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# The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

Vol. 5 No.2

Fall 2007

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## Message from the Society's President Derek Parker Royal

**T**here is much awaiting us in 2008. The Philip Roth Society will be sponsoring several conference panels in the first half of the year. In February, we will be holding a panel at the thirty-sixth annual Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture. Hosted by the University of Louisville, the conference will run February 21-23, and our contribution, "Philip Roth as Reader, Reading Philip Roth," will be held on Thursday from 3:15-4:45. Laura Tanenbaum, a long time Roth Society member, will chair the panel of three papers covering the topics of Roth and baseball in the 1960s, transitional Americanness in *The Human Stain*, and Roth as a critical reader of Saul Bellow.

And even though it is not a Roth Society-sponsored activity, Daniel Medin will be moderating the panel "Philip Roth: A Global Perspective" at the American Comparative Literature Association Conference in Long Beach, CA, on April 24-27. See our "Announcements" section of the newsletter for complete information.

In May, the Society will offer two sessions at the nineteenth annual American Literature Association

Conference, this year held at the Hyatt Regency in the Embarcadero Center, San Francisco. As we have done over the past three years, the Roth Society will sponsor both a roundtable discussion and a more traditional panel of papers.

The latter has been organized by James D. Bloom, the Class of 1932 Research Professor at Muhlenberg College and author of *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America* (Praeger 2003). James has pulled together three intriguing papers under the title, "Philip Roth and the Visual Arts," and will include discussions of stamp collecting in *The Plot Against America*, engagements with Jasper John's *Flag 1954-55*, and the uses of painting in *The Dying Animal*.

The roundtable discussion will focus on Roth's most recent novel, *Exit Ghost*, and will include noted scholars Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., Elaine B. Safer, Allan Cooper, and Michael Rothberg, as well as novelist Ruth Knafo Setton. The Roth Society will also hold its annual business meeting at the ALA Confer-

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### About the Philip Roth Society

Founded in July 2002, the Philip Roth Society is an organization devoted to the study and appreciation of Roth's writings. The society's goal is to encourage academic conversation about Roth's work through discussions, panel presentations at scholarly conferences, and journal publications. It accomplishes this by disseminating information concerning upcoming events, calls for papers, and recent publications on Roth through this newsletter, through a web page at <http://orgs.tamu-commerce.edu/rothsoc/society.htm>, by maintaining a listserv, and through the publication of *Philip Roth Studies*, a refereed journal devoted to Roth scholarship. The Philip Roth Society is a non-profit community of readers and scholars, and it has no affiliation with either Philip Roth or his publishers. The society is an affiliated organization of the American Literary Association, and we welcome both academic and non-academic readers alike.

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*The Philip Roth Society Newsletter* invites submissions of 500-800 words. Contributions may be informal in tone, and may address such matters as the teaching of Roth's work or personal reactions to it. We welcome notes that add texture or background information to larger elements of Roth's writing. Disks in Word or email submissions appreciated. For submissions or queries, contact Joe Kraus, Editor, *The Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, Department of English, The University of Scranton, Scranton, PA 18510  
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## Announcements

### **Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference Louisville, KY (February 21 - 23, 2008)**

#### Philip Roth as Reader, Reading Philip Roth

Chair: Laura Tanenebaum, City University of New York, LaGuardia

“Reconsidering the National Pastime: Philip Roth, Baseball, and the Problem of the Sixties” — Matthew Shipe, Washington University in St. Louis

“Transition and Being an American in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*” — David M. Borman, University of Louisville

“‘Bellow Banished’: Reconsidering Roth as Reader” — Laura Tanenebaum, City University of New York, LaGuardia

### **American Literature Association Conference San Francisco, CA (May 22-25, 2008)**

#### Philip Roth and the Visual Arts

Chair: James D. Bloom, Muhlenberg College

“Stamp Collecting and History in *The Plot Against America*” — Joshua Kotzin, Marist College

“‘I pledge a legion to the flag’: *Flag 1954-55* and Roth's Allegiance to Jasper Johns” — Aimee L. Pozorski, Central Connecticut State University

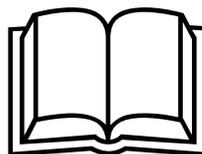
“Visual Expressions of Loss: *The Dying Animal* and a Contemporary Crisis in Representation” — Stephanie Cherolis University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

