



The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

Vol. 4 No.2

Spring 2007

Message from the Society's President

Derek Parker Royal

Since the publication of our last newsletter, there has been a flurry of activity within Roth studies, and from Roth Society members in particular. This autumn the society's journal, *Philip Roth Studies*, published its first special issue. The topic was "Roth and Race," and it was guest edited by Dean J. Franco at Wake Forest University. The issue included several essays that focused on such topics as Roth and the changing face of Newark; performative identities in *Goodbye, Columbus* and Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*; fictional constructions of race in *The Human Stain*; Roth, Charles Chesnutt, and the genre of the passing novel; and teaching ethnic passing through *The Human Stain* and *The Great Gatsby*. You can find more information on the journal, including subscription details, inside this issue of the newsletter. And you can see a complete listing of recent Roth scholarship in the bibliographic update section.

The Philip Roth Society continues to sponsor panels at various conferences and symposia throughout the year. In September we presented a panel of four papers at the American Literature Association's

Symposium on American Fiction, chaired by a founding member of the society, Aimee Pozorski. And the first half of 2007 looks promising as well. In February we will sponsor the panel, "Narrating the Shylock and Shlemiel in Philip Roth's Fiction," at the University of Louisville's 35th annual Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference.

Three months later we will hold both a panel and a roundtable at the annual conference of the American Literature Association, held in Boston, MA. The topic of the panel, chaired by Victoria Aarons, will be "Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud," and it will anticipate the next special issue of *Philip Roth Studies* due out in Spring 2008. Our roundtable will be titled "*Sabbath's Theater* and the 'Discomfort' of Readers," and its participants will be addressing this question: If, as many critics believe, *Sabbath's Theater* is Roth's masterpiece, then why isn't there more scholarship on the book? I hope that everyone will get the opportunity to attend either or both the Twentieth Century or the ALA conferences. And if any member has a suggestion for future conference panel

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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 is published twice a year by The Philip Roth Society and is distributed to all dues-paying members. It is indexed in the MLA Bibliography, Modern Humanities Research Association's Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, and the Index to Jewish Periodicals.

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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Calls for Papers and Announcements

Upcoming Events

Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference Louisville, KY (February 22 - 24, 2007)

The Philip Roth Society will sponsor a panel at the upcoming University of Louisville's Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference. The panel, "Narrating the Shylock and Shlemiel in Philip Roth's Fiction," will be made up of three papers and will be held on Friday, February 23, at 10:45-12:15 (Section E on the program).

The Twentieth-Century Literature Conference, now in its thirty-fifth year, is an annual international conference notable for the breadth of interests that it represents and for the combination of critical and creative work that it features. For more information on the conference visit its Web site, <http://www.louisville.edu/a-s/cml/xxconf/>.

American Literature Association Conference Boston, MA (May 24-27)

The Philip Roth Society will sponsor both a panel and a roundtable at the 2007 American Literature Association in Boston, MA. The topic of the panel will be "Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud" (to complement our upcoming special issue of *Philip Roth Studies*) and the roundtable title will be "*Sabbath's Theater* and the 'Discomfort' of Readers."

For more information on the American Literature Association Conference, please visit its Web site at <http://americanliterature.org>.

Calls for Papers**Special Issue on Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud**

Philip Roth Studies invites submissions for a special issue of the journal devoted to Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud. We are interested in a variety of literary, theoretical, and cultural approaches that reflect the relationship (textual and otherwise) between these two authors. Both articles and short notes are welcome. Articles should be between 4,000-6,000 words, and notes should not exceed 2,500 words. Manuscripts must be prepared according to the *MLA Style Manual*, 2nd ed. (1998), by Joseph Gibaldi, including parenthetical citations in text and endnotes rather than footnotes. Works may be submitted either by ground mail or e-mail (as attached Microsoft Word files). All in-

quiries and manuscripts should be submitted to:

Victoria Aarons
Department of English
Trinity University
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San Antonio, TX 78212
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Submission deadline is April 15, 2007.

Book Collection of Essays Devoted to Philip Roth as a Comic Writer

We are looking for essays that specifically deal with Philip Roth as a comic writer. The “comic” here can be approached as ironic, satiric, wry, burlesque, mockery, etc. Contributions can deal with a *general* comic theme and preferably focus on *a specific work or works*.

