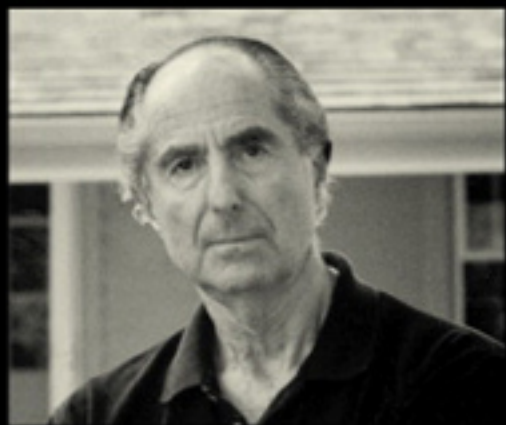


THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



PHILIP ROTH

Edited by Timothy Parrish

The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth

From the moment that his debut book, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), won him the National Book Award and earned him attacks from the Jewish community, Philip Roth has been among the most influential and consistently controversial writers of our age. Now the author of more than twenty novels, numerous stories, two memoirs, and two books of literary criticism, Roth has used his writing to continually reinvent himself – and in doing so remake the American literary landscape. This *Companion* provides the most comprehensive introduction to the works and thought of this major American author in a collection of newly commissioned essays from distinguished scholars. Beginning with the urgency of Roth's early fiction and extending to the vitality of his most recent novels, these essays trace Roth's artistic engagement with questions about ethnic identity, postmodernism, Israel, the Holocaust, sexuality, and the human psyche itself. They recognize that Roth's work resonates through American culture because he demands that his readers pursue the kinds of self-invention, the endless remakings, that define both Roth's characters and his own identity as an author. New and returning Roth readers, students and scholars, will find this *Companion* authoritative and accessible.