#### Roundtable Discussion on Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*

Moderator: Derek Parker Royal, Texas A&M University-Commerce

#### Participants:

Alan Cooper, York College of the City University of New York  
Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., Bard College at Simon's Rock  
Michael Rothberg, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign  
Elaine B. Safer, University of Delaware  
Ruth Knafo Setton, Lehigh University



## Is Larry David the Philip Roth of situation comedy?

By Richard Sheehan

“Larry David is the Philip Roth of situation comedy” was the leading line in an article published in the *LA Weekly News* by Brendan Bernhard back on November 12, 2002. Sometime last year whilst watching Larry David’s show *Curb your Enthusiasm* and in total ignorance of Mr Bernhard’s article, I came to a similar conclusion. My reasoning was based on the parallels that I could see between the two writers, the characters they created and the situations that unfolded around said characters. The following is a light-hearted look at the similarities in the works of Philip Roth and Larry David.

There are obvious equivalences between the two personalities so I’ll list them now to get them out of the way. They are both Jewish males, both baseball fans and were both born just a few miles apart; Roth in Newark, David in Brooklyn. Both have also often been accused of encouraging unwelcome Jewish stereotypes and even of being self-hating Jews. Right, that’s out of the way. Onward.

Probably the standout similarity in the careers of Philip Roth and Larry David are that they are both well known for having created memorable characters that have been mistaken for themselves and in doing so have blurred the boundaries between their reality and their fiction. Larry David, after the completion of *Seinfeld* in the late 1990s, created a new character — himself; or rather he created a character called Larry David, a comedian who’d had a successful career which had run a similar path to his own. Philip Roth has, in truth, created several characters whom casual readers might confuse with the writer. Nathan Zuckerman, of course, and numerous Philip Roths, none of whom were quite the real thing. When asked about these similarities, they have both been evasive but adamant that the characters were not autobiographical.

The role of Jewish male identity in modern North America is also a topic constantly addressed and queried within both bodies of work. In fact, more than that, they have been regularly criticised by orthodox Jews about their portrayals of the Jewish faith. Whether it’s Portnoy or Mickey Sabbath scandalizing all around them, or Larry David causing a fight between Jews and Christians at a baptism, or humming Wagner whilst in a cinema queue amongst other Jews, the two seem hell-bent on challenging Jewish orthodoxy.

Political correctness and racism have also been ad-

ressed by both writers. Roth looked at the issues in *The Human Stain* and Larry David confronted them in several episodes, most notably season one’s “Affirmative Action” where Larry makes an affirmative action joke with regard to a black dermatologist whom he later has to ask a favor of, and “The Bow-tie” in season five, where Larry and his family are accused of having a racist dog. In addition, David’s constant run-ins with Wanda Sykes regarding his attitude towards black people are a regular staple of the show.

Other similarities are harder to define and much more subjective. These include scenes or even moments in episodes of *Curb your Enthusiasm* that I find distinctly Roth-like. I find myself smirking with familiarity when Larry David argues with one of the other regular characters, sometimes his wife though more regularly his good friend and fellow comedian Richard Lewis (is this the real Richard Lewis or merely a creation of his and David’s imaginings?). These tête-à-têtes remind me of Zuckerman’s raging with Milton Appel, among others, in *The Anatomy Lesson* or Mickey Sabbath with Norman towards the end of *Sabbath’s Theater*.

There’s an episode in Series 2 called “The Doll” where Larry upsets the young daughter of a TV executive by cutting her doll’s hair. He manages to rescue the situation but final vilification is inflicted at the end of the episode when a scene involving Larry, a women’s toilet, an embarrassing rash, a bottle of water hidden in his underpants and the aforementioned young girl all conspire in a hilarious misunderstanding that reminded me of Mickey Sabbath in style if not in execution.

In the season two episode, “The Car Salesman” Larry decides on a career change to that of the title and brings to mind Zuckerman’s decision to go to medical school in *The Anatomy Lesson*. As with Zuckerman, acquaintances are flabbergasted at what they see as an irrational and illogical decision. Both plans are as short-lived as they were badly thought out.

If you’ve yet to try *Curb your Enthusiasm*, give it a shot, see what you think. The similarities with Roth are there, and have been picked up by other observers in the media and I think these parallels are due to the fact that what we have here are two personalities looking at the world with similar eyes and reaching similar conclusions, all the while trying to make the rest of us as aware of the absurdities of life as they are.

