You Cannot Really Flee

RABBIT, RUN. By John Updike. 307 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$4. By DAVID BOROFF

The beginning of this moving and often brilliant novel, "Rabbit" Angstrom quietly watches a group of boys playing basketball. Then, shedding his coat, he joins them at play, demonstrating superbly the virtuosity that eight years earlier had made him the star of his high school team. This opening defines the mood of nostalgia and unquiet adulthood that characterizes John Updike's "Rabbit, Run."

Rabbit is an older and less articulate Holden Caulfield. An urban cipher, he is trapped by wife, baby, an uncongenial job as demonstrator for a new kitchen utensil.

"You get the feeling," he says, "you're in your coffin before they've taken your blood out." Like his younger prototype, he is an uneasy, picaresque hero who discovers that you can run but cannot really flee. And in back of all the restlessness there is an unslaked thirst for spiritual truth.

Surfeited with his wife (who, highball in hand, sits glued to the television set), Rabbit gets in his car and drives into the night with a vision of falling asleep by the Gulf of Mexico and waking up "with the stars

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- Love and Squalor -

month is March. makes the air Love light. Things start anew; Rabbit tastes through sour aftersmoke the fresh chance in the air, plucks the pack of cigarettes from his bobshirt bling pocket, without breaking stride cans it in somebady's open bar-rel. His upper lip nibbles back from his teeth in selfpressure. His big suede shoes skim in thumps above the skittering litter of alley gravel.—"Rabbit, Run."

above perfectly spaced." How-ever, after only one night on the road, he is drawn back to his home town and finds refuge and love of a kind with a local Lilith. A minister, a curious mixture of fallen saint and case upon him worker, prevails u return to his wife. They have old second child--but the their dissatisfactions rage and Rab-Finally, disbit runs again. over takes the aster hapless family.

This is the stuff of shabby domestic tragedy—and Mr. Updike spares the reader none of the spiritual poverty of the milieu. The old people are listless and defeated, the young noisily empty. The novel, nevertheless, is a notable triumph of intelligence and compassion; it has none of the glib condescension that spoils so many books of this type. The characters have an imposing complexity.

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Painting by Henry Koerner, Courtesy Midtown Galleries.
"Trapped."

Cannot Flee

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The local Lilith is neither a golden-hearted harlot nor an item from a sociologist's workbook, but oddly lovable, stingingly real. Rabbit's wife is no self-indulgent slattern, but a woman with a rich and tortured consciousness-her interior monologues remind one of a less lascivious Molly Bloom. And Rabbit, neither an overaged delinquent nor a casual satyr, is a seeker and a sufferer -a man in impotent rebellion against all the people "advertising their belief that the world arches over a pit, that death is final, that the wandering thread of his feelings lead nowhere."

The author's style is particularly impressive; artful and supple, its brilliance is belied by its relaxed rhythms. Mr. Updike has a knack of tilting his observations just a little, so that even a commonplace phrase catches the light. The prose is that rarest of achievements—a perfectly pitched voice for the subject.

The treatment of sex commands our attention. For Rabbit, its expression is the final measure of the quality of experience. The author is utterly explicit in his portrayal of Rabbit's divagations—but the description is as seemly as it is candid, for Mr. Updike is primarily interested in the psychic underside of sexuality. Nevertheless, there are some noteasily-ignored footnotes about the erotic sophistication of the post-war generation that will shock the prudish.

"Rabbit, Run" is a tender and discerning study of the desperate and the hungering in our midst. A modest work, it points to a talent of large dimensions —already proved in the author's New Yorker stories, and his first novel, "The Poorhouse Fair." John Updike, still only 28 years old, is a man to watch.