# THE MANY SIDES OF ROTH

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*Philip Roth: The Biography*
By Blake Bailey
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THE SUGGESTED TITLE OF PHILIP ROTH'S BIOGRAPHY, from the man himself, was *The Terrible Ambiguity of the I*. This would-be title not only evokes the many sides of the book's complex subject, but highlights the question that readers of any biography should always keep in the back of their minds: "Can one human being ever *really* know another?"

Meanwhile, the biographer determinedly sets out upon his poor Rosinante and tilts at the distant windmills, convinced any giant can be subdued.

In *Philip Roth: The Biography*, Blake Bailey brilliantly subdues the literary giant thanks to more than eight years of work, extensive access to the novelist's papers, multiple interviews with Roth (who died in 2018), an arsenal of primary sources, and perceptive readings of his oeuvre. Throughout, Bailey examines how Roth used his life and counterlives, and manipulated reality into some of the most important fiction of the post-war era. What we get is a comprehensive, mostly balanced view: It is clear from the start that Bailey is intent on neither (overly) praising Roth nor burying him.

Ah, but that ambiguity that Roth cited in his suggested title rears its ugly head, both in reality and in the pages of Bailey's book. In fact, it provides a central theme to the novelist's life and work. Bailey puts it well on the final page: "What Roth's farrago of alter egos (especially the ones who write) have in common is a nature divided along somewhat predictable lines: the isolato who lives to pursue his art; the impious libertine who endeavors to squeeze

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the Nice Jewish Boy out of himself 'drop by drop'; and of course the Nice Jewish Boy per se, wishing mostly to be good and pining for *le vrai*," or the actual, the real thing, in a few words: the good and decent life.

It is upon this axis that this excellent biography turns, for as Roth himself put it, looking back in 2016: "You might say that right down through *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral* to *Indignation* and *Nemesis* (all later novels) the implications and ambiguities and contradictions inherent to goodness—and badness—has been the master obsession."

Speaking of good, bad, and obsessions, before going further, the elephant in the room must be dealt with. Just weeks after the publication of his Roth biography and its rapid appearance on the bestseller list, Bailey himself found his own past being excavated. And what turned up was not pretty. Bailey has denied the charges of sexual harassment and assault, but they were deemed plausible and serious enough that WW Norton and Company pulled the book, as well as Bailey's 2014 memoir, *The Splendid Things We Planned: A Family Portrait*. The author of previous well-received biographies of John Cheever, Richard Yates and Delmore Schwartz (the latter, we are told, Roth greatly enjoyed), Bailey scrambled to find another publisher.

Gladly obliging was Skyhorse Publishing, the home (through one of its imprints) of Woody Allen's recent autobiography, as well as titles like *Sexy Things to do Before You Die*, an anti-vax screed by Robert Kennedy Jr., a Trump defense penned by Alan Dershowitz, and books by Roger Stone and Michael Cohen. Though Skyhorse, distributed by Simon & Schuster, is home to many less notorious titles, one has to wonder if *The Wisdom of Rand Paul* and *Q Revealed* aren't in the pipeline. In other words, Bailey's fall was a steep one.

These contretemps have led to barrels of ink being spilled by pundits and commentators concerned about the author's ability to be objective vis à vis Roth's well-earned reputation as a cocksmith of Byronic proportions, given his, Bailey's, own history. Ditto the allegations of Roth's misogyny, and the troubling portrayal of the novelist by his second ex-wife, Claire Bloom, in her memoir, *Leaving a Doll's House*.

I was ready to accept that Bailey could handle Roth's lifetime of indiscretions judiciously; however, at several points in the book that faith was challenged. Bailey notes early on that Roth "persisted, in short, to refine his own values independent of those the world was apt to impose," which sounds to me like the very definition of moral relativism. Fair enough, but when

chronicling some of novelist's priapic activities, at time it seemed to me that subject and author had formed a boys club of two, snickering in the background as the stories of womanizing and worse whizzed past. For throughout his life, until health problems began interfering, Roth played the role of a libidinous Prospero, whose every third thought was sex. From feckless affairs, to sex with a student in one of the college classes he taught, to creepy concerns Roth stated about becoming too attracted to his pre-teen stepdaughter, to propositioning journalists sent to interview him, having his mistress listen on the phone as he masturbated, endless *shiksa* and endless skirt chasing, his history of dating much, much younger women, and at one point writing to a friend that the buds bursting at Yaddo that particular spring were, torturously, "like living in the company of seven thousand eleven-year-old girls."

