



## Memories of the Ford Administration

*John Updike*

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Alfred Clayton, the hero of John Updike's fifteenth novel, has received a request from the Northern New England Association of American Historians for his memories and impressions of the Gerald Ford Administration (1974-77). "Alf" obliges with his memories of a turbulent period in his personal history, as well as pages of an unpublished book he was writing at the time, on the life of James Buchanan, the fifteenth President of the United States (1857-61). The alternating texts body forth an arresting contrast between the life-styles and social dictions of two American centuries. The contemporary characters include Clayton's wife, Norma, whom he thinks of as the Queen of Disorder, and his mistress, Genevieve Mueller, whom he thinks of as the Perfect Wife, as well as his various colleagues on the faculty of Wayward College in New Hampshire. The characters around Buchanan include his doomed fiancee, Ann Coleman, and such eloquent contemporary politicians as Andrew Jackson, Edwin Stanton, and (in his capacity as American Consul in Liverpool) Nathaniel Hawthorne. All come unsettlingly to life in Clayton's wide-ranging confessions, which bring us down to the year 1991.

## Memories of the Ford Administration Details

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## From Reader Review **Memories of the Ford Administration** for online ebook

### **Andy Miller says**

In the early 1990s, the fictional Alf Clayton, a history professor at a second tier college in New Hampshire, is asked to write about the Ford administration for an academic history journal. Instead he recounts his life at the time, mainly his affair with the "Perfect" Genevieve, a younger woman married to a fellow professor that broke up both their marriages. He also recalls his stalled academic career and intersperses his memory of his personal life of living in a bachelor's apartment while trying to father his left behind children with the opportunity to include long sections of his unfinished biography of James Buchanan. So this novel is set in the 90s, focused on memories from the 70s, with long sections about James Buchanan's life in the first half of the 1800s.

Updike is known for his contarianism in his politics, but his alter ego's sympathy for Buchanan, one of the worst Presidents in history is jarring, especially Updike's going against the historical record to claim that Buchanan was heroic in trying to avert the civil war while criticizing abolitionists for their fervor to abolish slavery. Though Updike/ Clayton spend more time on Buchanan's failed engagement and the sexual and social mores of that time.

Updike also writes about Clayton's life with sympathy, it takes the reader's perspective to understand that in the few months after he left his wife for the "perfect" Genevieve ,who was also dealing with social ostracism and single parenting, he had affairs with another professor's wife, the mother of a student, and his own estranged wife, oblivious to the consequences to all he hurts.

"Memories of the Ford Administration" is an example of Updike being a good writer in terms of his mastery of words, his compelling narratives, but that his vacuum of values leaves the reader feeling empty

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### **Beth says**

This book has made me a fan of Updike

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### **Kelli Ann Wilson says**

Egads...where to start? *Memories of the Ford Administration* is really two novels in one. The premise of the novel is that the protagonist, Alfred, has been charged with writing a piece about his experiences of the Ford administration. What he produces is half memoir and half biography, but it has nothing to do with President Ford. Alfred's sexual escapades, which make up the majority of the memoir aspect, are described in graphic detail, which didn't do much for me as a reader. Where Updike really shines in this novel is in the biographical sections about President Buchanan. His use of lyrical language, interwoven with authentic primary sources, makes this part of the novel a fine piece of historical fiction. It gets three stars for yucky sex scenes, but is still an interesting book.

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### **Neil Cake says**

This is quite a book... uh... the first I've ever read by John Updike. I didn't really know anything about him, but I was led here by some combination of having read so many other modern American authors - most recently, John Irving, of course.

So I read some of the various reviews, and I figured this really wouldn't be a very good place to start. It doesn't sound very interesting. And for a while, it isn't. And then every now and then, also for a while, it isn't very interesting again. But for some reason I quite enjoyed it. I don't want to say I *really* enjoyed it, because then I'd have to start thinking about bumping it up a star, and it's really too odd to be doing that. By *odd* I definitely don't mean in a mind-bending, feat-of-the-imagination kind of way. I mean in a kind of *what the fuck was he thinking?* kind of way.

Because this is two parallel stories. One is a kind of lengthy *readers' letters* submission to a pornographic magazine for academics, while the other is a highly fictionalised account of a US President, of whom *I had literally never heard of* prior to reading this book. Nor had I ever had the slightest interest of reading about him - or any other president for that matter.