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
PHILIP ROTH

EDITED BY
TIMOTHY PARRISH
Texas Christian University



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CHRONOLOGY

- 1933 Philip Roth is born on March 19 in Newark to Hermann Roth (b. 1901), an agent with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, and Bess Finkel Roth (b. 1904). The Roths live in the Weequahic, a lower-middle-class neighborhood.
- 1942 Roth family moves to 385 Leslie Street.
- 1946 Graduates elementary school in January.
- 1950 Graduates high school.
- 1951 Enrolls at Bucknell University.
- 1952 Finds Bucknell literary journal, *Et Cetera*.
- 1954 Elected to Phi Beta Kappa and graduates magna cum laude in English. Accepts scholarship from The University of Chicago to study English.
- 1955 Receives MA. Enlists in US Army. "The Contest for Aaron Gold" reprinted in Martha Foley's *Best American Short Stories 1956*.
- 1956 Hospitalized for two months due to spinal injury. Receives honorable discharge. Returns to University of Chicago to enroll in Ph.D. program but quits after one semester. Continues as an instructor teaching freshman composition.
- 1957 Meets Saul Bellow. Writes novella, "Goodbye, Columbus."
- 1958 Publishes "The Conversion of the Jews" and "Epstein" in *The Paris Review*. Houghton Mifflin agrees to publish novella and five stories. Resigns teaching position.
- 1959 Marries Margaret Martinson Williams. Publishes "Defender of the Faith" in *The New Yorker*. Story provokes charges of anti-Semitism from Jewish organizations. Wins Guggenheim award from American Academy of Arts and Letters. Spends seven months in Italy writing *Letting Go*.
- 1960 *Goodbye, Columbus* wins National Book Award. Teaches writing at the University of Iowa. Meets Bernard Malamud.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1962 Accepts position as writer-in-residence at Princeton University. Separates from wife. Publishes *Letting Go*. Participates with Ralph Ellison in Yeshiva University symposium that would influence self-perception as a Jewish-American writer.
- 1963 Visits Israel.
- 1965 Teaches comparative literature at University of Pennsylvania. Does this intermittently for ten years.
- 1966 Protests Vietnam War.
- 1967 *When She Was Good*.
- 1968 Margaret Roth dies in auto accident.
- 1969 *Portnoy's Complaint*. Novel causes a sensation and becomes bestseller.
- 1970 Elected to National Institute of Arts and Letters. Begins *My Life as a Man*.
- 1971 *Our Gang*. Writes *The Breast* and *The Great American Novel*.
- 1972 *The Breast*. Buys an eighteenth-century farmhouse in northwest Connecticut. Irving Howe publishes attack on *Portnoy's Complaint*.
- 1973 Publishes *The Great American Novel*. Meets Milan Kundera and becomes interested in blacklisted writers from behind the Soviet-dominated Iron Curtain. Becomes General Editor of Penguin's "Writers from the Other Europe" series. Introduces, among others, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Tadeusz Borowski, Bohumil Hrabal, Danilo Kis, Tadeusz Konwicki, Ivan Klíma, Kundera, Witold Gombrowicz, and Bruno Schulz to American readers.
- 1974 *My Life as a Man*. Meets Vaclav Havel. Becomes friends with Vera Saudkova, a niece of Franz Kafka.
- 1975 Publishes *Reading Myself and Others*.
- 1976 Moves to London with Claire Bloom. They will alternate between living in London and Connecticut. Visits Israel for the first time since 1963 and frequently visits thereafter.
- 1977 *The Professor of Desire*.
- 1979 Publishes first Nathan Zuckerman novel, *The Ghost Writer*.
- 1980 *A Philip Roth Reader*.
- 1981 *Zuckerman Unbound*. Mother dies unexpectedly of a heart attack in Elizabethtown, NJ.
- 1984 *The Anatomy Lesson*.
- 1985 Publishes *The Prague Orgy* in one volume with *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, and *The Anatomy Lesson* as *Zuckerman Bound*.
- 1987 *The Counterlife*. Wins National Book Critics' Circle Award for Fiction.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1988 *The Facts*. In Jerusalem attends trial of Ivan Demjanjuk, accused of being Treblinka guard “Ivan the Terrible.” Begins teaching at Hunter College for the next three years.
- 1989 Father dies of brain tumor. Roth’s care for father during the year-long illness will become the basis for *Patrimony*.
- 1990 *Deception*. Marries Claire Bloom in New York.
- 1991 *Patrimony*. Wins National Book Critics’ Circle Award for biography.
- 1993 *Operation Shylock*. Wins PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. Separates from Claire Bloom.
- 1995 *Sabbath’s Theater*. Wins National Book Award for fiction.
- 1997 *American Pastoral*. Wins Pulitzer Prize for fiction.
- 1998 *I Married a Communist*. Wins Ambassador Book Award of the English-Speaking Union. Receives National Medal of Arts at the White House.
- 2000 *The Human Stain* completes the trilogy begun with *American Pastoral*. Wins second PEN/Faulkner award. In the UK wins the W. H. Smith Award for best book of the year. In France wins the Prix Medici for the best foreign book of the year.
- 2001 *The Dying Animal* and *Shop Talk*. Receives the Gold Medal in fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 2002 Awarded the National Book Foundation’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.
- 2004 *The Plot Against America*. Wins W. H. Smith Award.
- 2005 Third living American author to be included in the Library of America.
- 2006 *Everyman*.

TIMOTHY PARRISH

Introduction: Roth at mid-career

The author of more than twenty novels, numerous stories, two memoirs, and two works of literary criticism, Philip Roth has been perhaps the most critically significant and consistently controversial American writer of the past fifty years. Twice Roth has been awarded the National Book Award (1960, 1995), the National Book Critics' Circle Award (1987, 1991), and the PEN/Faulkner Award (1993, 2000). He is a recipient of the National Medal of Arts (1970), the Pulitzer Prize (1997), and France's Medici Foreign Book Prize (2000), among other recognitions. In 2001, *Time* Magazine named Roth "America's Best Novelist." Perhaps more telling, the distinguished literary critic Harold Bloom has included more of Roth's novels (six) in his *Western Canon* than of any other living American author; beginning in 2005, Roth became the third living American author to have his works collected by the Library of America. When Roth was honored with the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2002, his place as a major American author was one that no serious critic would be willing to dispute.