After digesting all this, when on page 408 Bailey then writes: "From earliest childhood Roth had had a soft spot for victims of injustice—especially women who'd been victimized by the men in their lives," I nearly fell off my chair. True, Roth helped many women, young and old, over the decades with everything from money for medical crises, help with jobs, assistance buying a home, paying tuition for children of friends and former lovers, and more. But an early feminist he surely was not.

And so, one must come to Bailey's biography with a constant awareness that author and subject may too often be on the same page when it comes to right and wrong where women are concerned. Perhaps Roth was speaking for both he and Bailey when he claimed, "literature is not a moral beauty contest." Over the course of a 55-year career and 31 books, the author demonstrated an unfailing belief in this dictum time and again. And I, and his many other fans, ate it up.

But should we have?

Philip Milton Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey, on March 19, 1933. The city, particularly its Weequahic section where he grew up, would become for Roth what Dublin was for Joyce, Yoknapatawpha County for Faulkner, and the past for Proust. The youngest of two children born to Herman, an insurance salesman and later executive, and Bess, Roth was spoiled by his mother, and had a happy childhood full of baseball and books, graduating from the local high school in 1950. He often found solace in his later years remembering his youth: "There was nothing that could ever equal coming home through the snow in late afternoon from Chancellor Avenue

School. That was the best life had to offer. Snow was childhood, protected, carefree, loved, obedient," he writes in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983).

After a year at Rutgers University's Newark branch, Roth was tempted away to Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, with "visions of a blond shiksa in (my) head." With men outnumbering women four to one on the campus, there was time for other pursuits, and Roth began writing for the school's magazine, *Et Cetera* (though at this point he still claimed he wanted to be a "lawyer for the underdog"). The publication privileged works of a humorous nature, and at one point, Roth took it upon himself to write scathing satires of the rah-rah! official student newspaper, *The Bucknellian*. Many found these sly takedowns hilarious (sample of Roth's handiwork: "Gee whiz, why can't we have some school spirit here . . ."), but those involved in the Bucknellian's production hurt in ways that lasted decades. Such incidents would prove prescient, as Roth's later writing certainly cut both ways.

While on a full scholarship earning a master's degree at the University of Chicago, Roth wrote stories that garnered him more serious attention. "The Day it Snowed" made him famous on campus, Bailey writes, while the Salinger-esque "The Contest for Aaron Gold" landed in Cornell University's *EPOCH* magazine and was later chosen for inclusion in *The Best Short Stories of 1956*.

Roth's key influences at this time included *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and authors such as Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner. But it was Saul Bellow's 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March* that most registered with Roth, with the "kind of high-faluting (sic) conversational tone I like." Bellow was to the burgeoning fiction writer "a complete genius without any limitations I could see." The two writers would later have a cordial but complex relationship.

Another book from this period that Roth admired was *The Naked and the Dead*. Norman Mailer appears in Roth's life for the first time in April 1958, at a party given in Chicago by Roth and his future wife, Margaret Williams. Roth hangs back, we are told, while Mailer holds court, leaving the elder novelist to remark to someone, "It's those quiet ones you have to watch out for." The two men had a "brief easygoing conversation" later that evening, with Roth speaking highly of his new friend's great war novel.

With the publication of his short story, "The Conversion of the Jews," written nights while he was in the military working as a public information

officer at Walter Reed Hospital, Roth felt he'd made real strides. "I've never been so in control in my life," he wrote to a friend. "It all worked, I think (and hope). I have never felt more like a writer in my life." Rejected by *The New Yorker*, it was ultimately pulled from the slush pile at *The Paris Review* by Rose Styron, wife of the well-known novelist and future friend of Roth, William. The story appeared in the spring 1958 issue of the magazine, as well as in *The Best American Short Stories of 1959*.

"The Conversion of the Jews" would bring down upon Roth's head the first of many allegations of his being a self-hating Jew, and worse. Bailey covers in full the decades of recriminations the author faced from the Anti-Defamation League and various Jewish organizations. Roth did his best to refute these charges in writing, during panel discussions and in interviews, and loyal readers of his will be forgiven for finding the recapping of all that occurred, while necessary, about as interesting as watching Lenny Bruce near the end of life when his act consisted primarily of reading court transcripts pertaining to his obscenity charges.