## Teaching Philip Roth and Toni Morrison

By Julie Husband

*The New York Times* surveyed a couple hundred writers, critics, and editors, asking them what they considered the best book of American fiction written in the last twenty-five years. Toni Morrison and Philip Roth emerged as the most influential novelists; *Beloved* topped the list and Roth, with six novels receiving multiple votes, became the most frequently cited author. Armed with this survey, I asked my department head at the University of Northern Iowa if I could teach a graduate seminar in the work of Toni Morrison and Philip Roth.

You see, Philip Roth has been a tough sell here in Iowa. Colleagues asked, "Will college students be interested in novels featuring middle-aged men?" "Isn't Roth, well, un-P.C.?" "Will Iowans read Jewish American fiction?" Backed by the authority of *The New York Times* and the allure of Toni Morrison, I finally got the class.

And it was a tremendously rewarding one. A couple of graduate students came from creative writing backgrounds, and several had strong backgrounds in post-modernism and American history. When I've taught Roth in undergraduate classes, some students find his post-modern narrative style confusing or slow. Even with a considerable amount of front-loading, many undergraduates do not have the feel for American history that makes Roth fans respond so viscerally to his writing. Neither of these things was a problem in this class.

Roth and Morrison share a set of formal and thematic concerns. Both take up personal and ethnic histories that are traumatic, histories that are experienced as painful, chaotic, and dehumanizing. Morrison once commented upon the shortage of materials available on the subjective experience of slavery; only about one hundred slave narratives exist and, under pressure to testify to the "facts" of slavery, even these are generally shorn of affect. This was a void Morrison sought to fill in her novel, *Beloved*. Morrison's other writings, especially her breakthrough novel, *The Bluest Eye*, similarly seek to understand the effects of trauma on the individual and on African American communities.

Roth's writing, while often humorous, also re-writes the history of a historically marginalized and oppressed group, the Jewish diaspora. Roth's perspective is quite different from Morrison's, since it is, in most cases, the

amazing success and assimilation of Jewish families in the United States that is the source of self-doubt, guilt, and repression in his works. Roth's characters confront (and often commit) taboos in the effort to throw off a stifling sense of decorum, the price his third-generation American Jews pay for middle-class success.

While we approached the texts in the class from many perspectives, we especially focused upon psychoanalytic readings. Traumas—whether the sudden death of a child (*Beloved*) or the sudden revelation that one's child is a killer (*American Pastoral*)—have narrative effects on the characters in Morrison's and Roth's works. Sethe (*Beloved*), Pecola (*The Bluest Eye*), and Dawn Levov (*American Pastoral*) try to repress memories of traumatic events, leading to numbness, psychosis, and family crisis. Nathan Zuckerman (*American Pastoral*), Philip Roth (*Plot Against America*), and "The Bluest Eye's" sisters Claudia and Freida try to narrate their ex-

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perience and thus bring order to chaotic, personally threatening experiences. Characters including Baby Suggs (*Beloved*) and Ozzie ("Conversion of the Jews") devise rituals to encourage community change and healing. In these texts, characters and communities respond to traumatic events in a variety of ways—repressing, compulsively repeating, narrating, even exorcising these traumas.

While Roth and Morrison deal with many of the same issues, their representational strategies are strikingly different. It seems almost sacrilege to say, but Morrison can be melodramatic, particularly in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. Roth, on the other hand, risks losing the reader's sympathy for his characters by deflecting attention from their suffering and emphasizing their efforts to protect themselves through self-deception, projection, and anger. Roth and Morrison work in entirely different metiers. Her characters may be shell-shocked, but they're seldom anxiety-ridden. His scenes often move toward absurdity, drawn with a fine hand that never sacrifices realism ("Whacking off" in *Portnoy's Complaint* and the story of Jerry's hamster coat in *American Pastoral*). Her scenes tend to move toward shocking conclusions (Soapbox Church manipulating Pecola into poisoning the dog, *Beloved* seducing Paul D).

I paired texts from each author, to pursue specific

multicultural or psychoanalytic issues. We read Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus and Other Stories* and *Plot Against America* alongside of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as a way to consider the risks of and taboos against negative ethnic representations. In the early career works, Roth and Morrison showed the effect upon children of ethnic marginalization but also of betrayal within the community. Both novels and one of the stories, "Conversion of the Jews," feature child narrators who are torn between the standards of the beloved adults in their community and their emerging sense of shame at these adults' limitations.