That Roth could become so widely revered by the end of his long and fruitful career seems unlikely when one recalls the controversy with which his career began. His early fiction excited the anger of many Jewish readers who accused him of exploiting Jewish-American culture in order to gain acceptance as an "American" author. Roth's notoriety reached its apex in 1969 with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). The book was a *New York Times* bestseller for 1969 and it helped to usher in a new era in American writing devoted to issues of ethnicity and cultural authenticity. So pervasive was the cultural influence of *Portnoy* that the prominent critic Irving Howe, who had helped to establish Roth as an important author ten years earlier, famously dismissed the novel as a betrayal of Roth's early promise. Howe reinforced the point of view of Roth's early critics by complaining that Roth had compromised the "authenticity" of Jewish American experience. Howe's dismissal of Roth, while unsuccessful in its aim to

diminish Roth's career, implicitly recognized how Roth's work portrayed American-Jewish experience being transformed into something no longer connected to its nineteenth-century European origins.

The tension between holding to a historically grounded identity yet suspecting that identity is something that can only be known through its reinvention has animated Roth's best work. Most Roth critics (including Roth himself) have emphasized that his career has largely been constructed out of his creative and cultural conflict with his Jewish audience. Yet, his wide audience does not consist only of Jewish readers. His characters have risked their selves in diverse locations such as Newark, New Jersey, Chicago, New York, London, Prague, Jerusalem, and Palestine. His narrative strategies and literary models have been similarly varied: Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka are clear influences on his work and his novels have employed the many different literary strategies implied by the work of these great predecessors. It is important to recognize, though, that Roth understands himself as more than just the representative writer of a particular ethnic group. Along with faithfully recounting the range of intellectual positions implicit within American identity politics, Roth explores their practical consequences by rendering them in fictional form. For Roth, the self takes its form through experimentation and should be perceived as a type of fiction. Asserting one's identity is, as Roth understands it, always a transgressive act. This means that for Roth no form of identity – ethnic or otherwise – can ever be fixed. To paraphrase what he once told Mary McCarthy, Roth is far more a novelist than he is a Jew.¹ By 2001 when Roth published *The Human Stain*, the story of a black man who passes for a white Jew, it was clear that much of the appeal of Roth's work has been its ability to portray not just American-Jewish experience in all of its historical variety but to challenge in ways that are distinctively postmodern the meaning of identity altogether.

This *Companion* attempts to do justice to Roth's multifacetedness, the constant reinvention, that is at the heart of his extraordinary career, and attempts to do so in essays that will appeal both to the new reader of Roth and to those who keep coming back to Roth to be renewed by that seemingly endless capacity for reinvention. Roth's remarkable creativity since 1986 has in many ways outstripped the attempts of critics to keep up with him. Many fine anthologies of Roth criticism and appreciation have appeared in the last several years, yet Roth himself has perhaps been his own best critic. The remarkable recent American Trilogy (*American Pastoral* [1997], *I Married a Communist* [1998], and *The Human Stain*) provides an instance of Roth's own critical rereading of his previous literary achievements: in these volumes,

he returns to Nathan Zuckerman, who was so central to his work of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, but does so with a new understanding of his and our pasts.

Rather than attempting to exert a critical control over Roth (to collect, finish off, and assert meaning over), this *Companion* is instead designed to encourage students to recognize and participate in the central demand that Roth makes of his readers and critics: to pursue the kinds of self-invention that define both Roth's characters and his own changing authorial identity. In understanding the trajectory of Roth's later work as a rethinking of Roth's familiar early fiction, readers of this *Companion* will see the path not just of Roth's career but also of the key themes and problems of contemporary American literature as a whole. At the heart of both Roth's fictions and the realities of American culture are such subjects as intertwining personal and communal identities, sexual politics and practice, the postmodern world and the place of America in that world, self-invention in the context of human annihilation and acts of terror, and racial and cultural pluralism. It is because he speaks to these central issues that Roth is widely taught as a central figure in American literature classes, Jewish and ethnic studies classes, and fiction-writing courses.

This *Companion* approaches Roth's work as a whole made of diverse and recurring parts, with any given part providing a perspective from which the whole can be challenged, or reconceived. Consequently, the essays in this volume reflect the basic tendency of Roth's work to reinterpret what has gone before in light of what has been discovered, or essayed, later. What connects these essays is that each one performs an intense interaction between author and reader that is, if anything is, the essence of Roth's writing. Whether it is Alvin Pepler confronting Nathan Zuckerman in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) or Pipik usurping Philip Roth's identity in *Operation Shylock* (1993), the reader in Roth's work is framed as the author's intended, his antagonist, and his collaborator.

