

Philip ROTH

“OBVIOUSLY THE FACTS ARE NEVER JUST COMING AT YOU BUT ARE INCORPORATED BY AN IMAGINATION THAT IS FORMED BY YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE. MEMORIES OF THE PAST ARE NOT MEMORIES OF ~~FACTS~~ BUT MEMORIES OF YOUR IMAGININGS OF THE FACTS.”

BY JESSICA TEISCH

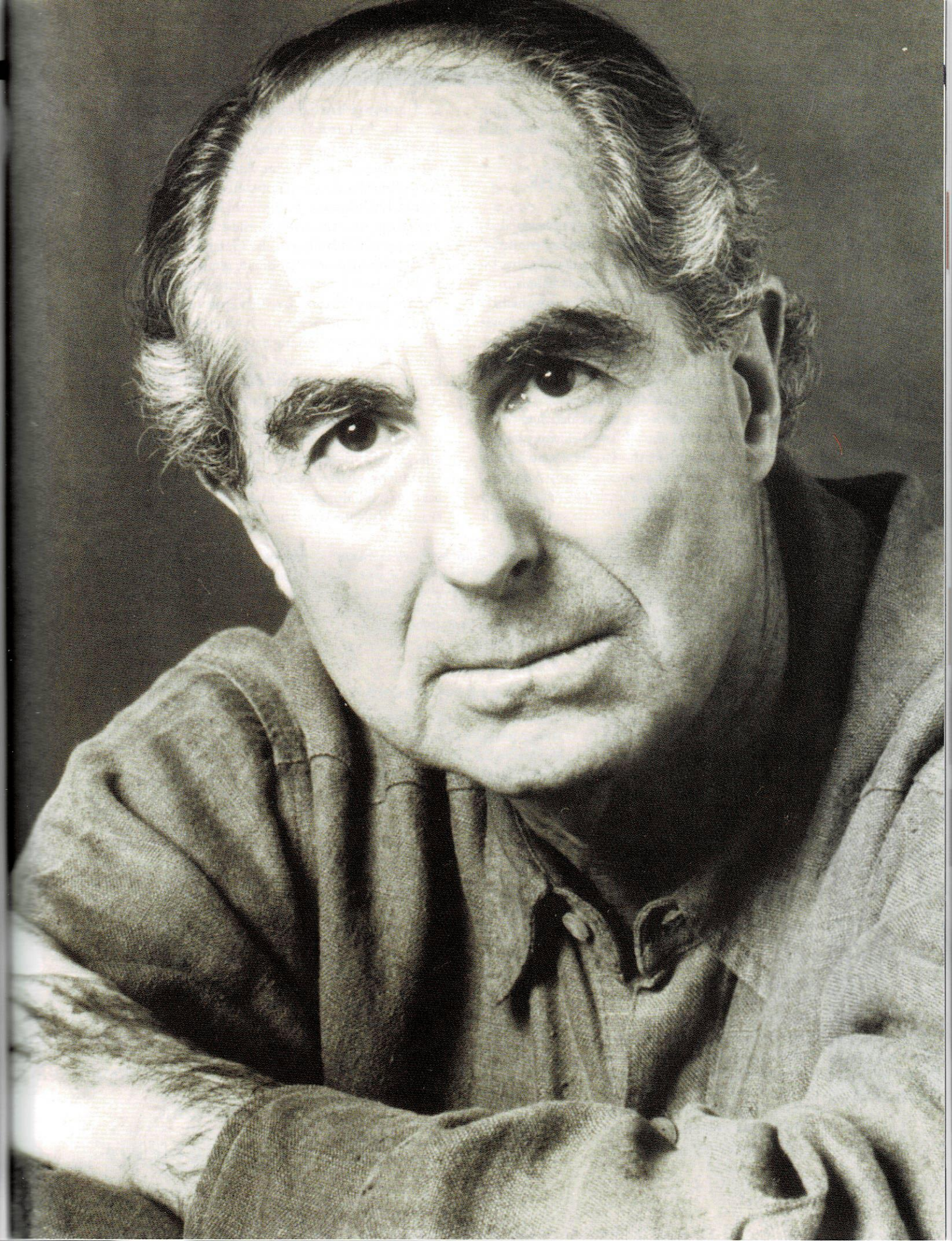
Philip Roth lives alone in a cabin in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts. “I came here because I don’t want a story any longer,” he told *Atlantic Unbound*. “I’ve had my story.” Roth, author of more than twenty books and numerous literary alter egos, wants peace and solitude. But, at 70 years of age, his stories keep coming.

