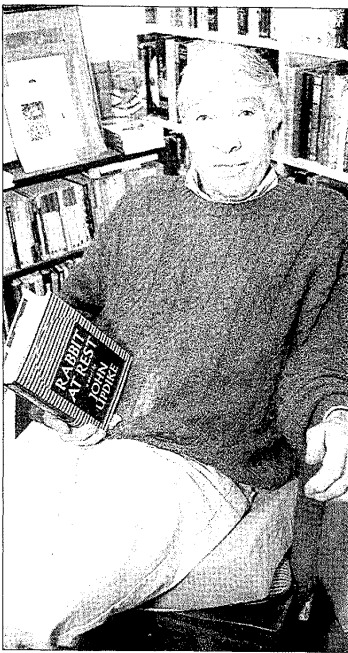


Updike up to his old tricks in new novel



John Updike can recycle like nobody else.

By David Williamson
Special to the Free Press

Memories of the Ford Administration: by John Updike, 371 pp., Toronto, Random House, \$25

IN JOHN Updike's quirky new novel, *Memories of the Ford Administration*, Alfred Clayton, a middle-aged history professor in New Hampshire, receives a letter that may seem unusual to the average reader but is probably commonplace in history profs. The Northern New England Association of American Historians (NNEAAH) asks Clayton for his memories and impressions of the presidential administration of Gerald R. Ford (1974-77). These they will publish in their quarterly journal, *Synopsis*. Alf proceeds to give them what they want and it gradually becomes a book-length treatise.

He begins by recalling that he was with his three children watching TV the night Nixon resigned and gave way to Ford; Alf and his wife Norma had recently split up and she had the kids, but on this night she was out on a date and had asked him to babysit. A certain droll ironic tone is set early when Alf treats the Ford years as if they were a major era (slightly less grand, I suppose, than England's Elizabethan period).

Sex still had a good name during the Ford Administration, Alf explains on page 6. (This is an Updike novel, don't forget, and the status of sex at any given time is always important. This was a hallmark of the Rabbit Novels.) "In those years one-night stands, bathhouses, sex shops abounded, venereal disease was an easily erased mistake. Syphilis, the clap — no problem. Crabs, the rather cute plague of sixties crash pads, had moved on as urban rents went up, and herpes' warts and blisters had yet to inflict their intimate sting. The paradise of the flesh was in order. What had been unthinkable

under Eisenhower and racy under Kennedy had become, under Ford, almost compulsory."

Clayton goes on to reminisce about his life alone and the many women that he lured into his pad. He also recalls that, for the last 10 years of his marriage, he had been working in his spare time on a kind of biography of James Buchanan, who was president of the United States from 1857 to 1861 — right after Franklin Pierce and just before Lincoln. "The only bachelor president, the most elderly up to Eisenhower... the last of the doughface accommodators, before the North-South war swept accommodation away. A big fellow, six feet tall, with mismanaging eyes, a tilt to his head, and a stiffish courtliness that won my heart," he proceeds to give the NNEAAH — and the reader — lengthy samples of his opus, alternating these with his recollections of his Ford-era philandering.

One suspects that the choice of Buchanan as the subject of Alf's major work has more to do with John Updike's interests than with any similarity the Buchanan days may have had with the Ford. Mr. Updike did considerable research on Buchanan during the Nixon days and published a play called *Buchanan Dying* in June, 1974, a scant two months be-

fore Nixon quit. (I do believe that Mr. Updike himself split up with his wife around this time, but it would be stretching the point to suggest that he resembles the garrulous Alf Clayton.)

Much of what Alf tells us about Buchanan is quite fascinating, especially in the light of recent developments about his use — the yearning of the American people for Bill Clinton to be some sort of messiah. The extent to which any president, being after all only a mere mortal, can really change a nation's fortunes is a point that comes to mind when one sees the pressures that Buchanan was under during his last months in office. Alf (that is, Updike) conveys the troubled Buchanan times in language befitting the period and it contrasts nicely with the candid descriptions of his sexual adventures.

To keep us mindful of the fact that this is supposed to be a scholarly work, Alf puts in the occasional footnote, such as this: "James Buchanan... is said to have had the neatest handwriting of any president." This ecumenism from *Facts and Funnies About the Presidents*, by George Sullivan, illustrated by George Roper (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1987). The same valuable source informs us that "Three American Presidents were left-handed: James Gar-

field, Harry Truman, and Gerald Ford." Since 1987, the voters have added a fourth.

Besides giving a feeling of the suspense in Buchanan's refusal to act as the country teetered on the brink of civil war, Alf's opus presents a rather poignant account of Buchanan's one serious but apparently chaste relationship with Ann Coleman prior to his being president. When one tires of the historical detail, the narrative invariably turns to a vividly accurate picture of a Ford-era faculty party or a funny observation like this:

"In the Ford era, one didn't hold a grudge long, in sexual matters. Nor was the performance judged perfectionistically, as in the Eisenhower years, when the sleeping beauty was so hemmed about with thorn-bushes that only a peerless prince would do, wielding Excalibur. Under Ford, if one lay didn't work out, another would be along soon."

A newcomer to John Updike's work might not have the patience to stick with the lengthy passages of Buchanan, but, for those familiar with his playfulness in past works like *Bach: A Book and S. Memoirs of the Ford Administration* will be a treat.