To read Roth is to be challenged to risk that which Roth and his characters always risk: the premises that seem to define one's very self. Each of the distinguished Roth critics in this volume is true to this premise. Although they reveal multiple and often contradictory Philip Roths, their versions of Roth make good companions for readers pursuing their own adventures with one of the best writers American literature has yet produced.

As a way of introducing Roth to students who may be encountering his work for the first time and reintroducing Roth to his longtime readers, it may be appropriate to begin by looking at a critical moment in Roth's career from 1986 when his eminent future standing was not yet so evident. By this

time Roth's early promise had been more than fulfilled and his *Zuckerman Bound* (1985) had answered his fiercest critics. Had he never written another word no one would have questioned that he was a significant post-World War American writer. He was fifty-three years old. Yet, arguably, Roth's career since 1986 has been more extraordinary than his career prior to that point. It is difficult to think of another American writer, with the exception of Henry James, who has been as successfully productive as Roth has been in the mature phase of his life. *The Counterlife* (1986), *The Facts* (1988), *Patrimony* (1991), *Operation Shylock* (1993), *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* (1998) *The Human Stain*, *The Dying Animal* (2001), *Shop Talk* (2001), and *The Plot Against America* (2004) represent an extraordinary run of novels that any writer would envy.

Yet, in 1986 such a future could have been barely imaginable even to Philip Roth. Indeed, as Roth acknowledged in *The Facts* and *Operation Shylock*, he suffered in the late 1980s and early 1990s a mental breakdown that took years to diagnose and remedy. In retrospect, 1986 can be seen as a kind of turning point for Roth because he was on the cusp of what would become in effect his mature phase. Roth's sense of himself as a writer whose career was noteworthy but not yet fulfilled is revealed in his powerful response to Bernard Malamud's death that year. Malamud was for Roth a friend, a rival, and, as an older Jewish writer whose critical fame coincided with Roth's own fame, a kind of uneasy father figure against whom Roth measured his own achievement. Roth's tribute to Malamud, published as "Pictures of Malamud," hints at the mental turbulence Roth was suffering then. In the essay, Roth dispassionately portrays Malamud as a dying artist who is too weak to summon the will required to complete his last work. Beneath Roth's account of Malamud's death, though, one perceives Roth's own fear.

Intended to commemorate the passing of Malamud, Roth's essay is also a powerful account of the mortality of his own literary achievements and ambitions. In Roth's response to Malamud's death, which is not entirely generous but always impassioned, we see an encounter that foreshadows the second and almost entirely unexpected half of Roth's career. It anticipates *Patrimony*, Roth's memoir about his father, in that its subject is the writer's necessary battle to make over the forces that have made the writer's identity prior to writing. Roth's portrait of the dying Malamud is tender and merciless. The essay is merciless because it makes Malamud the sacrificial victim of Philip Roth's insatiable will to aesthetic truth; the essay is tender because Roth knows that Malamud's death is a portent of his own. Roth speaks to the dying writer and himself to say that a writer's work at its best is sacred; thus, facing the inevitability of one's death the only moral choice is *to*

write – to write as well and as truly as one can. From Malamud's death will come Roth's second life – one that he will make out of books.

In "Pictures of Malamud" Roth tacitly acknowledges that his own conception of himself as a writer is crucially linked to his perception of Malamud's example. Roth first associated himself with Malamud in his 1960 essay, "Writing American Fiction." There Roth had noted that Malamud had "not shown specific interest in the anxieties and dilemmas and corruptions of the modern American Jews" but instead wrote about timeless Jews who happened to live on the Lower East Side.² In contrast to Malamud's Jews with their archetypal moral dilemmas that are only incidental to their stories' settings, Roth's Jews experience their selves as transitive entities always being transformed by the flux of American experience. Nearly twenty years after Roth's first published critical encounter with Malamud, he evoked him again through Nathan Zuckerman's portrayal of E. I. Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*. In that novel, Zuckerman, Roth's fictional alter ego, goes as a pilgrim to sit at the feet of the master, Lonoff. In "Pictures of Malamud" Roth recalls how he first met Malamud in the early sixties but he also seems to be rewriting Zuckerman's pilgrimage to Lonoff as well.