All contributions should be formatted using the latest edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

For more information concerning this project, especially in terms of potential contributions, please contact either: Ben Siegel at BSiegel@CSUPomona.edu or Jay L. Halio at jlhalio@yahoo.com.

The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

For the Spring 2007 issue, we seek contributions of 250-800 words that offer reactions to the term “21st Century Roth.”

We are looking for informal reviews, notes, or essays that are informed by one or more of the contexts within which contemporary readers encounter Roth and his work. Tone can, and we hope will, vary from one contribution to another. We conceive of the contributions as neither the first nor the last word on the particular question they engage. Instead they are an opportunity to take part in a conversation among scholars and careful readers of Roth’s work.

For queries or submissions, please contact Joe Kraus at krausj2@scranton.edu. Deadline for contributions is April 15, 2007.



Everyman's Diamonds Less than Forever

By Josh Lambert

A few days after submitting an essay on Philip Roth's *Everyman* to my editor at the *Jewish Literary Supplement*, I came across Greil Marcus's review in the summer issue of *Bookforum*. Marcus doesn't much like the novel. Among other critiques, he makes the fair if arguable point that the language of *Everyman* includes several "unexamined banalities and clichés" that sink beneath Roth's usual exacting standards: "such shorthand excuses for language as 'life partners,' 'sexual encounter,' and even '9/11 attacks.'" What this brought to my mind was another hollow phrase that does not appear in *Everyman*, but which I invoked in my own quite positive review because I perceived it hovering behind Roth's prose: "A Diamond Is Forever."

That banal slogan seemed relevant because the novel repeatedly contrasts the unnamed protagonist's decaying body with "imperishable" diamonds. As the protagonist's father, a jeweler, explains, "It's a big deal for working people to buy a diamond ... no matter how small. ... Because beyond the beauty and the status and the value, the diamond is imperishable. A piece of the earth that is imperishable, and a mere mortal is wearing it on her hand!" "Imperishable" is just another way of saying "forever," and, in my first reading of *Everyman*, the juxtaposition of eternal diamonds and ephemeral, "mortal" humanity served as a resonant, if unsubtle, symbolic complement to the book's interest in the protagonist's failing health. (This reminded me of the way gloves and skins resonate so forcefully throughout 1997's *American Pastoral*.)

On second thought, it seems worthwhile to consider where the notion of diamonds' imperishability originates. In a classic *Atlantic Monthly* exposé from February 1982, Edward Jay Epstein describes how the international De Beers cartel hired the New York advertising firm N. W. Ayer to market diamonds so as to maximize profit from their worldwide control of mining and distribution: "To stabilize the market, De Beers had to endow these stones with a sentiment that

would inhibit the public from ever reselling them," Epstein relates. "The illusion had to be created that diamonds were forever—'forever' in the sense that they should never be resold." This resulted in a monumental ad campaign and its familiar tagline, though, as Epstein points out, the precious stones are anything but indestructible: they can "in fact be shattered, chipped, discolored, or incinerated to ash."

One would expect a jeweler like the protagonist's father in *Everyman* to know better, then, than to wax rhapsodic about diamonds' imperishability. And one would equally expect a master craftsman like Roth, who prides himself on his research, to get his details straight. How can we explain the character's naïveté?

On the one hand, we might try to reconcile it with the novel's interest in advertising as a profession, seeing as how the protagonist prides himself on his campaigns for dish soap and remembers, without a qualm, a pitch he did for Mercedes-Benz, despite that company's infamous links to Nazi Germany. Perhaps Roth is subtly suggesting that while his protagonist eschews religion ("superstitious folderol") and family (he has only pity for people who "find sufficient grounds for existence in the existence of their grandchildren"), he fools himself no less in taking satisfaction from his career and his idealized memories of his father's store: if religion and family exploit our needs and vulnerabilities, so of course do advertising and the jewelry business. Certainly the novel's final pages offer fertile ground for such an interpretation, with their close attention to the material stuff of life and to the preposterous meanings we imbue it with—such as bones, "the only solace there was" for the novel's protagonist, and "the billion-, the trillion-, the quadrillion-carat planet Earth" itself.