Now, it all comes together as one document, supposedly written by the character Alf Clayton, as he tries to relate his memories of the administration of President Gerald Ford to a local historical journal - which makes it kind of funny, because all he remembers from the Ford Administration are his marital problems and extra-marital liaisons - of which he includes hilarious and inappropriate details. Has he lost his fucking mind?

In tandem with that is the fact that he doesn't write about Ford at all - except in the last chapter to acknowledge that he really doesn't have any memories of the Ford Administration. What he does write about is James Buchanan. And it's very dry, quite difficult to follow (especially as the civil war approaches, and we're expected to remember the names of delegations and officials and god knows what else), and at times seems like an experiment in finding out how much boredom a pervert will tolerate in order to reach the next instance of smut. As the pervert in question, I can attest to the fact that quite a lot of boredom can be tolerated. However, I'm not a teenager anymore, and the smut doesn't have the effect on me that it might have done in my [let's say] formative years.

"One of my memories of the Ford years is of a wet cunt nipping... at the small of my back as a naked woman settled herself astride my waist to give me an allegedly relaxing shoulder rub," is one example of the kind of reminiscences that had me wondering what this Clayton fella thought he was doing - and there's more, believe me, but I won't be quoting any more of it in my review.

So beyond the odd plot, the unusual structure and the bizarre concept, there are one or two other things to take notice of. Firstly, we are confronted with the word "cunt" 6 times. This seems like rather a lot when you consider that half the book is a biography of an American president, and the word doesn't surface in those parts at all. However, the words "languor" and "languid" appear many more times. These though, I feel help to strengthen the impression that we are reading a work by a character called Alf Clayton, rather than one by John Updike - though it might be worth looking out for these words in other Updike novels (challenge accepted). For the record, I don't expect to find them as, if you follow my @readothusiast twitter account, you'll see that Updike introduced me to 21 *very* strange words in the course of the rest of the novel - 7 in the afterward, where he portrayed himself. Also of note is that one of these [new to me] words, *aporia* appeared 3 times itself.

There are also other weird things going on with grammar and form - the amusing notes to the editors, for example, which serve to remind you that Clayton hasn't lost his fucking mind after all - he's well aware of what he's writing and doesn't seem to think there's anything strange about it. Perhaps historical journals are

full of the sexual escapades of the world's historians.

Then you've got things like some unfeasibly long sentences. To be fair, most of these occur at the beginning of the novel, as if it's an intentional device that Updike simply forgets to do as he becomes ensconced in his story. The king of these sentences is one that covers *70 lines* and only comes to an end because there's a quotation in the passage that has a full stop in it.

Then there's a square bracket that opens and doesn't seem to close. Another square bracket opens, and then, 15 pages later, one of the square brackets closes. Is this deliberate? I think so.

Between pages 205 and 215 we have long passages in fucking French. I didn't bother trying to translate them too accurately, and after a while even skipped them altogether. I really hate that, though. I have to assume that you included it because you wanted me to read it. And if that's the case, you should have translated the fucker.

Oh yeah, also there was a footnote that contained a footnote, that contained a footnote, that contained a footnote, that contained *another* footnote. As I write this, you know, I'm wondering if I'm revealing spoilers here... because - and don't get me wrong - these grammatical foibles were some of the things I found most interesting, because I got a sense that they were all definitely deliberate, and it was such a weird thing to do.

Anyway, these things are not all. There are also some beautifully constructed sentences, many of which I marked out with post-it notes for when I wrote this review, but now, looking over them, and realising even more so, how beautiful they are, I don't want to ruin them for you by including them here. It's not that they'd be out of context. They transcend the context, I really just don't want to steal all of Updike's thunder.

I seem to have enjoyed this novel more than I was allowing. I'm going to look at the other reviews, to see if I can allow myself to give it 4 stars.

Right, anyway, before I make that decision; this might be a difficult and at times very dry read - at others it might be hilariously sexual, and you might wonder what the fuck it's supposed to be. However, I can clearly see that John Updike is a writer of some skill and seriousness. I'm intrigued, and I want to read some more of his works.