The same can be said for Roth's marriage to Williams. Roth fictionalized in his novel *My Life as a Man* how she tricked him into marriage by substituting a pregnant homeless woman's urine for her own in order to convince Roth to marry her. The novel was deemed tedious by some (though it was a finalist for the National Book Award), and likewise reading about the whole affair page after page in this biography also wears thin. However, the doomed marriage is important not only because Roth was so hung up on it and tried to use it again and again in his fiction, but also for what impact it may have had on the novelist's view of women and marriage.

Almost everyone who knew Roth at any time in his life will tell you he was one of the funniest people they've met. In the late 1950s, with his writing career slow to advance beyond the odd short story publication, a college friend named Dick Stern encouraged him to be funnier on the page. Stern saw "a discrepancy between Philip as he told stories and Philip as he wrote stories." One day after Roth riffed on a story idea about his experience "in Jewish suburbia with the dazzling daughter of a prosperous dealer in plate glass," Stern's verdict was clear: "Write that, for God's sake!" Roth did, and in the meantime cast aside the niceties and any notion of a "proper" story a la his heroes Conrad, James, Faulkner, and Dostoevsky, and took a cue from Bellow and the freewheeling style that is a central component of *Augie March*. *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* was the result. It won the National

Book Award for 1960 and signaled the arrival of a bold new literary voice. Roth was still in his 20s at the time.

In the novella, the protagonist Neil Klugman meets a Radcliffe student, Brenda Patimkin, from a well-to-do family, and they spend the summer together. The story focuses to humorous effect on class differences and questions about sexual propriety (the couple breaks up in part over an incident involving an IUD).

It's easy to forget with all that he accomplished in life, that Roth's career foundered at various points. Following his debut, *Letting Go* (1962) and *When She was Good* (1967) failed to fulfill his perceived promise. He tried writing plays and suffered many false starts with both novels and short stories. Then he hit it out of the park in early 1969 with *Portnoy's Complaint.*

"Much of what Roth later wrote was in reaction to the mortifying fame of this book," Bailey writes, dubiously and reductively, I feel, as Roth's subsequent output was so varied and unrelated to *Portnoy's* in specific content and form to support such a claim. The story of a Jewish mama's boy who tells his therapist about his nonstop onanism (which famously includes a frantic session with a piece of liver from the family refrigerator not long before it was cooked and served for dinner), made Roth both rich and famous, though he often complained that the public thought the book wasn't so much a work of fiction but an actual confession. From serial rights, the film option and advance from his publisher, Roth earned for *Portnoy's Complaint* what in today's dollars would equal more than $6 million. The novel was controversial and became the talk of not only the town, but commentators and comedians, in print and on television and radio. A downside to Roth's newfound fame was how often people on the street would yell to him things like "Hey, Portnoy!" usually accompanied by some obscene hand gesture.

After his notorious bestseller, Roth again hit tough times. During the next decade, he published *Our Gang* (1971), *The Great American Novel* (1973), and *My Life as a Man* (1974), which were mingled with the first two "David Kepesh" novels, *The Breast* (1972) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977). While each book has its moments, especially the Kepesh titles, the public and critics found them underwhelming.

Had Roth not escaped this rut, primarily via the invention of his next fictional alter-ego, Nathan Zuckerman, the author could have drifted off the cultural radar, remembered primarily as a one-hit wonder. However, Zuckerman's emergence demonstrates that what Roth succeeded doing in *Port-*

*noy* could be replicated to differing degrees and in a multitude of ways. Carnality serves as the ever-present backdrop when Zuckerman is on stage. A conflicted Jew, well-known author, and unrepentant chaser (and catcher) of skirts, this alter-ego allows Roth to have it both ways: include in his novels aspects of his life, yet maintain distance and deniability. Over the course of nine novels and a novella (1979–2007), serving in some as the protagonist and in others as third-person narrator or interlocutor, Zuckerman grows old with Roth and us. The art of writing, Zionism, fame, marriage, sex, fidelity, illness, impotence, revenge and current events all feature in these books, one of which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (1997's *American Pastoral*).

Roth's late stage reminds me of an extended version of Samuel Beckett's "siege in the room," that lasted for the great Irish writer from 1946 to 1950, during which he produced his trilogy of great novels and *Waiting for Godot*. The so-called American Trilogy of *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* (his return takedown of Bloom for *Leaving a Doll's House*) and *The Human Stain*, comprise the foundation of Roth's being declared the country's greatest living writer, along with the uber-outré *Sabbath's Theater*, in which the novelist simply tosses out any thoughts of decorum. It was Roth's favorite among his novels (mine, too), and its cunt-crazed protagonist is the closest Roth has to a doppelganger in his books—this according to Roth himself. As Martin Amis said of the novel, it "is the first time that Mr. Hyde has been given the floor." Celebrated often for its near-pornographic aspects, it is Sabbath's humanity and his deeply buried sadness over an older brother lost in the war that lifts this novel to impressive heights.