On the other hand, though, we might come around to Marcus's perspective and assume that Roth has been gulled by the advertisers, that he has bought into the diamond myth and layered it sloppily into his fiction. Every novelist, even one as brilliant as Roth, makes mistakes from time to time, and by soberly acknowledging his errors we can better appreciate his many successes.

Josh Lambert is a doctoral candidate in English literature at the University of Michigan. His book reviews have appeared in the Forward, the San Francisco Chronicle, and other publications.

Reading the Reviews:

Reactions to *Everyman* run from Bleak and Powerful to the Whimpering that Comes at a Career's End

As with the early responses to *The Plot Against America*, reviewers of *Everyman* are strongly split in their assessments of the novel. Many see it as an aging novelist's answer to Portnoy, a work that looks head-on at contradictions and terrors that most prefer to ignore. A substantial minority, however, regard it as falling short of Roth's best work on the grounds that its tone is insistent and unyielding. All agree that there is a terrifying bleakness to the work. The question seems to be whether that bleakness represents an artist's brilliant despair or demonstrates instead that Roth's considerable well is at last running dry.

The following excerpts come from reviews across the globe. Most represent the thrust of the review from which they come. Some, however, are asides that seemed especially apt or well put or suggest striking contexts within which we might read the novel.

Ronan Farren, *Sunday Independent* [Ireland]

This is clearly a very personal novel from one of America's finest writers, and a beautifully written one, but I found its narrowness, its obsession with the "unfairness" of death — its display of something not far removed from self-pity — to be oppressive and stultifying.

'Get a grip,' the reader wants to urge Roth's sometimes tiresome character, 'we all die, you haven't cornered the market on the Grim Reaper.' Most of us may brood about death as the years go on, but we don't — or shouldn't — bore other people about it.

Bill Eichenberger, *Columbus Dispatch*

While *Everyman* deals squarely in death, it is still more about choices and their consequences, about choices and the way they shape our lives — and our deaths.

John Dicker, *Rocky Mountain News*

Yes, the narrative is firmly embedded in his native northern New Jersey. And yes, his now patented storytelling trick of recounting a complicated life through a third-person, rearview-mirror perspective is still in full effect. What's different here is that the focus is more on death and dying than history, politics or even the characters themselves. Maybe this is why Roth doesn't even bother to give his protagonist a name. This short, dark, intense novel details the walls closing in around a man so quickly that basic nomenclature isn't terribly relevant.

Jonathan Derbyshire, *Time Out* [London]

Everyman reflects at one point that were he ever to write an autobiography, he'd call it *The Life and Death of a Male Body*. And that's as good an alternative title as any for this brief but remarkable novel in which Roth fixes on matters of life and death with a concentrated intensity unmatched in his fiction since 1995's *Sabbath's Theater*. In that book, Mickey Sabbath fears impotence as much as he fears death. Though *Everyman* is less extravagantly priapic than *Sabbath*, sex for him is nevertheless a sort of howl of erotic rage against the fact of finiteness and decay (as it is for many of Roth's protagonists).

Dan Cryer, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

It's safe to say that the brevity of life is clearly on this 73-year-old's radar. What is missing in *Everyman*, though, is a sense of the thickness of life, the texture that quickens and makes real even the most ordinary of *Everymen*. Roth's resurgence in the past decade or so, beginning with *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral*, has been extraordinary. The writer who had been bogged down in self-indulgent game-playing had opened himself to the larger ironies and tragedies of the American communal experience.

Philip Connors, *Salon*

We might be forgiven for hoping that, in Roth's hands, such a structure would hint at an effort to plumb to its fullest the life we confront at its terminus in the very first pages. Not so this time. The life as

Roth retells it is of little consequence; death and decay are his preoccupations. And while his jeremiad against mortality undoubtedly has a certain fierce power, it reduces its main character to not much more than a body that lives in fear of the end.

Michael Carbert, *Canadian Review of Books*

For Roth there can be no religious or spiritual consolation, and it is the same for his unnamed protagonist. Old age and illness cannot be rationalised into anything other than portents of oblivion. The years of good health and productivity are barely mentioned; they are cancelled out by Everyman's ongoing struggle with heart disease. And most agonising of all, he must confront the fact that the choices he made when he was healthy and active have resulted in his being isolated and alone, just when he is most in need of support and attention.