Yes, I think 4 stars is allowed.

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### **Robert says**

This is an erratic, unsuccessful novel that demonstrates that great writing is not enough to generate great books. As always, Updike displays his astonishing eye for detail--and couples it with an unusually thoughtful approach to American history--but the parts do not add up to a whole despite twenty pages at the end that serve to complete, or partially save, the text surprisingly well.

Here we have one Alf, an historian obsessed with James Buchanan (the only president from Pennsylvania) conflating his failed attempts to write a unique book about Buchanan with his failed attempt to carry off an affair with another man's wife (while abandoning his own and his children.) All this occurs during Gerald Ford's presidency, hence the title, but Ford gets little play here.

Written in the weakly comic form of a memo to a New England historical association, Alf sometimes reflects on Genevieve, his lover, and their affair, and sometimes offers long historical reflections on Buchanan. There's no one-to-one correspondence between the two parallel stories, just some interstitial ice-dancing by Alf in his attempts to combine the two.

That said, once the lugubrious Buchanan finally achieves the presidency and is faced with the trouble brewing in South Carolina, the actual history here is interesting--as well-informed and better written than similar pieces by Gore Vidal (Burr, etc.). And Alf's broader reflections on his own self-indulgent behavior and the haplessness of contemporary American culture and politics reflect Updike's deep, amused interest in almost everything from the fashions of the day to the performance of Volvos to the varieties of religious experience to be obtained by munching on the part of a woman that is to be found between her legs.

Just reading Updike is to ask yourself how much you miss in a given day that he always captures and puts to use. It is also, in this particular book, to be exposed not only to his supple intellect but also to his firm judgment. He was a devout middle-of-the-roader, perhaps accounting for his interest in the sorely tried Buchanan (caught between north and south). For him (Updike's gone now), the sky was never quite falling and yet bliss--especially the sexual kind of bliss--was dependably transient.

The amount of research Updike must have put into generating this novel is somewhat mind-boggling. Even though Buchanan, like Alf, is not an interesting character in and of himself, his times, more than Alf's times, were interesting. Romance was not so easy back in the 19th century, gossip was more harmful, and one had to be more careful of one's reputation. By the same token, politics had a certain dignity and formality--and skullduggery, one must admit--that cost Buchanan a lot of effort. He, too, wanted to be in the middle, but where was the middle?

The middle in Alf's case seems to have been the general muddle of the Ford administration. In some ways, the most intriguing moment in Alf's affair with Genevieve comes at its end. He wants to disbelieve her call to order, but she has had enough and does not believe (as he does and thinks everyone in the Ford era does) that his unfaithfulness to her (he's not quite a serial offender, but when he gets a chance, he is) is no big deal.

Both of them go back to their flawed mates and confused children, but in Updike's world, this is okay, how things go, something to observe and ponder, not dramatize.

Updike's essentially benign view of humanity's imperfections derives from two things: 1) his comic spirit and 2) the undamaged narcissism of being an only child.

This probably explains why he brings his story to the edge of divorce and total rupture within two families and to the edge of civil war and total rupture within a nation but does not go into the gory, permanently damaging realities of maimed children and soldiers and societies. Updike was no Ingmar Bergman or William Styron. He was not a writer interested in total darkness taking over his imagination, but it can't be said that he didn't have a well-conceived position on rejecting tragedy. And there's something to what he seems to say: "Life goes on, like it or not."

This novel? Well, I've said it doesn't work, but yet as an artifact of the times and of aesthetic failure, it probably is worth reading all the way through, but that presupposes a willingness to be pleased more by dazzling detail and observation than repelled by a narrative conceit yielding two books, each half written, within the cover of one.

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## Carol Storm says

"We all dream of becoming a child again. The worst of us as well as the best. Perhaps the worst most of all!"  
THE WILD BUNCH.

"Billy Brown's soul lies a-moldering in the crib, but his body goes crawling on." EUGENE O'NEILL

The plot of FORD ADMINISTRATION is a typical Updike plot. Alf Clayton is a small-time history professor at a small-time college in New England in the mid-Seventies. He's cheating on his wife with another faculty wife, and at the same time he's trying to write a book about President James Buchanan, the last President before the Lincoln and the Civil War. Just as Buchanan was never able to figure out which side he was on, North or South, slavery or abolition, so Alf can't make up his mind between his warm, relaxed, slightly bohemian wife Norma ("The Queen of Disorder") and younger, sexier, more aristocratic Genevieve ("The Perfect Wife.")