There are just too many books to go into at any length. Suffice it to say the best of them represent some of the finest fiction written over the past sixty years. The lesser novels each have their joys, but add up to something less than wholly satisfying. As for whether Roth should have gotten the Nobel Prize in Literature, of course he should have. Bailey notes Roth's various responses to not getting the call from Stockholm: usually it's a gritted-teeth nonchalance.

As for marriages, there was just the one other, to Claire Bloom. That troubled pairing also reads like a psychodrama at times and makes for some of the more tepid sections of the book. Bailey does not shy away from the various attempts by Roth to use biography as a weapon against his ex. And while some critics have faulted the biographer for failing to provide the other side

of Roth's two marriage stories, this reader for one clearly concluded that both women knew they were not marrying a saint, and some or much of the culpability of these doomed relationships and the fallout of each land at the feet of the husband. Put another way: an awful time was had by all.

Fans of Mailer will be interested in the story of when Roth wrote a piece for the October 1972 issue of *Esquire* in praise of a novel called *American Mischief* by Alan Lelchuk in which a character named Normal Mailer is killed by the protagonist who "fire(s) the fatal bullet up the author's determinedly virginal anus." They expected Mailer to be angry. And he was, even before the issue came out. Mailer at first told Lelchuk to meet him at a given bar where they would have it out. That idea squelched, instead the setting was a publishing law office, and Bailey provides a fascinating blow by blow of the meeting between the parties. There was some legal talk, as well as a "lurching grab across the conference table" by Mailer. Ha! The man never lets you down.

After 800 pages of *Philip Roth: The Biography*, the picture that comes into focus is of a novelist who successfully combined the high and the low, the tragic and the comic, the traditional and novel, the pious and the blasphemous, life and death, and, yes, love and hate. Roth's use of alter-egos, alternative realities, and modern narrative methods, made him one of the most inventive writers of our time. But it is his imagination that most sets him apart, as well as his style, which can encompass everything from the jargon of PhDs to the denizens of the gutter, with equal ease. And of course, he's extremely funny in his books, as well as in correspondence and conversation. To wit, when telling a friend that he'd only received $125 from a major magazine for a short story, "Whacking Off," Roth quipped, "A masturbator yes, a capitalist, no." These bon mots are sprinkled generously throughout the book and much welcome. This is one of the payoffs of the in-depth research Bailey undertook; he found many a gem.

Additionally, Bailey fills an epilogue with not only updates on many of those who were a part of Roth's life, he also details the hundreds of thousands of dollars the novelist over the years gave to friends and former lovers in need of some assistance. He was also a regular presence at the sickbeds and funerals of those he'd been close to. One can almost imagine Roth telling these poor souls something he wrote in *The Dying Animal:* "You tasted it. Isn't that enough? Of what do you ever get more than a taste? That's all we're given in life, that's all we're given of life. A taste. There is no more."

Love also comes on strong in Roth's last years. When asked about the subject during the final interview before his death, Roth thinks for a moment and then sings a Charlie Chaplin song from *Limelight*, that is comprised primarily of the word love, repeated in quick succession fifty times. Such feelings were made most manifest in a strange way, given Roth's longstanding desire to be childless. Believe it or not, a job that Roth may have enjoyed more than writing, more even than womanizing, was serving as unofficial grandfather to the children of some of the paramours he remained close to over the years.

For those who are not apt to forgive men like Bailey and Roth for their alleged transgressions, there is the adage that it all comes out in the wash. For in the end, Roth was sick and mostly alone. As he writes in *Everyman* (2006), "Old age isn't a battle; old age is a massacre." Bailey relates how after his trusted cook announced she would not be returning with him to Connecticut to work for the summer, she was surprised moments later to see her octogenarian boss's face streaming with tears. Comeuppance at last? You decide. Again, Bailey did the work and got the details down, and even if we worry he may be too close to his subject and his subject's foibles for his and our own good, everything's ultimately on the page and it's up to us to make of it what we will.

*Philip Roth: The Biography* will no doubt stand as the definitive work on an important writer; a man, who along with Bellow, Mailer and Updike, made American fiction of the post-World War II generation the envy of the literate world.