David Williamson is a Winnipeg writer.

Children love it

By Laurie Olsson
Special to the Free Press

The Yesterday Stone: by Peter Eynon, illustrated by Rhian Brynjolson, unpaginated, Winnipeg, Penncman.

EVERY TIME I come to the office to pick up the mail I need for work, I bring my two-year-old daughter Katie. The first thing she does is to run for Peter Eynon's book *The Yesterday Stone*. Katie loves looking at all the pictures.

One day she put the book in her bag and took it home so I could read it to her. When I read the book to Katie and her five-year-old sister, Jennifer, they were fascinated with

this magical story. They had their seven-year-old brother Kris also read it to them, and he too was fascinated.

This book has been read to them many times and they never get tired of hearing it. Each time they enjoy it more as they come up with their own different worlds that they would see if they had their own Yesterday Stone.

The story is about a little girl named Anna and her grandmother's yesterday stone. In order for the stone to work, all they had to do was rub the stone until it was warm, and then they would see different worlds. Sometimes they would be of shining knights and of fairy princesses, or of pirates, villains and rogues.

Anna's grandmother took her to find her own yesterday stone, explaining to her it would only work if she truly believed in it. When Anna found her yesterday stone she really wanted to share all these worlds with her friend Molly. But would Molly believe?

I would highly recommend this book to all parents with young children.

The illustrations and the story in this book are so well done that they will appeal to children of all ages, and it is one that parents will enjoy reading to them. Their imaginations will really take over and they will want to hear it again and again.

Laurie Olsson is a Winnipeg freelance writer.



Illustration from *The Yesterday Stone*: kids really do find the magic in it.

Snippets of history

By Michael Finlayson
Special to the Free Press

The Broadview Book of Diplomatic Anecdotes: by Gordon Martel, 303 pp., Ottawa, Broadview Press.

UPON RECEIVING this book for review, I flipped to the index and looked for three names of my regard as pillars of diplomatic history: Talleyrand, Metternich and Bismarck. I found none of these. The names I did see appear all to be of 20th century figures and I was reassured to see Henry Kissinger's. I then looked for one of the giants of diplomacy in this century, Abba Eban. It was not there. I next turned to the first sentence of text and read this:

"In London in 1942 (sic) the foreign mMinisters of the United States, Britain, Germany and France were meeting to discuss a

number of delicate, and potentially volatile issues involving NATO..."

When I regained consciousness and came back to the book later with appropriately diminished expectations, I discovered it to be an engaging and enjoyable light read. One brief example of the sort of anecdotes told or repeated is:

Anyone listening? The shrewd and clever Pierre Laval once told the story of how, at a delicate moment in the relations between France and Germany, the Munich Crisis and diplomats as "spies" to list only a representative sample. Generally, the work is well written, albeit the remarks introducing each anecdote tend to be too long. This would be an excellent book for someone with an interest in history, but who is able or willing to read only for a few minutes each day.

Michael Finlayson is a Winnipeg freelance writer.

The pilots glory passed by

By Nick Martin
Staff Writer

Behind The Glory: by Ted Barris, 358 pp., Toronto, Macmillan, \$27.95

BRANDED AS shirkers and cowards, denied medals and pensions and postwar jobs, they spent the Second World War no closer to the fighting than rural Manitoba or small town Ontario — and died by their hundreds.

Ted Barris has tracked down 200 of the surviving instructors from the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, the scheme that transformed dozens of small Canadian towns almost overnight into thriving air force bases, training more than 100,000 pilots and air crew from throughout the British Commonwealth.

Those air crew who lived through the war came home covered in glory, while the men who taught them to fly were simply handed a pink slip, shunned by veterans as non-combatants who'd somehow ducked combat, rejected by airlines which

refused to hire pilots who hadn't undergone fire.

Even 48 years later, it's not too late to give them their just due, says Mr. Barris.

Many of the first young men with flying experience volunteered to fight the Nazis were assigned indefinitely and indefinitely to serve as instructors for the thousands to follow. They took youngsters with virtually no ability to fly, worked from primitive airfields in sometimes questionable and overtaxed aircraft and flew in the most appalling conditions. And many of them fell out of the sky.

Though the instructors were among Canada's best pilots and desperately begged for transfers to Europe, they were too valuable to release from training duties, says Mr. Barris.

The 200 instructors' harrowing tales of training crashes and brushes with death are *Behind The Glory's* greatest strength in bringing the early 1940s to life, but ultimately they're also the book's flaw.

Mr. Barris's work is far too anecdotal, as though he concluded that, having interviewed some 200 people, he was compelled to tell each person's most interesting story, producing a repetitive book.

Mr. Barris concentrated on former instructors within an easy drive of his Toronto home. Numerous references to temporary airbases in Rivers, Verdun and Carberry cry out for an author's visit and an intensive chapter on one of those communities — just what it was like, for these towns and their surviving residents.

And like so much of Canadian history, *Behind The Glory* seems all but unaware that women exist.

A reader with an acute interest in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan could have pointed Mr. Barris toward aspects of the BCATT such as its bringing together a young RAF pilot from Newcastle and a telephone operator from Charlottetown, a direct postwar result being this reader.

But such stories will have to await another book, or another author.

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