There's something creepy about Updike. This is a human being who hates being alive, and fears the very condition of being human. What drives him is fear, and it's not just fear of a specific enemy, like women or blacks. It's fear of having to acknowledge that other human beings actually exist. I'm sure there's some psychologist like Erickson who could explain it in terms of developmental stages. A baby has no knowledge of anything outside of himself and the nipple. Everything else in the world is a threat, except the nipple. Updike thinks of that state as "innocence." And he keeps trying to recapture it. He feels enormous nostalgia for Buchanan's world because in that world a white man could live as if blacks and women didn't exist. What he loves about "history" is that it can be written in such a way that painful facts painlessly disappear. He misses the days when black lives didn't matter. Buchanan is his hero because in his mind Buchanan was a victim -- the real criminals are the abolitionists who insisted on making slavery a moral issue.

For John Updike, the real horror is that human beings have to choose between right and wrong. Wouldn't it be easier to stay a child forever, to be incapable of seeing, feeling, or thinking? That's how Updike defines innocence. Some would call it death. But that doesn't matter, because God is dead anyway, and there's no point in trying to understand history or your own mistakes, because history isn't real, nothing can be documented and nothing is real except your own body's infantile demands. But hey, it's the Ford years, and everyone's doing it. Whatever it happens to be.

You will not believe how lazy Updike is with his writing. Like, "here's a list of famous people who died in 1974. Here's a list of the top pop hits on the radio. Maybe we talked about these things at the party. Maybe we didn't. What difference does it make, anyway? God is Dead. Buchanan is dead. The Civil War was pointless. Why do those blacks keep making trouble?"

In spite of all the information dumping, facts are the real enemy in this book. There are no facts about what slavery was really like. Still, there are some funny passages, like the faculty part where Alf pretty much rips on everyone . . . in his head, of course. He doesn't like confrontations. And the scene where he's about to seduce a jaded woman his own age, and he claims that he was "disappointed" the Korean War ended before he got a chance to fight. ("But for these vile guns, he'd have been a soldier too!" SHAKESPEARE) Alf is clearly a coward, like Buchanan. But simple cowardice would be understandable. It's the creepy way he tries to put down other people, like hippies, and abolitionists, for having a moral life. He even talks about the nineteenth century woman who founded his college as being "militantly unmarried." It's not just sexism. Any form of integrity, unselfishness, or even basic self-control is unsettling to Alf.

What balances all the hatred, of course, is sentimentality. The best writing in the book is probably where Alf comes home late at night to check on the family home and the children he's abandoned. This passage could have been one of the stories in "Problems" written twenty years earlier. Problem is, this story goes on too long, and Alf keeps talking about how much he loves his little girl, Daphne, and how pure she is, and it gets really creepy after a while. You start to realize that his daughter's purity is valuable to him precisely because it gives him a license to debase and degrade other women. This is not new, of course. Studs Lonigan was doing this stuff in the Thirties. ("My sisters are as pure as yours," he says to his pal Arnold Sheehan, when they're visiting a whorehouse.) But where tough Chicago author James T. Farrell was exposing evil, Updike is covering it up. (Part of what slavery meant was that girls Daphne's age could be raped by southern slave owners while men like Buchanan did nothing.) Ultimately, the tender father-daughter theme is just another lie. Alf brags about what an adoring father he is, and how innocent his daughter is -- and then he talks about taking her to see **THE GODFATHER PART II**.

Huh?!?! That's an R Rated movie, full of brutal violence. Who takes a nine year old girl to see it? More than that, it's two and a half hours long. What nine year old girl would WANT to see it? Don't misunderstand me, that movie is a classic, much closer to great art than anything Updike ever wrote. The most interesting moment in the novel is when Alf says frankly that the movie is "terrifying." He's right. Great art, tragedy written for adults, is terrifying. In the **GODFATHER PART II** weak men who betray their families die horrible deaths. Men who can't control their sexual impulses are shamed and stripped of power. Evil catches up to the evil-doer no matter how wealthy he is, no matter how cunning he appears to be. John Updike spent his whole artistic life running away from those kind of truths, terrifying truths. Alf in this novel is just like Fredo, actually. ("Old Abe Lincoln would never come down here! But James Buchanan knows these places like the back of his hand!") Except unlike Fredo, Alf never pays for his sins, never learns anything, and never becomes human enough to arouse our sympathy.

