

**Philip Roth**  
by Erica Wagner for the *Financial Times*

It was towards the end of our hour-long conversation that Philip Roth asked me what I made of one of the characters in his novel *The Humbling*. It was 2009, the year his penultimate book was published, the first year of Barack Obama's presidency. I had flown to New York on a day's notice to meet with Roth in a bland conference room in the office of his agent, Andrew Wylie. I was glad I hadn't had more warning; less time to worry about how this encounter with prickly titan of American letters would go.

The protagonist of *The Humbling* is an actor, Simon Axler, sliding into despair as he ages. Drawn to suicide, he checks himself into a psychiatric hospital where he encounters a woman, Sybil Van Buren, who asks Axler to kill her husband -- he's been abusing their daughter. Axler's encounter with Van Buren is a strange subplot in this peculiar, unsatisfying novel that doesn't rank among Roth's best work. But he noticed that in the course of our talk I hadn't mentioned her at all. Why was that?

I didn't know what to make of her, I said. I thought her story, her connection with Axler, was going to go in a different direction; I was puzzled by what Roth had done. The moment I said this it was as if I was suddenly observing myself from a great height. *Philip Roth is sitting across from me, and I am telling him I don't like what he's done*. His brow furrowed, and he nodded. "You're puzzled by her," he said. "So am I." He couldn't get the narratives in the novel to connect in quite the way he wanted: "someone smarter than I am will have to tell me what it's all about," he said with a smile.

This is the mark of the great artist: someone who is never satisfied with what he has done, who always knows there is more work to do, no matter how much praise or how many prizes have been garnered in a long, extraordinarily productive life. His first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, a novella and five stories, was published in 1959, and his last, *Nemesis*, in 2010: just over 30 books in just over 50 years, not bad going. He won the Pulitzer Prize (for *American Pastoral*, in 1998), two National Book Awards, a couple of National Book Critics Circle awards, three PEN/Faulkner Awards, and the Man Booker International Prize in 2011, when it was still given for a body of work, rather than an individual novel; that same year President Obama awarded him the National Humanities Medal.

*The Humbling* is one in a final quartet of novels which begin with *Everyman*, published in 2006. As a group they take on the last great subject facing Roth: mortality and death itself. Published at the rate of nearly one a year, these last books show Roth, even well into his 70s, finding a new direction. But from the very first his work was marked by a restless energy that taught his readers to expect the unexpected. He burst onto the literary scene with a story in the *New Yorker*, "Defender of the Faith" -- it would appear later that same year in *Goodbye, Columbus*. Roth's portrayal of his Jewish characters brought accusations of betrayal from some in the Jewish community: things didn't improve when his raucous third novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, appeared in 1969. The novel, voiced by the irrepressible Alexander Portnoy as a rollicking psychoanalytic monologue, remains hilarious and shocking nearly 50 years after its publication: "Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz!" [*Portnoy's Complaint*, 33] You will never look at a piece of liver the same way again.

His early work was caustic and riotously comic: he never stopped being a scathingly funny writer, and friends said he could have had an alternative career in stand-up. But alongside the comedy are the great questions his work has always asked. How do awkward, angry, fallible human beings live together? How do they build societies which function for everyone -- is it even possible to build such societies? Raised in an immigrant family, he observed directly the compromises communities made to fit in: in *The Ghost Writer*, published in 1979, he drew a challenging parallel

between the violence of the Holocaust and the violence done in the offices done of plastic surgeons where Jewish girls went to get their noses fixed<sup>1</sup>. Too horrible to be funny? It's up to the reader to decide. But he refused to be pigeonholed as a writer of Jewish experience alone: "I don't write in Jewish," he said to me. "I write in American."

*The Ghost Writer* marked the first appearance of Nathan Zuckerman, a novelist who shared much of Roth's biography; the academic David Kepesh was another alter-ego. But he thought drawing direct parallels between his real life and the lives he created on the page was a fool's errand. "Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life," he told his friend, the biographer Hermione Lee. "There has to be some pleasure in this job, and that's it."<sup>2</sup> He blamed Hemingway for beginning the conflation between a writer's work and his life, and disliked "the cult of the interview" [to me], as he called it.