In the second section of the course, I focused more upon the crafting of the novels, looking at post-modern experimentation in Roth's *The Counterlife* and Morrison's *Jazz*. We considered the ways in which Morrison builds upon jazz aesthetics by using polyvocality, spontaneity, and lyrics celebrating female masochism. Some narratives reverberate in the stories of other characters, while others abruptly stop, resisting closure. Turning to Roth's novel, we noticed that the multiple narrators never collectively harmonize as they do in Morrison; they each deconstruct another character's explanation of the meaning of Jewish experience in the diaspora. Their stories and their political agendas were incompatible with one another. In both novels, the characters hoped to find America, especially the northeast, to be the promised land where ethnic minorities could find full self-expression, only to discover collective expression fleet-

ing at best.

The last third of the class considered the late-career masterpieces, *American Pastoral* and *Beloved*, historical novels that begin with terrible losses, and proceed to consider how and whether stories of loss and shame should be articulated or "passed on." This took us back to the original Freudian terms of our class. While many argue that the best therapy for trauma and hysteria is the talking cure, both texts consider the possibility that such story telling ultimately debases the storyteller and demoralizes the listener. We considered, for example, what went wrong when Sethe shared her story with Paul D. Why, we asked, did Swede change his mind and refuse to trust Zuckerman with his story? What do these personal stories suggest about the challenges and responsibilities facing ethnic writers?

Pairing Philip Roth and Toni Morrison drew their different representational strategies into relief. Roth's self-referential storytelling, which interrogates the limits of truthfulness, seemed to some self-indulgent, but to others ironically honest and even modest alongside the tremendous authority of a novel like *Beloved*. Morrison's theory of Africanist presence could be productively tested out in "Goodbye, Columbus" and *Plot Against America*, where the fleeting presence of black characters serves to illuminate the class and racial anxieties of the main characters. Together, Roth and Morrison offer so many possibilities for exploring issues of multiculturalism, ethnic identity, and national identity.

## Studio Makes a Habit of Bringing Roth to the Movie Theater

Thanks largely to the independent film studio, Lakeshore Entertainment Group, Roth's later novels are finding their way into movie theaters more frequently than his earlier ones.

Producer of 2003's *The Human Stain*, Lakeshore has finished filming *Elegy*, based on *The Dying Animal*, and it has recently optioned the rights to make *American Pastoral*.

*Elegy* premiered in February 2008 at the Berlin Film Festival, and it should be released in the United States within the next several months. According to Matt Halvorson, International Marketing

Assistant at Lakeshore, the studio has yet to determine a release date.

Directed by Spanish film-maker Isabel Coixet, *Elegy* stars Ben Kingsley as David Kepesh and Penelope Cruz as Consuela Castillo. The screenplay is by Nicholas Meyer, best known for his work on the screenplay for *The Human Stain*, for directing *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*, and for writing the novel and screenplay for *The Seven Percent Solution*.

*The American Pastoral* project is only just getting off the ground although, according to Halvorson,

"We're definitely going to make it, but we haven't gotten to where we can say anything about it."

According to imdb.com, the project already has on board Philip Noyce, director of *The Quiet American* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The same site reports that John Romano is writing the screenplay and lists 2009 for the anticipated release.

According to Halvorson, it's more than coincidence that has brought so many Roth projects to the studio. "We enjoy the work and have a good relationship with the author," he said.

— Joe Kraus

## Bibliographic Update:

Compiled by Derek Parker Royal

Below is a listing of secondary critical resources that have appeared since (or were not listed in) the last issue of the newsletter. For a complete listing of bibliographical resources in English, go to the Roth Society Web site at <http://rothsociety.org>. An asterisk \* indicates that the scholar is a current member of the Philip Roth Society.

### Books

\* Brauner, David. *Philip Roth*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007.

### Chapters from Books

Acocella, Joan. "Counterlives." *Twenty-eight Artists and Two Saints: Essays*. New York: Pantheon-Random, 2007. 459-68.

Alvarez, Al. "Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, Philip Roth." *Risky Business: People, Pastimes, Poker and Books*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007. 355-65.

—. "Philip Roth." *Risky Business: People, Pastimes, Poker and Books*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007. 30-41.