Now I can't really recommend this book, because it sucks. But in a way I recommend it very highly. If you don't understand what the Me Too movement is all about, just read what our Alf says about his girl students. If you don't understand how Harvey Weinstein got away with so much for so many years, read how Alf and his buddies react to the idea of sexual harassment on campus. If you don't understand why Ta-Nehisi Coates writes with such fury and despair about how white people choose to remember American history, read the Buchanan sections.

Every ugly trend in America now is something John Updike fought to keep alive. He was wrong on every single issue and just as hateful as Donald Trump. Yet he wasn't some ignoramus reality TV star. He was a Harvard graduate and a venerated member of the literary elite.

That's worth remembering too!

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### **Paul says**

This is an odd book. John Updike was something of an expert on the President before Lincoln; James Buchanan. He wrote a play about him and had intended to write a historical novel about him. Instead he shoved most of what he knew into this book. It is ostensibly about Alf Clayton a history lecturer. When the Northern New England Association of American Historians (NNEAAH) ask for memories and recollections of the Ford administration Clayton puts together all his notes about Buchanan, about whom he had been writing at the time and this takes up about half the book. Interspersed are Alf's recollections about what he was doing at the time. Essentially this comprises of a series of sexual escapades. Alf is unfaithful to his wife

(whom he dubs The Queen of Disorder) with his mistress Genevieve (whom he dubs The Perfect Wife), the wife of a colleague. He moves out and is then unfaithful (several times) to his mistress. His mistress finally sees sense and gives him the elbow and he returns to his wife.

The historical part of the book has been criticized as being rather boring, but actually I found it the most interesting; mainly because I knew very little about Buchanan. This being Updike, there is a lot more going on! One of the Elephants in the room is Nabakov and more specifically Pale Fire. The structure is similar where a particular subject is an excuse for a more personal tour-de-force. However there is a joke at the centre in the form of the pay off; “the more I think about the Ford Administration, the more it seems I remember nothing” There are also several amusing pokes at deconstructionists and Derrida.

However there is one thing you cannot get away from; and that is Updike’s extensive and somewhat detailed descriptions of Alf’s sexual exploits. I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised given Updike’s past history. Several points occur;

- 1) Some of the descriptions of sexual relationships would undoubtedly be contenders for the bad sex award
- 2) Some of Alf’s attitudes towards women felt to be to be very unpleasant and demeaning. Describing someone you are making love to as a “witchy incubus” even in your head strikes me as deeply troubled at best or just nasty. Sentences like “Her wetness had become so extreme I kept slipping, like a man in smooth-soled boots on a mudbank” suggest to me that there is a total disconnection with the woman involved and almost an alienness and I feel there is an unspoken loathing there which I find disturbing. The question I then ask is whether this is Updike observing and satirising men, or is it what he really thinks. I am not sure, but I tend towards the latter. All the women in the book are sexual foils, not intellectual ones. There is no meeting of minds, just a meeting of bodies, which alienated this reader because the meeting of minds for me is primary and is inseparable and an integral part of the physical incarnation.
- 3) This is sex as a burden, almost like one of Marley’s chains, something inescapable because that’s what men have to do. It is a gloomy view of sexual relations with no sense or understanding of femininity. It felt to me deeply misogynistic.

The whole contrivance doesn’t work, but the bits about Buchanan were at least informative.

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### **Holli says**

A terrible book that features the "protagonist" cheating on his wife with EVERYONE (including his students and their mothers) and a very dry history of the James Buchanan presidency. Total Disappointment.

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### **Robin Friedman says**

#### Personal And Public History

"Memories of the Ford Administration" (1992) is the fifteenth novel of John Updike, a prolific American writer. It is the third of Updike's novels I have read, spaced widely over the years, with the other two being "Roger's Version", which predated this book, and "In the Beauty of the Lillies", which followed it. I had similar reactions to all three books. Updike deals with important and large themes, such as the possibility and nature of a belief in God in a skeptical age, the character and promise of American life and history, and, of course, the nature of human sexuality.