Gail Caldwell, *Boston Globe*

Everyman is a brief, piercing novel, a grim *cri de coeur* that has all the mellifluous authenticity of the Kaddish. Its first three words are "Around the grave," and even after that resounding start, the book is almost impossible to stop reading, whether one is swept up in the story's desolate fluency or scans it for autobiographical details.

Bill Brotherton, *Boston Herald*

Unlike Willie Loman, Arthur Miller's confused, sympathetic *Everyman*, this fellow doesn't earn your respect. You probably won't even like the guy. Yet Roth creates such a compelling character, it's impossible to put this down because, ultimately, *Everyman* could be any one of us.

Randy Bovagoda, *National Post [Canada]*

As we know from the opening words of the book — "Around the grave" — *Everyman* fails in his evasive tactics, as must we all. The result, especially compared with Roth's recent American Trilogy and 2004's *The Plot Against America*, is a minor work marked by occasional flashes of the author's caustic energy and by momentary openings into the oddball riches of growing up Jewish in 20th-century New Jer-

sey, that combination of method and madness that has earned the author an unrivalled position in contemporary American literature.

Sandu Bauers, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

Why was this book so funny? And so hopeful? And why was the hero so endearing?

There is, perhaps, no single reason, no one thing that explains Roth, the master. This book has it all — the richness of life itself, the quest of literature, the depth of character, the choiceness of dialogue.

But I think that what attracted me most to this novel was that it was so inescapably real. Yes, people always talk about parallels between Roth's novels and his life. This one just seems even more so. Even though Roth himself isn't dead.

Lionel Shriver, *[London] Daily Telegraph*

I belong to a generation that isn't ready to get old. To the degree that we dare to picture our own old age, or even believe it will ever arrive, we envision leaping onto our bikes to get to the tennis courts. Yet at 72, Philip Roth is a few steps ahead of us boomers, and the report from the trenches is bleak. On the other hand, he offers some compensation: we may fall apart, but most of us when geriatric will still be able to read. *Everyman*, his deceptively slender 27th novel, may prove both a primer for that final, stumbling lap around the track, and some misery-loving-company solace while we're in intensive care wheezing our last.

John Williams, *[London] Mail on Sunday*

This is a frankly bleak picture of old age as a series of losing battles, and as such is inevitably depressing.

Unfortunately, it's also disappointing: too much of the dialogue is written in the same register, which is itself barely distinguishable from the narrator's voice, and there are too many characters who start promisingly but are never developed.

Scott Raab, *Esquire*

Fuck sin: The wages of *life* are death — but only after full rations of pain and loss. The upside, of course, is that Roth is the best fiction writer America has ever

produced. And *Everyman* is fiction as calligraphy, a ribbon of memory spun from a single stroke across a couple hundred pages, encircling, and entombing, a life.

Jacob Stockinger, *Capital Times* [Madison, Wisconsin]

Is it uplifting? No. In fact, the book is decidedly a bummer. But it bravely holds how we live and die in a level gaze as it uses the psychological portrait of aging in one man. And like the original inspiration, it teaches its reader — not necessarily how to live, but what it means to live and die in disappointment, which is the new mortal sin in an age of cheery self-help and empowerment.

David Manning, *Nelson Mail* [New Zealand]

While obviously not a happy book nor one ostensibly to give to someone in their autumn years, Roth still manages to fill this novel with the breath of life, with a clarity and profundity of insight in lean prose that gradually takes hold with the same grip with which most people cling to life, despite how harsh or testing it is for them.

Merle Rubin, *Washington Times*

The message is simple, hardly original, yet like most great truths, contains a world of complexity and experience: love is what matters most. But what is love?

Brad Quinn, *Daily Yomiuri* [Tokyo]

Simply put, *Everyman* is an angry novel by a writer who is appalled by death and has nowhere to direct his rage. Unlike Percy Byshe Shelley's lyric poem *Prometheus Unbound* or even the song "Dear God" by English pop group XTC, which both confirm God as they shake their fists at the tyranny of heaven, *Everyman's* protagonist finds notions of a higher power beneath consideration

Emily Nussbaum, *New York Magazine*

The last few years have been oppressive ones for fans of Philip Roth. Once a libidinous bad boy — a *shonda* for the Jews, a tonic for literature — he has been ele-

vated to something of a secular saint, praised and overpraised, for his trio of fat books (*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*) on worldly topics (terrorism, McCarthyism, race). So it's a relief to open *Everyman*, which at 192 pages feels like an attempt at something else entirely: a small-scale universality. If it fails in that task, it succeeds in almost every other way.