Roth’s tales first reached the public in 1959, when his debut novel, *Goodbye, Columbus*, won the National Book Award and put him on the literary map. His subsequent work continued to be raw, comedic responses to his own life and to American culture. Roth often calls upon a series of recurring narrators in his work, and they are put to wide-ranging purposes. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, Roth uses Nathan Zuckerman’s writing of a controversial book, *Carnovsky*, to explore the visceral responses to Roth’s own *Portnoy’s Complaint*. In *The Human Stain*, Roth takes a much broader view, with Zuckerman recounting the story of political correctness run amuck on a college campus. Roth easily moves between biographical and cultural satire, from novel to novel and within each.

WHERE TO START

PORTNOY’S COMPLAINT, a good place to start for novices but not necessarily for the faint of heart, movingly and comically introduces many of Roth’s recurring themes: the self-questioning of sexual, religious, familial, and ethnic identity. **PATRIMONY**, which explores Roth’s relationship with his father, delves into Roth’s more serious “nonfiction” side. For a taste of Roth’s dark look into post-war America, try **AMERICAN PASTORAL** or **THE HUMAN STAIN**, which extends his trademark themes to present-day suburban America.

Zuckerman, and the rest of Roth’s suite of narrators, including Peter Tarnopol and David Kepesh, are all cut from the same cloth. Like Roth, some taught creative writing, lived in writers’ colonies, married actresses, and devoted their careers to undoing the damage caused by their books. Yet Roth considers his narrators to be “alter brains,” not alter egos (*New York Times*, 5/7/00). Just as his character Zuckerman denies parallels with the licentious character of his fictional novel, *Carnovsky*, so, too, does Roth dispute links between his life and those of his creations. He admits to distilling biographical events through his narrators, but claims that readers “who convert literature into gossip don’t get what reading’s all about” (*New York Times*, 5/1/81). Let’s take Zuckerman’s word for it:



"Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life" (*New York Times*, 9/10/95).

ROTH, AMERICAN JEWS, AND THE CRITICS

Roth takes perfect aim at a variety of people, including WASPs, homosexuals, Irish Catholics, immigrants, doctors, blue-collar workers, housewives, and whores. In short, he's no Pollyanna. He's been called anti-American, sexist, anti-feminist, and homophobic. "Someone cagey out there," he said, "is always going to see through to what kind of son of a bitch you really are" (*New York Times*, 9/18/77). But if Roth's panoramic canvas of America parodies almost every group stereotype in America, it zooms in most closely on his own culture: that of the American Jew.

Roth was born in 1933 in Newark, New Jersey. "Growing up," said his father, the late Herman Roth, "he was just like any other all-American boy. Any other ethnic boy, that is" (*New York Times*, 10/26/83). Raised in the city's Jewish section, Philip Roth saw Newark

as a crossroads of ethnic assimilation. "The cultural struggle," he wrote, "was bruising," particularly between the immigrant generations (*New York Times*, 3/29/91). Roth first alienated some American Jews in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), which contained stereotypes of the self-hating Jew. *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), which ridiculed Jewish culture, men, and mothers, hardly restored Roth's reputation. Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem, speaking for the American rabbinate, denounced Philip Roth for successfully writing the ultimate anti-Semitic novel, in which Portnoy tried to "put the id back in yid." And in 1972, literary critic Irving Howe accused Roth of a "deeply marred vulgarity" brought about by moral callousness (*Commentary*, 12/72). Howe's criticism hit home, for it appeared in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983) as an article penned by the cruel Milton Appel.

Roth has spent the better part of his career justifying the uproar caused by *Portnoy's Complaint*. But charges of anti-Semitism only encouraged Roth to become "the writer some Jewish critics had been telling me I was all along: irresponsible, conscienceless, unserious" (*Reading Myself and Others*, 1975). Only writing

THE ZUCKERMAN BOOKS

These novels trace the development of Roth's "alter brain" Nathan Zuckerman from an aspiring young writer to a psychologically unstable literary celebrity.