There are interesting things in the books by Updike that I have read. But they are all highly uneven with long, dull and wordy sections. Worse, the books have each seemed to me glib in a way that detracts from the

importance of their themes. They are more in the nature of literary performances than thoughtful explorations of their subject matters. I have thought about the three Updike books I have read, and was engaged while I was reading them. But I still came away dissatisfied.

"Memories of the Ford Administration" begins when, in 1992, a historical organization called the Northern New England Association of American Historians asks Professor Alfred Clayton (named after Alf Landon, the 1936 Republican Presidential candidate) to provide "requested memories and impressions of the presidential Administration of Gerald R. Ford (1974-1977)." Clayton is a professor at a small women's 2-year college in New Hampshire during the Ford years. By 1992, the college is a four-year institution and has gone co-ed.

In response to the request Clayton produces instead a long, rambling, draft-like monologue which is the text of this novel. It consists, in roughly alternating sections, of a discussion of Clayton's personal life during the Ford years, and of a long unfinished manuscript of Clayton's involving the life and administration of President James Buchanan. Buchanan was the fifteenth President, just before Lincoln, and the only bachelor President.

One can understand the befuddlement and the irritation with which the Northern New England Association of American Historians would have greeted Clayton's response. The trouble is, as far as the novel is concerned, that their response is justified and that the reader of the novel is entitled to the same response and more. There are interesting things in Clayton's ruminations on his life and good discussions in the manuscript on Buchanan. There is little on President Ford's administration and, from a novelistic standpoint, far too little in tying the Ford administration together in some insightful way with Clayton's life or with the Buchanan administration. Updike tries to do this I think, but in an overly clever manner. That is why the book is more a "performance" than it should be and ultimately doesn't succeed.

Clayton remembers the Ford years as a time of widespread sexual openness and promiscuity. The novel focuses on his sexual liaisons and primarily on his lengthy adulterous affair with a woman named Genevieve, the wife of a colleague at the University, whom he fantasizes to be the "ideal wife." Genevieve and Clayton abandon their families, including young children, to pursue their affair, with deleterious and unhappy consequences. Neither has the will to get a divorce and to marry the other.

Twentieth century writers of every variety show great interest in sex and in the human libido. I think it is a product of the Enlightenment, with the attendant skepticism toward revealed religion, that took place centuries ago, not, of course, in the Ford Administration. Even writers and individuals who have remained committed to organized religion have tended, for the most part, to accept at least some of this product of Enlightenment thought. I found it useful to remember this in considering the book's treatment of sexuality.

The Buchanan portion of the book focuses on Buchanan's romance with a young woman during his early career as a lawyer, the termination of the romance due to what appears to be a misunderstanding, and the subsequent early death of Buchanan's beloved. There are good scenes in the book describing Buchanan's subsequent relationships with President Andrew Jackson and the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. The final days of Buchanan's administration, the prologue to our Civil War, are described in a revealing, if slapdash, way.

There is a focus on the elusive character of historical understanding -- which is good and well-taken. The book seems to suggest the impossibility of achieving anything even approximating historical truth which seems to me tendentious and unsupported.

One theme that comes through, I think, is the value of restraint of our tendencies to be overly-critical of our national leaders, of American culture, and of ourselves. This is easier to do when events are separated from us by historical time, as is the case with President Buchanan, than is the case with our contemporaries, such as President Ford. There is also the broad theme of forgiveness running through the book. I found President Ford's pardon of former President Nixon hovering in the background of this novel, even though it is little discussed. Thus, to the extent the book deals with the Ford Administration at all, what it has to say is thoughtful and humane. President Ford is praised for doing his best, for keeping the Nation's interests at heart, and for acting in a responsible manner. (see, e.g. p.354, p.366) Professor Clayton learns, I think, in the course of his ruminations, to work towards a sense of forgiveness and understanding of his own life, including its disappointments and failings. I think this too is a message of the book, but I find it obscured by a good deal of false bravado, obscurity, and unnecessarily showy writing.