James Wood, *New Republic*

The issue is not Roth's right to self-pity, but his book's. Aesthetically, it is not obvious that the best way to evoke the horror of dying is by overloading a short novella with many examples of it. The writer is trying a bit too hard; the misery overwhelms not us but the book's form, which threatens a deadening literalism. (Look, another death! And another!) An interesting didacticism becomes only propaganda. Tolstoy's novella, for different reasons having largely to do with its Christian preaching, does not avoid a similar charge of propaganda against it, so Roth is in good company; but much of the remarkable, burning power of that book has to do with the way Tolstoy keeps his gaze on a single example of dying, universalizing outward in concentric circles from that one laser-like dot of pain. Roth, by contrast, seems to want to universalize sideways, to gesture broadly and multiply from his many examples of dying and pain: not so much *Everyman* as *Everyperson*.

Stephen Metcalf, *Slate*

The most effective form known to man, for bringing his consciousness in line with his own mortal limits, is tragedy. The most effective form known to man, for bringing his consciousness out of line with his own mortal limits, is advertising. Growing old in an age of mass marketing, with all its many confusions regarding age and youth, has created a new genre of writing, part tragedy and part sports-sedan advertisement, of which *Everyman* is a prime example. (Hence the critical confusion over the book: Its champions can point to its bleakness, its detractors to the silliness of its preoccupation with sex.)

Michael Upchurch, *Seattle Times*

Roth does get certain moments right: a resentful son's

anger-strangled wave of grief at his father's grave-side; a serene exchange, late in the book, between Everyman and a gravedigger about the practice of the latter's trade.

Still, nothing here can help the novel transcend its central flaw: the fact that its characters never take on more than a cartoonish weight.

Norman Rush, *Washington Post*

Philip Roth's 27th novel is a marvel of brevity, admirable for its elegant style and composition (no surprise), but remarkable above all for its audacity and ambition. It seizes unflinchingly on one of the least agreeable subjects in the domain of the novel — the natural deterioration of the body. But beyond that, Everyman can be seen as a bid to engage conclusively with the core anxieties that the literary novel exists to confront: How, absent the shadow of God, in new and confusing brightness, shall we decide what we are, how we human animals should judge ourselves and whether we can love our species despite everything?

Andrew Maurer, *Independent Collegian [University of Toledo]*

The strange thing is that essentially, *Everyman* is an elaboration on any of a number of high-school-teacher aphorisms — life isn't fair, you can't always get what you want, etc.

But the way in which Roth weaves a single unnamed man's life history into these simplistic ideas somehow makes them much more poignant than old Mrs. Applebottom ever did — it gets closer to the truth of what they mean; the kind of truth that only exists through experience.

Lloyd Sachs, *Chicago Sun Times*

Roth has never lacked courage — to break taboos, as he did in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Breast*; to obsess over themes, as he did with the real-life/fiction divide in the Zuckerman novels; to rewrite history as he did in *The Plot Against America*, which imagined the nation coming under the control of a fascist government in the 1940s. But in staring down infirmity and death, and forcing us to stare with him, he may well have committed his most courageous act of fiction yet. If his acclaimed *American Pastoral* was a bit undone by its tricky chronology, *Everyman* gains ee-

rie power through its circular structure.

Allan Massie, *The Scotsman*

What disturbs me is that Roth appears to approve of his "hero", to be at one with him in his resentment of reality and his corrosive self-pity.

Here is a slob who has gone his own way all his life, doing whatever pleases him, and who arrives at old age thinking it's unfair that he is going to have to die.

One likes to think of the irony which Conrad or Proust would have brought to the portrayal of such a character; but there is no irony here.