The Ghost Writer (1979)

Zuckerman, a middle-aged writer, recalls his 23-year-old self in the 1950's. Having already hurt his family with his semi-autobiographical stories, he struggles to deal with the consequences of his art.

Zuckerman Unbound (1981)

Zuckerman has written an alleged libel of the Jews, *Carnovsky* (1969). It has made him both vilified by his friends and family and wealthy, a similar relationship that Roth (the real one) experienced with *Portnoy's Complaint*.

The Anatomy Lesson (1983)

The third volume in the Zuckerman trilogy examines a mysterious illness that inhibits Zuckerman's creative process. But not to worry; Zuckerman consoles himself in womens' arms as he decides to abandon his successful writing career.

Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue (1985)

The Zuckerman trilogy follows Zuckerman from Manhattan to Miami Beach to Communist Czechoslovakia.

* *The Counterlife* (1987)

THE KEPESH BOOKS

David Kepesh is a sex-driven man whose fetishes resemble those of Portnoy. Like Zuckerman, he ages throughout the novels, but women and literature occupy his mind throughout.

The Breast (1972)

Literature professor David Kepesh awakes one morning to find that he has morphed, Kafkaesque-style, into an enormous mammary. He must then face the strangeness of the opposite sex.

The Professor of Desire (1977)

The now middle-aged Kepesh imagines himself as a college student "a rake among scholars, a scholar among rakes." But when this motto comes true, he questions whether sexual fulfillment and happiness are the same thing.

The Dying Animal (2001)

Kepesh returns as an angst-ridden sexagenarian who writes dramatic

criticism and sleeps with his female students—and confesses it all to you as he lies on his couch.

THE ROTH BOOKS

The protagonist "Philip Roth" plays a literary game in this group of novels, questioning the relationship between fact and fiction, the "lived" and the "written" world.

The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography (1988)

Roth opens his unconventional autobiography with a letter to his alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, who responds with "the facts" of Roth's life.

Deception: A Novel (1990)

The only one of the "Roth Books" billed as a novel, *Deception* presents intimate, adulterous snippets of conversation between Philip and his English mistress (a "remarkably uninteresting, middle-aged wife") mainly before and after making love.

* *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991)

* *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993)

THE AMERICAN TRILOGY

Roth returns to an older (and less

Operation Shylock (1993) changed his tune, forging “an astonishing affinity between myself and the audience that has long considered me exactly what I considered [the Roth imposter]: deformed, deranged, craven, possessed, an alien wreck.” Roth admits that he now has “more than a faint idea of why [his audience has] wanted to kill me and of what, rightly and wrongly, they have been through” (*The New York Times*, 3/7/93). And he’s learned to ignore the critics. “You know,” he said, “if you hang around long enough, they begin to get used to you” (*The New York Times*, 8/1/85).

MAJOR WORKS

Goodbye, Columbus (1959)

✦ National Book Award

Roth’s first novella and five stories won a major award for its biting commentary on class and religion in America. But some within the Jewish-American community vilified the 26-year-old author, then an English instructor at the University of Chicago, for his unflattering depiction of Jews.

crazed) Nathan Zuckerman, who narrates the stories of individuals who represent the social, political, and psychological conflicts of late 20th-century America.

* *American Pastoral* (1997)

I Married a Communist (1998)

Ira Ringold, the Communist of the title, is a poor Jewish boy from Newark. He becomes a party member during World War II, only to be ruined by the McCarthy-era witch-hunt. Narrated by Zuckerman, the novel muses on Ringold’s failed marriage to a famous actress (modeled after Roth’s failed marriage to actress Claire Bloom), Communism, literature, and politics.

The Human Stain (2000)

✦ *PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction*
Zuckerman recounts the story of Coleman Silk, a professor emeritus at Athena College in the 1990’s who is forced to resign after he innocently misuses the word “spook” in class.

OTHER WORKS

* *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959)

Letting Go (1962)

Roth’s first full-length novel, inspired by Henry James’s literary re-

alism and published just after *Goodbye, Columbus*. In 1950’s Chicago, New York, and Iowa City, Gabe Wallach, recently discharged from the Korean War, strives to live righteously in a rigid American society.