There is good material in this book and it stimulates reflection. Thus I think the book will reward reading in spite of the reservations about its specific tone, style, and substance that I have expressed.

Robin Friedman

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### **Chad Bearden says**

The premise of "Memories of the Ford Administration", as well as the process of reading it, is bizarre. This is it: A college history professor is asked by a professional historian organization to reflect on the years of the Ford presidency for an upcoming symposium. The professor's response is apparently to write a book which is half John Updike novel, and half pseudo-non-fictional biography of James Buchanan (our 15th president).

The protagonist, Alf Clayton, admits in the closing pages of his work that he didn't actually say much about Ford. Indeed, there are moments when the rowdy events of his love life occupy his memory, and he cannot recall whether they even occurred during his target era.

On the surface, getting in sync with this novel just requires the reader to throw a switch every few dozen pages and shift from reading a standard John Updike novel to reading a historical account of the life of Old Buck, James Buchanan. It's a weird juxtaposition, but nothing an adept reader can't juggle. Alf's life is that of the typical Updike-man: naively greedy, self-centered, sex-obsessed. The historical portions read like slightly-more poetic biography than you might get from a David McCullough.

[Sidenote: I read "John Adams" recently, which ends with the death of Adams in 1826. The first chunk of Buchanan's life Updike tackles occurs in 1819. The overlap, and inclusion of the politics behind the election of John Quincy Adams (and Buchanan's role in it) interestingly made me feel like I was reading some kind of sequel.]

What at first struck me as strange, however, was Updike's insistence on including little notes from Alf to his prospective editor; each time one pops up, it reminds you that this history is not supposed to have been written by Updike, but instead by his character, Alf Clayton. As this continues, you begin to see the parallels between the frustrating life of Buchanan and that of Alf. And before you go feeling all clever for noticing the parallels, Alf starts talking about the parallels in a strange act of metafiction (or is it meta-non-fiction?). All of this made the act of untangling the various voices a novel little game. Updike, the author; Alf, the sometimes subject, sometimes narrator; Buchanan, the hapless, unwitting subject of Updike's subject.

Some people complain about the lack of plot in Updike novels. I'd agree that there is an aimless, meandering quality to the paths his characters run over the course of his novels. His books are more like character portraits than tightly plotted stories. And although there is a distinct through-line for the life of Buchanan (the separation from and death of his fiance, the rise of his political career, his ascension to the Presidency, the crumbling of the union from under him), Alf just sort of wanders around the Ford era filling us in on his crude sexual exploits, and the exasperation with which he confronts the disappointment he endears in his various mates. That he is a chauvinist bastard is something about which he is utterly oblivious.

Anyhow, inattention to plot is attractive to me when the negligence is enacted by such a poet as John Updike. I don't care where the novel is going, as long as I'm given several chances to get lost in his lush descriptions and metaphors. He is elegant in the way he turns a phrase into a sentence into a paragraph. In my reading experience (which broad though it may be, is relatively limited, I'm sure) only Heller or Faulkner are comparable in modern times, and beyond that, it isn't too far fetched to begin comparing him to Tolstoy and Hugo. Updike's subjects aren't as epic in scale, but his strong sense for conveying very subtle emotions and sensations and impressions is sometimes stunning. And it becomes all the more impressive when you realize he's turning these tricks both in his standard prose style, as well as in the style of the more formal and stuffy attitudes of the early and middle 19th century.

Besides the weird meta-fictional pas-de-deux, a few other themes are touched on. There is a striking comparison, for instance, of the societal mores dealing with sex and relationships as they existed in the Ford and Buchanan eras. The malleability of history is touched on several times, as Alf not only comments on his difficulties pinning down what happened when in the life of Buchanan and his love, Ann Coleman, but also as he struggles at times to pin down what happened when in his own life. Though the Alf we read about is still in his virile thirties, we're reminded in a few instances that the actual man writing this account is an aging grandfather, whose thoughts on old age and death also crop up occasionally both in thoughts about his own life, as well as in his reflections on the life of an aging Buchanan.

In no way is this novel a light read. It's definitely one that requires your attention, and even an eagerness to delve into what some might consider 'dry' accounts of history. But if you're a fan of Rabbit Angstrom (although he was kind of a bastard too, so 'fan' might not be the right word), then "Memories of the Ford Administration" will take you down a similar path, with, albeit, a slightly more strange premise.