Like Tolstoy, like Dickens, like George Eliot and Jane Austen, it is the deep particularity of his work, its rootedness in specific characters and experiences, which makes it universal. Reading his novels is an exercise in radical empathy. There is a vogue, these days, for "likeable" characters - - Roth couldn't have cared less if you liked the people he wrote about. His (male) characters were obsessed with sex: to simply call him a misogynist is to misunderstand his task. "Literature isn't a moral beauty contest," he said. "Its power arises from the authority and audacity with which the impersonation is pulled off; the belief it inspires is what counts. The question to ask about the writer isn't 'Why does he behave so badly?' but 'What does he gain by wearing this mask?'"<sup>3</sup> Not everyone bought this argument: Carmen Callil, the founder of Virago Press, was a judge the year Roth was awarded the Man Booker International; she resigned over the decision, questioning whether anyone would even read his work in 20 years' time.<sup>4</sup>

The novels he began to publish in the 1990s ensure that they will. In the mid-1970s he lived in Britain much of the year, thanks to his relationship with the actor Claire Bloom (who wrote a withering recollection of their marriage in her memoir *Leaving A Doll's House*). But in 1989 he came back to the United States and found himself re-energized by this new immersion in his native milieu. He took a deep dive back into American literature, and the eventual result were the books that have come to be called his American trilogy: *American Pastoral*, *I Married A Communist*, *The Human Stain*. In *American Pastoral* the daughter of the upstanding Swede L'vov becomes a terrorist in the 1960s; *I Married A Communist* confronts the McCarthyism of the 1950s; *The Human Stain* has at its centre Coleman Silk, a black professor of classics, who finds himself hounded from his classroom after a chance remark is perceived as racist.

But boiling these engrossing, complicated novels down to the issues they address does them, in truth, a disservice. Discourse in the 21st-century becomes increasingly binary. Is X a good person or a bad person? A misogynist or one of the good guys? Such simplifications were not for Roth. "As an artist the nuance is your *task*. Your task is *not* to simplify," he wrote in *I Married a Communist*. "Even should you choose to write in the simplest way, à la Hemingway, the task remains to impart the nuance, to elucidate the complication, to imply the contradiction. Not to erase the contradiction, not to deny the contradiction, but to see where, within the contradiction, lies the tormented human being. To allow for the chaos, to let it in. You must let it in. Otherwise you produce propaganda, if not for a political party, a political movement, then stupid propaganda for life itself -- for life as it might prefer to be publicized." [*I Married A Communist*, 223]

But it is Roth's 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*, which is his most haunting, prescient text in 2018. In it the isolationist aviator Charles Lindbergh wins the presidency in 1940, trouncing Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It is a portrait of authoritarianism in America which stands with Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here* as a warning to those who believe that democracy and equality are the natural states of humanity. In *The Plot Against America*, it is Roth's own family,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/philip-roth-unmasked-and-the-birth-of-a-meme>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/philip-roth-the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/philip-roth-the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booker-prize/8521557/Feminist-judge-resigns-after-Philip-Roth-wins-Man-Booker-International-Prize.html>

young Philip, father Herman and mother Bess, who are victims of the anti-semitism that comes to be codified under Lindbergh. “He dares to call us *others*?” Herman Roth cries. “*He’s* the other... The man is unfit. He shouldn’t be there. He shouldn’t be there, and it’s as simple as that!” [*The Plot Against America*, 256] Speaking of the novel at the very beginning of this year, Roth issued a reminder that Lindbergh, at any rate, had been a real hero, the man whose solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927 opened up a new world. The 45th President could not be mentioned in the same breath, Roth said. “Trump, by comparison, is a massive fraud, the evil sum of his deficiencies, devoid of everything but the hollow ideology of a megalomaniac.”<sup>5</sup>

That landscape of literature has changed in the fifty years Roth was writing: opened up, broadened out, allowed for more voices. But it was Roth’s wild ebullience, his force and presence, which helped to open the breach. It was an effort that cost him. In 2012 he revealed that he kept a Post-It note on his computer: “The struggle with writing is over,” it said.<sup>6</sup> Approaching 80, he’d earned a rest. But when we met, a few years before, he still seemed restless, seeking for a new subject; and perhaps a little lonely, too. I’d asked him about the deaths of Updike and Mailer. “How does it make me feel, all these fellows dying? Very sad. Several of them were friends, William Styron was a close friend, he also died in the past few years. Arthur Miller was also a friend, he died in the last few years. I think I’ve had something like six male friends die in the last couple of years. It reminds me, if I need reminding, that time runs out. How does it make me feel about my work? Well, I’ve done a lot of work, but I want to continue working until I can’t work anymore.”

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/16/books/review/philip-roth-interview.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/books/struggle-over-philip-roth-reflects-on-putting-down-his-pen.html>