* *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969)

When She Was Good (1967)

Another Jamesian-inspired novel, unusual for its female voice. Lucy Nelson, Roth’s symbol of “Puritan America” in a Midwestern town in the 1940s, tries to reform all of the men around her—even if it means ultimately destroying herself.

Our Gang (1971)

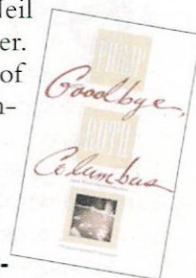
This novel satirizes the hypocrisy of politicians and the basic indifference of voting Americans. Richard M. Nixon, here named Trick E. Dixon, is a polished politician, Boy-Scout hater, and peace-loving Quaker who kills unarmed citizens in self-defense.

The Great American Novel (1973)

Is the great American pastime a worthy subject of the Great American Novel? To Roth, yes, who makes a wonderful mockery of baseball with the Ruppert Mundys, the only homeless baseball team in American history.

THE STORY: The novella involves the young Neil Klugman, who meets the beautiful and wealthy Brenda Patimkin, a Radcliffe undergraduate. Neil pursues and wins Brenda only to reject her. The title short story, “The Conversion of the Jews,” is one of Roth’s most widely anthologized stories.

“Mr. Roth has written a perceptive, often witty and frequently moving piece of fiction. He is a good story-teller, a shrewd appraiser of character and a keen recorder of an indecisive generation.” William Peden, *The New York Times*, 5/17/59.



“To the uninformed reader all of this might seem to verge on caricature, but I think it is ferociously exact. . . . Even if only a fraction of what Mr. Roth portrays is true, it ought to create the most intense heart-searching among the very people who will soon be hectoring him.”

Irving Howe, *The New Republic*, 6/15/59. (Note: Howe later decided he had erred with this positive review; in retrospect the novel seemed mediocre.)

THE BOTTOM LINE: Welcome to the literary elite, Mr. Roth.

My Life as a Man (1974)

In the first of the Zuckerman trilogy, Roth introduces Nathan Zuckerman, his self-reflexive, literary alter ego. Here, he’s a fictional character developed by Peter Tarnopol, a gifted but depressed young writer who looks to his wife, Maureen, for direction.

Reading Myself and Others (1975)

The interviews, essays, and articles in this collection span two decades of Roth’s career and focus on the relationship between the written and the unwritten world.

Sabbath’s Theater (1995)

✦ *National Book Award for Fiction*
Morris (Mickey) Sabbath, a libidinous 64-year-old ex-puppeteer, resembles Portnoy. He teaches drama at a local college in New England until a sex scandal forces his resignation. News of the death of his mistress spurs him to leave his wife and arrange for his own death.

Shop Talk (2001)

The ten interviews in this collection, which first appeared in national magazines and newspapers, constitute a grab bag of sorts—conversations with other writers, including Aharon Appelfeld, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Milan Kundera. ■

Portnoy's Complaint (1969)

✦ #52, Modern Library's 100 Best Novels

Philip Roth's best-selling second novel corners the market on Jewish guilt. The novel, which aptly captures middle-class New Yorkers' neuroses, made Roth a celebrity, an uneasy position he later fictionalized in *Zuckerman Unbound* and *Operation Shylock*. *Portnoy's Complaint*, along with Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, defined Jewish-American literature in the 1960's.

THE STORY: "The very first distinction I learned," Alexander Portnoy says, "was not night and day or hot and cold, but *goyishe* and Jewish." The 33-year-old Portnoy lies on a therapist's couch, where he rants and raves about his angst-ridden Jewish childhood and search for sexual identity.

"The result is not only one of those bullseye hits in the ever-darkening field of humor, a novel that is playfully and painfully moving, but also a work that is certainly

catholic in appeal, potentially monumental in effect. . . . it is. . . the very novel that every American-Jewish writer has been trying to write in one guise or another since the end of World War II." Josh Greenfeld, *New York Times*, 2/23/69.

"... Roth is vibrantly talented, an original, as marvelous a mimic and fantasist as has been produced by the most verbal group in human history, and therefore not given to the concessiveness that less interesting Jews fall into. . . . [he] is pitiless in reducing Jewish history to the Jewish voice." Alfred Kazin, *New York Review of Books*, 1/27/69.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The bestseller that introduced his stereotypical neurotic Jewish character and, perhaps unfairly, gave Roth his pornographer, self-hating Jew label.