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## **Mark says**

An unusual book and one with considerable merit. I had known little of James Buchanan so enjoyed that part of it, plus the descriptions of Alf Clayton's contemporary life. I did not feel comfortable with the sexual explicitness and feel that this aspect of the book is somewhat overdone. Very Updike, however.

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## **R. says**

### **Everything Cuckolded is Neutered Again**

A rewrite of *Roger's Version*. The players in the game are changed a bit, to fit a different era and a different academic setting. But...*Roger's Version* was interesting in that it was adultery+astrophysics. This is adultery+the presidency of James Buchanan. Got to page 54, when, in the chill fall of 1819, Buchanan

Could've sworn that when this novel came out that it was *Memoirs of the Ford Administration*. That there were, like, actual copies with that title. So I'm thinking this is another one of those Berenstein/Berenstain things, the Mandela Effect, if you're hip to that kind of stuff. Anyways, to take it a weird step further, this paperback copy even has a blurb from the Los Angeles Times Book Review that states, "Stunning...*Memoirs* has more sex in it than any of Updike's previous books..."

So even they, even the Los Angeles Times observed (or originated) the confusion. They were also wrong about the sex. Or read a different alternate universe version of this novel that was, indeed, entitled *Memoirs of the Ford Administration*.

## Ronnie says

This was a reread for me. The book came up in a conversation recently, and the person I was talking to had not liked it at all. I found myself defending my memory of it, asking, "But didn't you think it was funny? Didn't the narrator strike you as outrageous?"

Those had been my main takeaways from decades ago. This time through, I can see why those aspects of the book stuck--because it does have its humorous moments, and our narrator, history professor Alfred L. Clayton, is in his way outrageous, for sure.

The whole book is his response to the Northern New England Association of American Historians request for his memories/impressions of Gerald Ford's tenure as president, supposedly for inclusion in the association's academic journal, *Retrospect*. The outrageous part is, given that simple request, the fundamental content he sends back--hundreds of pages of it, very little of which has anything to do with Ford. His "memories" go so far afield in every way, delving into his extramarital affairs in granular/body-fluid detail and spending much, much more time and space on the 15th U.S. President James Buchanan's life and administration than on anything having to do specifically with Ford's.

I do think I must have had more patience when I first read this in the late '80s because this time the Buchanan parts definitely seemed to go on too long, bogging down progressively, especially toward the end, when Clayton's recounting of history comes closer to Lincoln's presidency and the Civil War. And while Clayton's bracketed asides to the *Retrospect* editors are amusing ("If I've misjudged my assignment, please trim this response to suit your editorial requirements") and even absurdist, they also reveal how misguided and sort of sad our narrator is.

In the end, I don't agree with my friend about the novel's lack of merit, but I do feel I should downgrade my rating a bit simply because it does require a lot of patience with only marginal payoff. If you have a healthy appreciation for absurdity, then there's something here for you, but if you're actually somehow expecting or hoping for actual memories pertaining to the Ford administration, here you're mostly out of luck.

First lines:

"I remember I was sitting among my abandoned children watching television when Nixon resigned. My wife was out on a date, and had asked me to babysit."

**Sam says**

This is very nearly two books for the price of one - though far more schizophrenic than Haruki Murakami's

Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World or Alasdair Gray's Lanark A Life in Four Books.

The first being the memories, particularly those of the Ford administration, of Updike's stand-in, a college professor whose life's work is a biography of James Buchanan. The second being snippets of that biography, which often takes on the pallor of historical or even speculative fiction.

This being Updike, the stand-in has oodles of sex - yet Buchanan, America's sole bachelor president, remains chaste to the end.

A strange work.

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### **Mark says**

I generally like John Updike, but this one was just too dry and too contrived. A professor is writing of his memories of the Ford Administration, a time when he was trying to write a biography of our only bachelor President, James Buchanan. Most of his memories of the Ford administration had to do with the woman he was having an affair with at the time. Unfortunately, neither story captivated my interest. I set it aside so that I could move on to something else, with the intention of going back to it later. I just never could bring myself to pick it up again. I'm finally admitting this ain't gonna happen!

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