Casteel, Sarah Phillips. "The Myth of the West in Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth." *Second Arrivals: Landscape and Belonging in Contemporary Writing of the Americas*. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2007. 51-78.

Coetzee, J. M. "Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*." *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005*. New York: Viking, 2007. 228-43.

Freedman, Jonathan. "The Human Stain of Race: Roth, Sirk, and Shaw in Black, White, and Jewish." *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. 164-208.

Miller, Nancy K. "Childless Children: Bodies and Betrayal." *In Memory of Elaine Marks: Life Writing, Writing Death*. Ed. Richard E. Goodkin. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2007. 110-

28.

Posnock, Ross. "Planetary Circles: Philip Roth, Emerson, Kundera." *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Ed. Wai Chee Dimok and Lawrence Buell. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. 141-67.

\* Royal, Derek Parker. "Portnoy's Neglected Siblings: A Case for Postmodern Jewish American Literary Studies." *Complicating Constructions: Race, Ethnicity, and Hybridity in American Texts*. Ed. David S. Goldstein and Audrey Thacker. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2007. 250-69.

Sternlicht, Sanford. "Philip Roth: *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)." *Masterpieces of Jewish American Literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007. 110-18.

### Journal Articles

\* Aarons, Victoria. "'There's no remaking reality': Philip Roth's *Everyman* and the Ironies of Body and Spirit." *Xavier Review* 21.1 (2007): 116-27.

\* Mathews, Peter. "The Pornography of Destruction: Performing Annihilation in *The Dying Animal*." *Philip Roth Studies* 3 (2007): 44-55.

Medin, Daniel L. "Liebliche Lüge?: Philip Roth's 'Looking at Kafka.'" *Comparative Literature Studies* 44 (2007): 38-50.

\* Rodgers, Bernard F., Jr., and \* Derek Parker Royal, eds. "Grave Commentary: A Roundtable Discussion on *Everyman*." [Participants include \* Debra Shostak, Mark Shechner, \* David Brauner, Derek Parker Royal, and Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr.] Transcribed by Derek Parker Royal. *Philip Roth Studies* 3 (2007): 3-25.

\* Rudnytsky, Peter. "True Confessions in *Operation*

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*It's Easy:*

## Subscribe to *Philip Roth Studies*

Remember that membership in the Philip Roth Society is separate from subscribing to our journal, *Philip Roth Studies*. Even if you are a member, you will need to make a separate order through Heldref Publications, the publisher of the journal, in order to begin your subscription.

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## President's Message: An Update on the Society

*(Continued from page 1)*

ence, and I strongly encourage everyone who can to attend.

There will be plenty to keep the Society busy during the second part of the year as well. In September, Roth will release his twenty-ninth book, *Indignation*, about American students during the time of the Korean War. (The man never rests.)

What is more, the film adaptation of *The Dying Animal* should be released in the United State by late spring or early summer. Going by the title *Elegy*, the film is directed by Isabel Coixet and adapted for the screen by Nicholas Meyers. It stars Ben Kingsley as David Kepesh, Penelope Cruz as Consuela Castillo, and includes supporting actors Dennis Hopper (George O'Hearn), Deborah Harry (Amy O'Hearn), and Patricia Clarkson (Carolyn).

If Roth Society members cannot wait for the new novel or for Coixet's film and need other Roth-related

activities to keep them busy, then I would recommend that they visit the Library of Congress. As many of you already know, the Library houses the Philip Roth Papers, the official collection of Roth's letters, manuscripts, and miscellaneous documents.

In December 2007 the Library acquired a brand new batch of papers, these covering Roth's work from 2000-2004. I had the pleasure of visiting the Library in early January, and I was fascinated by the voluminous notes and drafts in this collection on such texts as *The Human Stain*, *The Dying Animal*, *Shop Talk*, and *The Plot Against America*.

As we have seen for many years in Roth studies, the material is available, the subjects are bountiful, and the audience is ever-evolving. Just add the primary outlets for research and discussion—our journal, *Philip Roth Studies*, and the *Philip Roth Society Newsletter*—and readers have all they need for appreciating the growing diversity of Roth scholarship.

## Bibliographic Update:

*Shylock.*" *Philip Roth Studies* 3 (2007): 26-43.

Trendel, Aristie. "Master and Pupil in Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal.*" *Philip Roth Studies* 3 (2007): 56-65.



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# The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

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