The Counterlife (1987)

✦ National Book Critics Circle Award

Nathan Zuckerman first appeared as the hero of two short stories written by Roth's Peter Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*. "Are you planning to write Zuckerman variations until you have constructed a kind of full-length fictional fugue?" Tarnopol's editor asked him. "All I can do with my story is tell it. And tell it. And tell it," Tarnopol replied. Roth also, for the first time, explores the relationship between American and Israeli Jews.

THE STORY: Nathan Zuckerman refuses to speak at his brother's funeral. Henry, in turn, has the opportunity to refuse to speak at Nathan's funeral as the book becomes posthumous. Halfway through, Roth switches perspective, and the book reads from past to present. Nathan follows Henry to Israel, where Nathan finally sees himself as "a Jew clearly without a home."

"When we change our life—one of the central themes of Philip Roth's magnificent new novel, a remarkable change

of direction itself—we recreate 'a counterlife that is one's own anti-myth,' as Roth's protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, surmises." William H.

Gass, *New York Times*, 1/4/87.

"[I]f structural miscalculations and floundering impulses make *The Counterlife* a much less absorbing novel than it might have been, its feverish imaginings are proof that the main quest of Roth's career thus far—the exploration of the self through a fictional alter ego—continues to yield powerful, disturbing material." Josh Rubins, *New York Review of Books*, 3/26/87.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Challenging as an experiment in storytelling: "This is not the ordinary Aristotelian narrative that readers are accustomed to reading or that I am accustomed to writing," Roth said. "It is a book where you never get to the bottom of things" (*The New York Times*, 1/4/87).

Patrimony: A True Story (1991)

✦ National Book Critics Circle Award

A "Roth Book" that blends fiction and autobiography, *Patrimony* is, ironically "a true story," a memoir and celebration of his father's life.

THE STORY: Herman Roth, the author's 86-year-old father, refuses to let doctors remove a non-malignant tumor pressing against his brain stem. Instead, he decides to live the rest of his abbreviated life with the love and support of his family, including Philip. (Unlike Roth's narrator Zuckerman, Herman Roth admired and defended his son's writing.)

"Mr. Roth brings to the tale his gift for attention, his worldly, vernacular heart and the tremendous inventive force that here he keeps largely in check. . . . [T]he reader's view of Philip Roth is enriched by the mirror of this new book's central figure." Robert Pinsky, *New York Times*, 1/6/91.

"[O]nly a man of Roth's challenging disposition would have attempted such a discordant bundle of effects, and only a man with Roth's trenchant style could have carried it off. . . . [T]here's a lot of warm and gritty reality in the book, even streaks of humor, like fitful lightning in a black night." Robert M. Adams, *New York Review of Books*, 3/5/92.

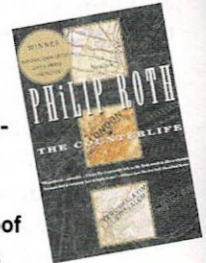
THE BOTTOM LINE: A poignant chronicle that reveals Roth's shrewd ability to distill, from his father's decline, the meaning of sickness, love, life, and death.

Operation Shylock: A Confession (1993)

✦ PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction

✦ Time Magazine's Best American Novel of 1993

Roth swears that *Operation Shylock* occurred during his addiction to the sleeping pill Halcion. "As you know," he said, "at the end of the book a Mossad operative made me realize it was in my in-



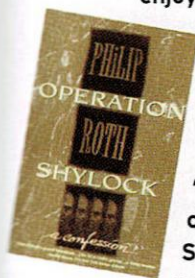
terest to say this book was fiction" (*The New York Times*, 3/9/93). But readers beware: The note's closing sentence says, "This confession is false."

