

# Philip Roth

Philip Roth (1933-2018) was one of the most successful American novelists. He was born into a modest, secular Jewish family in Newark. Despite having been awarded almost every single literary award in the USA and around the world, he was denied a Nobel Prize for literature. Although this might only reflect the culturally constipated, humorless Swedish judges.

His biography, by Blake Bailey, has been withdrawn by the publishers, not for anything Roth did. Even if many of his works offend the woke #MeToo generation because he was male, white, and Jewish to boot. In April 2021 the publisher took the book out of print because Bailey was accused of sexual impropriety. I am glad I got hold of a copy and read it before the cultural Prophets of Baal could burn them all. Even though it is dry and boring, it does plot in great detail his life, his output, and affairs.

Roth was obsessed with sex and secular American Jews. Just like Woody Allen, the other icon of alienated non-Jewish Jews. They have. Made a huge success out of mercilessly lampooning the dysfunctional Jewish society they were brought up in. A world of banal, upwardly mobile, gutless Jewish men and domineering, frustrated, neurotic women, trying to escape the stigma of the immigrant classes they came from. And the spoilt Jewish arrogant princes and princesses they produced. But Roth also made fun of the academic and literary Jews more at home in a secular world, who still felt alienated from established, WASP American society. All his Jews wanting to lose what little Jewishness they might have absorbed from diluted Jewish homes where the priority was to transcend an ethnic identity for a universal one through assimilation.

Roth did not like to be described as a Jewish writer. He drew heavily on his childhood experiences such as attending Hebrew School briefly. In an early story *The Conversion of the Jews*, Ozzie Freedman challenges his teacher Rabbi Binder who loses his temper and slaps him. Ozzie curses him, runs up to the roof, and threatens to jump unless everyone bows down, declares their belief in Jesus and Virgin Birth. He jumps, but lands in a fireman's net.

*Goodbye, Columbus* makes fun of a material, dysfunctional Jewish family. His alter-ego has sex with a spoilt Jewish girl and her mother. His most notorious novel was *Portnoy's Complaint* about a highly sexed New Jersey boy who suffered from the cliché of a dominant Jewish mother and was so preoccupied with sex he was unable to enjoy his sexual adventures. The novel is notable for its explicit depictions of masturbation using various props including a piece of liver that Portnoy's mother serves for dinner.

He wrote about other forms of alienation and dysfunction. *The Human Stain*, for example, was about an academic hiding his racial origin, and *The Plot Against America* in which he imagines an America in which the Nazi sympathizer Lindbergh becomes President America, aided and abetted by a rabbi. America turns against the Jews, including those who supported him. Roth experienced the genteel Jew-hatred of the British and French upper classes. He would not

have been surprised by the hatred now rampant and rising across the so-called civilized world as it is fed by increasing numbers of people nourished on the primitive populist hatred that elements of fanatical religion and politics orchestrate, like spreading manure. He was ambivalent towards Israel which he visited more times than most American Jews of his ilk did but resisted its charms (though not its sex).

It was that toxic mixture of sexual mania and alienation (as well as a literary gift of course) that made him such a popular novelist and entertainer. Roth was the American version of Arthur Schnitzler, that great Viennese secular Jewish doctor who interwove psychology with the same themes of sex and alienation. The movie "Eyes Wide Open" was based on one of his novels. I just pray that New York does not become like the Vienna of the nineteenth century.

Roth was particularly popular amongst more assimilated Jews who delighted in his mocking of Jewish life. They loved him because he justified their abandonment of Judaism. Many religious Jews were embarrassed by his making fun of their religion. Some rabbis, Orthodox, Emanuel Rackman, and Reform David Seligson for example, reacted furiously because they felt that Roth was insulting and demeaning the whole of the Jewish community. I confess that I thought them both wrong and hyper-sensitive. Art after all is art even if it distorts and satirizes. I enjoyed his writing, his humor, and his social commentary, precisely because they bore absolutely no connection to my own Jewish experience with its majesty and spirituality. As for his depiction of materialism, that applies equally to many people in every group of human beings on earth, no matter what their origins, who care about social and material success.

Roth typifies the majority of Americans of Jewish origin who care little about their Jewish identities. This is why so many non-practicing Jews in America no longer support Israel or have any sense of belonging. It is not just that they are alienated from their religious heritage. They never experienced what the European and Sephardi Jews of the previous generations did, the hatred, the violence, and the humiliation. The insecurity of not having a safe haven when things turn bad as they always have in cycles for thousands of years. American Jews have dabbled with the Holocaust, Zionism, and secularism. Anything other than religious commitment as a way to define their identity. It has not worked.

It is the genius of Judaism that although we inspire so much creativity, artistically, intellectually, and scientifically, ironically, it has almost always turned against us. From Marx to Chomsky to Sanders. From the dreams of equality that Napoleon offered that turned into the rejection of Dreyfus. From Freud and Schnitzler to Hitler. Roth reminds us of our strengths, of what we have contributed to in almost every area of western thought, the arts, and literature. But also, of our weaknesses. Our pathetic desire to be accepted. Our worst enemies have often come from within and yet we have survived.