



[Rabbit, Run](#), by John Updike

In A Nutshell

Rabbit, Run was published in 1960 by American author John Updike. He wrote three more *Rabbit* novels, one at the end of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. He says these novels became “a running report on the state of my hero and his nation.” He won the Pulitzer Prize for the “final” two books. But, the series actually continued after Rabbit’s death in Updike’s 2001 novella, *Rabbit Remembered*. In 2006, The *Rabbit* series was voted number four on *The New York Times* list of “the best work of American fiction of the past 25 years.” *Rabbit, Run* was also selected by *Time* magazine as one of the top 100 books from 1923-2005. And the novel is also listed by the American Library Association as one of the 100 most frequently banned books in the 20th century.

Why was it banned? Isn’t it set in 1959, like *Leave it Beaver* time? Yes, that’s true, but *Rabbit, Run* touches on some delicate issues, like prostitution, male and female orgasms, alcoholism, adultery, blow jobs, homosexuality (though only briefly and ambiguously), birth control, abortion, and even accidental infanticide (We realize the phrase is a contradiction in terms, but we promise it’ll make sense when you get into the novel). Its 26-year old protagonist Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom even leers at 14-year old girls (though only to make his girlfriend jealous). *Rabbit, Run* also has lots of conversations between people arguing about different Christian philosophies, a main character with a bit of a Jesus Complex, a couple of atheists, and even a Freudian. Are you beginning to see why maybe this was touchy? *Rabbit, Run* was also what some consider a “biting critique” of America in 1959. That might or might not have anything

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to do with why it was banned, but a working knowledge of America in 1959 might help us understand the novel.

1959 was, let's face it, *repressive*. A little thing called McCarthyism had much to do with that. You've heard about it in history class, on Shmoop History, and have maybe even seen the 2005 film *Good Night, and Good Luck*, about Edward R. Murrow fighting McCarthyism, a few years before *Rabbit, Run* was written. You've probably read about suspected communists being blackballed from their industries, fired from their jobs, or even executed (like Julius and Ethel Rosenberg). But did you know that popular McCarthyism was also against public vaccination, water fluoridation, and mental health care services? These were deemed figments of the communist plot to bring America down. 1959 also brought us Barbie, and we all know what *she* did for a woman's body image. Civil Rights? Women's Lib? Not much. Divorce: big no-no. Gay rights? Nope. You get the drift. Another thing about 1959: popular culture was on the rise. 1959 was ushering in the postmodern age, and information was becoming more easily accessible than ever before, though nothing like today with our cell phones, laptops, and satellite radios. Reality TV was in its infancy. *I Love Lucy* was still on the air and so was *Leave it to Beaver*. The American Dream meant being married with children, and having the latest in modern appliances and beauty products. Many of these issues are barely visible in the novel, but a working knowledge of America 1959 might help us understand the characters a little better.

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- 1 *Rabbit, Run* seems pretty concerned with "doing the right thing" as Spike Lee would say. Do we find instances in *Rabbit, Run* of characters doing the right thing? If so, what are these right things, and why do we think they are right?
- 2 Is Rabbit an honest person? Can we think of any instances in the novel when he lies? If we can or can 't, does that surprise us? Why or why not?
- 3 How might this book have been different if Updike had picked a different animal for Harry Angstrom, say a wolf or dolphin? Does Harry 's being a "rabbit" make him more or less sympathetic to us (or does that have nothing to do with it at all)? Why does Rabbit call Ruth his "good horse"? What animal would you pick for Janice, if you had to?

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