THE STORY: Perhaps the most memorable Jewish character in all of Western literature exists in Shakespeare's Shylock, "the embodiment of the Jew in the way that Uncle Sam embodies. . . the spirit of the United States," one character notes, only more "terrifying." *Operation Shylock* explores the thorny question of identity. Philip Roth, a Jewish-American novelist, travels to Israel to confront an imposter also named Philip Roth who is attending the trial of John Demjanjuk (Ivan the Terrible of the Nazi death camps) in Israel. The imposter, advancing a "new Diasporism," tries to incite Zionist Jews to leave Israel for Europe in light of the inevitable second Arab-provoked Holocaust. When the two Roths meet, the first realizes the terrible paradox of the Jewish Diaspora.

"Roth's double permits him to explore territory that, even for a Jewish writer of notable courage and independence, must still seem impermissible. . . . The tolerant and cultured Jews whom he celebrates, in the West, must surely enjoy his wit, his daring in both artistry and ideas,

at the same time as they may be shaken by his merciless probing of the wounds inflicted by Jews on Arabs—and on Jews." D. M.

Thomas, *New York Times*, 3/7/93.



"Philip Roth is, I think, Roth's most vivid character. . . . Operation Shylock's answer to Shakespeare's Shylock is Aristophanes, whose mode of comedy—exuberant, outrageous, hallucinatory—has found in Roth a living master." Harold Bloom,

New York Review of Books, 4/22/93.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Arguably Roth's finest work. Roth's ex-wife Claire Bloom even admitted that *Operation Shylock* nearly put Roth's face on the cover of *Time*—if a lukewarm review from John Updike hadn't killed that idea.

American Pastoral (1997)

✦ Pulitzer Prize

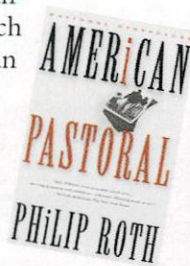
✦ National Medal of Arts

For the first time, Nathan Zuckerman falls in love with traditional American life. But readers beware: John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1674), inspired this dark look into American society during the explosive 1960's.

THE STORY: Zuckerman recounts the story of the perfect life—that of his old high school friend and star athlete, Seymour "the Swede" Levov, a successful Jew who marries his former-Miss New Jersey sweetheart. They unexpectedly give birth to a monster, Merry, who goes underground in Newark only to resurface as a terror-

ist. The novel revolves around the meaning of Merry's unpardonable acts, which tarnish the Swede's only dream: to lead an ordinary American life.

"[T]he mixture of rage and elegy in the book is remarkable, and you have only to pause over the prose to feel how beautifully it is elaborated, to see that Mr. Roth didn't entirely abandon Henry James after all. . . . [the end] arrives, with a flick of the con-juror's hand, at a revelation none of us can have been waiting for." Michael Wood, *New York Times Book Review*, 4/20/97.



"It is somber and raging. . . . American Pastoral scintillates with more Rothian wit, paradox, eloquent tantrums and absurd pratfalls placed at the exit of each irresistible argument than can be counted." Richard Eder, *Los Angeles Times*

Book Review, 5/4/97.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Considered to be one of Roth's masterpieces, *American Pastoral* delights in its slow destruction of the all-American hero and his seemingly all-American life. For Roth novices and fans alike. ■

BEING JEWISH IN AMERICA



Roth may have cornered the market on Jewish guilt, but other Jewish writers pioneered a new kind of American literature. "I think it no exaggeration to say," critic Irving Howe said, "that since Faulkner and Hemingway the one major innovation in American prose style has been the yoking of street raciness and high-culture mandarin which we associate with American Jewish writers" (*The Atlantic*, 1/98). This group includes Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth. Bellow-Roth's graduate adviser at the University of Chicago and, according to Roth, one of the "greatest American writers of the last century"—introduced his first Jewish character, Asa Leventhal, in *The Victim* in 1947, only a few years after the Holocaust. Not surprisingly, Leventhal's Jewish identity was a burden (*Guardian Unlimited*, 7/1/01). Bellow's *Herzog*, which sold almost half a million copies in 1964 alone, presented Moses E. Herzog, a confused Jewish intellectual who grapples with his identity in post-war America. Roth also admires Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957), which features an impoverished Jewish grocer, Morris Bober, who "redeems" an Italian drifter. For a wider spectrum of Jewish-American fiction, try works by Arthur Miller, Susan Sontag, Cynthia Ozick, Abraham Cahan, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Anne Roiphe, Wendy Wasserstein, Chaim Potok, and Grace Paley. ■