Washington Post* regular contributor. She feels dismayed by the average citizen's political and social apathy and the overall crisis of memory and knowledge involving everything about the way we learn and think. She argues that the nation's current cult of unreason has destructive consequences. She traces the seeds of current anti-intellectualism (and anti-rationalism) back to post-WWII society. She singles out mass media and the resurgence of fundamentalism as the primary vectors of anti-intellectualism, while also having harsh

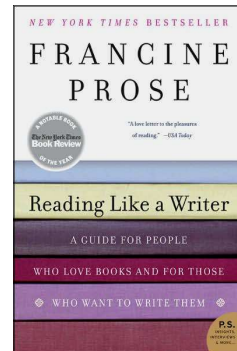
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words for pseudo-scientists. In her own words, she “share[s] the conservatives' belief that public schools ought to concentrate on teaching Standard English. But the Standard of Standard American English, and the ways in which private speech now mirrors the public speech emanating from electronic and digital media, is precisely the problem. Debased speech in the public square functions as a kind of low-level toxin, imperceptibly coarsening our concept of what is and is not acceptable.”

Francine Prose. *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them.* Harper, 2007

Francine Prose, a longtime creative writing teacher, is the author of fifteen books of fiction, including *A Changed Man* and *Blue Angel*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. Her latest novel, *Goldengrove*, was published last year. Her *New York Times* bestseller *Reading Like a Writer* is a guided tour introducing the tools of the masters. She interprets Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Kafka, Austen, Dickens, Woolf, Chekhov, James, and Roth—and discovers why their work has endured. She addresses the question whether writing can be learned. In her own words, many aspiring writers of the past “studied meter with Ovid, plot construction with Homer, comedy with Aristophanes; they honed their prose style by absorbing the lucid sentences of Montaigne and Samuel Johnson. And who could have asked for better teachers: generous, uncritical, blessed with wisdom and genius, as endlessly forgiving as only the dead can be?”



Main Campus

6650 Inglewood Avenue
Stockton, CA 95207
209.478.0800
Fax 209.478.8721

www.humphreys.edu

Branch Campus

3600 Sisk Road, Suite 3-A
Modesto, CA 95356
209.543.9411
Fax 209.543.9413

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Stanislav Perkner, Editor, sperkner@humphreys.edu

Cynthia Becerra, Co-Editor, cbecerra@humphreys.edu

Leslie Walton, Executive Editor, lwalton@humphreys.edu