

Philip Roth

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I can never think of Philip Roth without thinking about how outraged the organized Jewish community was about his first books—*Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. Do you remember those books, or perhaps the movies that were based on them?

Roth poked fun at the American Jewish community, at its social climbing, its propensity to sell out for security, even its ignorance. I loved the scene with the Hadassah lady who asks about Martin Buber, “Is he Orthodox or Conservative?” Roth overflowed with disdain for what he considered the bourgeois limitations of Jewish life and the organized Jewish community.

In writing about Philip Roth, Stanford Professor Steve Zipperstein describes an old tape found of the 1962 Yeshiva University Symposium on the occasion of the University's 75th anniversary. Roth was an interesting choice of speakers, along with Ralph Ellison and an Italian Marxist.

Much of the audience was hostile to Roth, including Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, later the Provost of Yeshiva University. Perhaps he had heard Israeli Professor of Mysticism Gershom Sholom's censure: “This is just the book the Anti-Semites have been waiting for.”

Roth's interviewer that night wanted to make the point that an author has a responsibility to his community, that his writing should be helpful—like John Steinbeck, who Roth insisted had prettified the sharecroppers in *Grapes of Wrath* in order to win sympathy for them.

Roth would have none of that. He was not interested in harnessing his talent for the benefit of the Jewish people. He had a different sense of his responsibility as an author.

He said that night, “The story of Lou Epstein stands or falls, not on how much I know about the Jewish tradition, but on how much I know about Lou Epstein.” Of course, Philip Roth was more than the books of his early years. Unlike many other authors, who peak with a burst of originality and then tail off, Roth wrote significantly both as a young man and in his middle years, and then had a third burst of creative output as a “senior citizen.”

Our Temple book group read *I Married a Communist*, one of the books of his middle years, but you might have enjoyed *The Ghost Writer* or *American Pastoral*. In his later years, Roth wrote *The Plot Against America*, a prescient exploration of the underbelly of American politics in which a pop culture autocrat wins a surprise election and runs our country off the rails. He described it as “the indigenous American berserk.”

Roth's final writing years also included two powerful short stories “Nemesis” (about the polio epidemic of the 1950's) and “Indignation,” which was made into

a film just a few years ago, about how, in a sense, anti-Semitism leads a young Jewish man to his death in Korea.

Roth was often grouped with Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow, but he did not want to be branded a Jewish writer, and he was not really of the same generation as they were. Unlike Malamud and Bellow, Roth's mom made Jello and not challah, and his dad watched baseball instead of reading the Yiddish magazine *Forvertz*. From his upbringing in suburban Newark, New Jersey, he saw being Jewish and being American as practically indistinguishable.

Roth wanted to write America and saw himself in the tradition of Melville, Hemingway, and Faulkner. He would also be grouped with non-Jewish writers such as John Updike and became, in the opinion of many, the most significant American writer of his age, even if his Nobel Prize for Literature was given to Bob Dylan.

Reading about Roth's life, one can see the power of hard work, of discipline, of a grueling daily routine, from which he eventually, at age 77, gave himself permission to retire. Roth was motivated to retire by the desire to stop before his powers waned. When asked why he stopped writing, he would say that he had said what he wanted to say.

Roth lived on to age 85, despite the earlier stretches of depression, surgeries on his back and spine, a quintuple bypass, and 16 cardiac stints. He lived to see criticism from feminists because of the weakness of his female characters and,

even more, because of his men and their lust and lechery. But he helped young writers in those final years of retirement, including Nicole Kraus, Zadie Smith, and Lisa Halliday, fine young women writers. Early on, he had promoted Eastern European Jewish writers and been significant in the career of the Israeli writer Aharon Applefeld.

Though Roth didn't want to be classified as a Jewish writer, that was his focus. Roth examined the ambivalence of American Jewry in all its variety, including its complicated feelings about Israel.

A young woman, raised in the Orthodox community, wrote about what Roth taught her:

He helped me understand what it meant to be Jewish in America. Were we supposed to convey pride in our religion and our culture? Were we the punch lines to a joke that was constantly being made? Were the jokes at least funny? And such small portions.

Was being Jewish a bad thing? Were we proud? Were we embarrassed? Did we still have to watch our backs?

How should a modern Jew assert his or her Jewishness? Were we white? You're kidding yourself if you think we're white! Do the goyim like us, or do they simply tolerate us? You're kidding yourself if you think they tolerate us! How to act, how to assimilate, but not too much, how to remind them

about the Holocaust when they got uppity about Jewish privilege. How not to break into laughter when someone used the phrase “Jewish privilege.”

What it meant to be the child of people who came to America to forget, but then insisted on incessant remembering...He was called self-hating for all this, but he wasn't self-hating. He was paving a road that would legitimize the American Jewish experience...he was affirming to us that we were contenders.

Philip Roth was a favorite of Elayne Klasson, a writer in our congregation, who argued that Roth gave us a unique gift, a picture of the American man from the vantage point of youth, maturity, and old age. In Elayne's opinion, “. . . his work has a universality for us all as we struggle to live with our flaws.”

Roth summed up his work in the words of Joe Louis, “I did the best I could with what I had.”