In "Pictures" Roth recalls how he read the stories that Malamud was publishing in the early fifties "the day they appeared." In *The Ghost Writer* Zuckerman thinks of Lonoff as "the chief rabbi, the archdeacon, the perpetual high priest of perpetual sorrows."³ Young Nathan sees himself as Lonoff's adopted "twenty-three year old son" and seeks affirmation. Zuckerman's visit with Lonoff will help Zuckerman find his voice as a writer – one very different from Lonoff's. The crucial transformation occurs when Zuckerman, giddy from having been toasted at dinner by Lonoff, spends the night in Lonoff's study. Taking a break from contemplating the moral austerity implied by Lonoff's example as an artist, Zuckerman stands on a volume of Henry James stories that is placed on Lonoff's desk and then cups his ear toward the ceiling so he can eavesdrop on an intimate conversation between Lonoff and his student, Amy. Zuckerman transforms what he hears above into a fantasy about Anne Frank having survived the Holocaust and come to Lonoff as Amy Bellette, his love-struck writing student. Zuckerman stops short of portraying Lonoff as Frank's illicit lover but he does transform Lonoff's moral austerity into something comic and impossible to sustain. Moreover, Zuckerman's impiety toward Lonoff is the narrative mechanism by which he is able to renew Anne Frank's story as being one more complicated than that of an unlucky martyr murdered by historical necessity. Then, by novel's end, Roth has Lonoff point toward Zuckerman's gift: the ruthless will to transform anything, even the Holocaust, into art and, if necessary,

outrageous comedy. Having been thanked by Zuckerman for his hospitality, Lonoff says, “You’re not so nice and polite in your fiction” (*The Ghost Writer*, 180).

Neither is Roth so nice in “Pictures of Malamud,” but his respect for Malamud is as deep as Zuckerman’s for Lonoff. Roth acknowledges that Malamud wrote “four or five of the best American short stories I’d ever read (or I ever will)” and characterizes *The Assistant* as “his masterpiece” (“Pictures,” 121). Roth speaks of Malamud’s English as “a heap of broken verbal bones that looked, until he came along and made them dance to his sad tune, to be of use no longer to anyone other than a Borscht Belt comic or a professional nostalgist” (121). Identifying Malamud’s artistic penchant for portraying lonely, suffering Jews, Roth suggests that Malamud did for his characters what Samuel Beckett did for his misery-ridden Molloy and Malone.

Despite the general note of appreciation that hovers over the essay, though, Roth writes less to praise “Bern,” as he calls him, than to put him and the counterexample he represented to rest. “I wonder,” Roth speculates, “if early in adult life Bern didn’t have an insight about himself still more terrifying: that he was a man of stern morality who could act only like he was” (124). Roth, the flamboyant performer whose ideal artist impersonates someone impersonating, has always been attracted to characters that challenge the aura of a legitimately stern moralist. He suggests that Malamud suffered from “a need so harsh that it makes one ache to imagine it. It was the need to consider long and seriously every last demand of a conscience torturously exacerbated by the pathos of a need unabated” (124). Although Roth’s characterization seems meant to distinguish Malamud’s character from his own, it makes one wonder if Roth is not also describing the author of *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *The Plot Against America* too. Roth’s fiction usually questions the purity of any one character’s motives but it may be such questioning only belies Roth’s hope that a purely moral stance is actually possible. Perhaps Malamud continued to attract Roth’s critical gaze over twenty-five years because he, more than Saul Bellow or Ralph Ellison, represented in his work the ethical stance Roth most wanted to emulate but instead pretended to destroy through the acts of his *shiksa*-crazed, sex-crazed, family-betraying, Jewish-son-protagonists.

Roth concludes his essay with an account of his last meeting with Malamud in July 1985. Malamud is feeble, sick from bypass surgery, a stroke, and heavy medication. He is easy prey for a grown-up Nathan Zuckerman. Roth contrasts the vibrant forty-six-year-old Malamud he’d met twenty-four years before with this “frail and very sick old man, his tenacity about used up” (127). Roth sums up his vision of Malamud with Malamud’s own words. In