

# Arts & Entertainment

## 'Bech is Back': Second chapter in author's life



**Bech is Back**  
John Updike  
Knopf

Those who have been reading current American fiction during the last five years or so probably have noticed that an increasing number of authors who have been described as good are producing novels about writers.

Some of those novels are Saul Bellow's "Humboldt's Gift," John Irving's "The World According to Garp," Bernard Malamud's "Dubin's Lives," Phillip Roth's "The

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Ghost Writer" and "Zucherman Unbound" and finally John Updike's novels titled "Bech: A Book" and "Bech is Back."

Does the reading public want to know something about writers that they can't get through some other source? Updike somewhat humorously addresses this question in "Bech is Back."

The novel continues the saga of Henry Bech, who first appeared in "Bech: A Book." "Bech is Back" follows Bech through the years of unproductive writing he goes through after having written three rather famous novels. This unproductivity has some positive aspects. Bech wins the coveted Melville Medal, which is awarded to the author who has maintained the most meaningful silence during the past five years. The award is named after Herman Melville, who retired from active writing after "Moby Dick" and his better books were published.

Bech tries to carry on the best way a famous, unproductive novelist can. He gives lectures around the

world. He doesn't mind giving the lectures, as he repeats the same lecture, changing the title to fit the audience. But he has the problem of carrying around the reputations of all the other noted American writers inside him.

He has one encounter in Venezuela when he is asked what has happened to the noble tradition of social criticism demonstrated by Dreiser, Steinbeck, Jack London and Sinclair Lewis

Bech can't tell them that it has drifted in a more sexual direction because, in his own case, he was "weary, weary to death of dragging their large obliging, misshapen reputations around the globe, rag dummies in which the stuffing had long ago slipped and dribbled out the seams."

Bech's new novel is called "Think Big," and he just can't figure a way to finish it. So to escape the impotence he faces at his writing table, he marries his mistress, hoping to gain security and drive. His marriage to Bea helps him overcome his writer's block, but it doesn't bring him the happiness he is looking for. He can't get over his sexual urges for other women and commits adultery with his wife's sister. This unfortunately brings a divorce down on his head.

Through his new novel, though, Bech now finds himself a *People* magazine star of the 1980s, and he isn't sure he wants to be. We last see Bech at a big party thrown by a TV game-show producer who is trying to get publicity for his new show, women's mud-wrestling. This isn't the world Bech remembers belonging to when his first novel was published, but he adapts well and hustles one of the wrestlers home with him.

Updike has created a funny character with Henry Bech and has done well to continue Bech's story. This novel makes one wonder if the lives of most writers have such strange, but humorous, moments and if they are they like the writers depicted in Bellow's or Roth's stories.

David Wiese

## Reincarnated New Birth offers good, solid effort



**I'm Back**  
New Birth  
RCA

There's an old saying that goes, "Quit while you're ahead," and that's exactly what the group New Birth tried to do shortly after their version of "Wildflower" (the Skylarks also hit big with the 1971 song) and "Dream Merchant" did rather well on both soul and pop charts. The band disintegrated piece by piece until, finally, who ever was left called it quits three years ago.

Now New Birth has resurfaced on RCA with an aptly

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titled eight-song LP called "I'm Back," which, surprisingly, is a very good, solid album.

I say surprisingly because the temptation to join the endless list of exclusively funk-dance bands has not been resisted, and the ideas the press release praises the group for are sadly common.

But New Birth, with nine of its original 12 members reunited, come off just a bit smarter than their self-same, bland contemporaries. This has a lot to do with the presence of such trailblazers as Sly Stone, Johnny Graham and Fred Wesley, as well as members of the late Bootsy's Rubberband, Richard Griffith, Calvin Bennett and

Frankie "Crash" Waddy, as back-up musicians.

Between the new and old influences, many of "I'm Back's" tracks end up following modern molds, but small touches, such as the horns on "Never Say Goodbye," remind you of the soul music in the early '70s, something New Birth members apparently still hold fondly.

"Kute Girls," the album's first single, is actually one of the LP's least likable cuts, mainly because its electronic voice dubbing and rap are total concessions to commercial black music, and anybody from Midnight Star to Lakeside to the Bar Kays could have come up with it. The brighter moments come on "Time Is," perhaps the best mix of the old soul with today's standards whenever Londee Wiggins, the group's lone female, sings. Wiggins' voice is reminiscent of Denice Williams', and it's particularly interesting to hear that type of alto over these arrangements.

Hopefully, "Kute Girls" should do well enough to bring deserved public attention to the latest reincarnation of New Birth. New Birth has always been a quiet, but consistent, trendsetter (New Birth was running around in spaceships and bizarre outfits well before George Clinton and Parliament made it infamous), and "I'm Back" is indication enough that maybe they have a few more ideas to introduce.

Ward Triplett

## 'Pegs' for sure is like totally tubular, ya know?

By David Wood

For sure, it's just part of the drag of being in high school, you know — like gag me up to my ears. We're not invited — can you just believe it? Can you wildly imagine — Muffy Tepperman, Miss Prep and Circumstance herself, got Devo to play at her new-wave bat mitzvah? Can you experience that — Devo, D-E-V-O? At her bat mitzvah — like knock me out with a M&M, I mean really. Spudboys in the skin, max out, totally — my mind is boggling even as I prattle.

Blah, blah, blah — we've all been there, high school, and we weren't invited to the big to-do either. We were

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plain, unpopular or in the wrong cliques, too. It's the incredible thing about high school — we all went through it. We can look back and laugh at ourselves together, remembering those as the most moronic years of our lives.

For idiotic comedy, high school is dynamite. "Square Pegs" (CBS, Monday, 7 p.m.) is essentially "Happy Days 1982," complete with Valspeakers, new wavers, preppies, snobs, nerds and wimps. It's also the best new sitcom of the season.

Not only do its writers and producer have some experience from National Lampoon and "Saturday Night Live," but Devo finally did perform at Muffy's bat mitzvah. Hot music, street satire, wit, no pretense about its pretense — "Square Pegs" has it all and is easily the best half-hour encapsulation of cultural graffiti on TV today. Surely no other show has more fun with a bigger sampling of slang, and it's getting better.

If not awesome, "Square Pegs" is at the very least tubular — for sure, for sure, like I'm telling you from my mouth.

The reason "Square Pegs" rock 'n' rolls better than any other prime-time show is, at the bottom line, technical — "Square Pegs" is recorded on film instead of videotape. Producer Anne Beatts, a former writer for the original "Saturday Night Live," wanted to have records playing during certain scenes, but a regulation of the American Federation of Musicians requires that if a show is filmed, as "Square Pegs" is, rather than video-

taped, as "WKRP in Cincinnati" is, then all musicians responsible for the record played must be paid as though it were a recording session.

"So if we used a Stevie Wonder cut that had 60 musicians," Beatts told Rolling Stone magazine, "we'd have to pay all 60."

Now if you're going to pay a group as if it were performing live, you might as well have the group performing live. That's what Beatts figured, and now "record companies have been beating the doors down."

Devo's appearance Monday wasn't the first time a class act had graced a "Square Pegs" episode. The Waitresses played in the season premiere, and it's them who do the series' title song. In the future — well, A Flock of Seagulls, the Motels, Joe Jackson and X have all expressed interest. Like pass me out the door, I'm swooning.

Devo was a smash at the bat mitzvah, as well as in the Nebraska Union lounge, where I caught the show. One verbal viewer loudly expressed jealousy.

But Beatts made a good point when she said, "you can't have every show end in a dance." So in the works for the high school is its own radio station.

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