Joel Yanofsky, *[Montreal] Gazette*

This is, by far, Roth's most deliberate and sustained portrait of averageness. His Everyman lives his life conventionally, unadventurously. It's a long way from the usual Roth alter ego, from the self-indulgent and outrageous antics of the likes of Alexander Portnoy or Nathan Zuckerman.

James Marcus, *Los Angeles Times*

Sometimes, you see, size does matter — and the slender heft of *Everyman*, combined with its funereal jacket, should have been an immediate tip-off. What we have here is a companion piece to *The Dying Animal*, which Roth published in 2001. In that similarly proportioned novel, mortality brings David Kepesh to his knees without actually killing him. In this one, the hero dies.

Karen Sandstrom, *[Cleveland] Plain Dealer*

Illicit sex as a talisman against Death is hardly a new idea. It's a common explanation — if a difficult one to receive with a straight face. This aspect of the novel is what most reminds us that we're receiving not just the mature wisdom and big-thinking sociology behind *American Pastoral* and *The Plot Against America* but the sexual fixation of Alexander Portnoy.

Philip Marchand, *Toronto Star*

The novels of Philip Roth have seemed as free of embedded literary allusions, as devoid of mythic parallels and archetypal symbols, as a comic monologue

by the late Rodney Dangerfield. Roth's is the great raw voice of American literature — urgent, artless, impatient of pure storytelling, driven by a savage sense of humour and a classically Jewish love of argument.

In his latest novel, *Everyman*, however, he is deliberately summoning the presence of western literary classics, beginning with the medieval play of the same name.

Michiko Kakatuni, *New York Times*

He's another one of this author's aging narcissists, increasingly isolated and forlorn and bitter; another dutiful son, torn between responsibility and rebellion; another restless womanizer continually trading in one year's model for the next. As for his life story, it's been orchestrated to underscore themes that Mr. Roth has examined with more energy and originality many, many times before: the notions that freedom can devolve into rootlessness and dislocation, that sex is a flimsy bulwark against mortality, that the dizzying gap between expectations and reality can induce vertigo in even the hardest of souls.

Mark Shechner, *Buffalo News*

When all is weighed and measured, the message of the original *Everyman*, that "God will you to salvation bring," isn't Roth's cup of philosophy, unless some televangelist got to him when nobody was looking. The eternal, immortal soul is not at risk here, and consolation is out of the question.

Yet Roth's *Everyman* has this in common with the morality play: the disturbing recognition that one is after all culpable for the way things turn out.

Norman Lebrecht, *Evening Standard [London]*

At first reading, this sombre novella leaves no more than a bitter taste and a desire to reread certain pages for their word-perfection. On second reading, more allegories are revealed, but not incontestably. Life, you keep feeling, need not be as hopeless as this...

Roth fails in the face of death by refusing to countenance the dignity of human life, as distinct from the dignity of work and art. *Everyman* leaves him with nowhere to go.

Neal Karlen, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

Not knowing what the hell he was getting into is the theme of the everyman's life. It can also be said that "not knowing" is the key to whatever is left of his life. Like Dostoevski's anti-hero in "Notes from Underground," Roth's creation knows only that the past doesn't matter except as a possible explanation for your present; and that unless you've gambled well with your life, no one will care about your future.

Claudia La Rocca, *Associated Press*

This lack of vibrancy is a real problem for a novel attempting a lament over the decline and eventual loss of life. Roth is hardly the first writer to probe such a universal theme; perhaps nodding to this, he begins the book with a passage from the John Keats poem, "Ode to a Nightingale." But Roth doesn't say anything that any number of great writers haven't said before him. In fact, he says considerably less.

Patrick Kurp, *Houston Chronicle*

Especially in his most recent books, Roth has indulged what might be called an essayistic streak, and this mix of omniscient observation and narrative momentum almost always works. Roth is one of the most intelligent writers we have ever had, and the novelist's trade, by definition, is hubristic — he apes the deity when he creates an inhabited world, and his omniscience becomes a reliable chorus, echoing, augmenting and challenging the reader's thoughts.

Douglas Kennedy, *Times [of London]*

And yet the genius of this short, bleak, remarkable novel stems from the way that Roth turns his desolate assessment of death into something bracing: an angry acceptance that mortality is the price we pay for the sheer wonder of this thing called life.

Rosemary Goring, *Glasgow Herald*

A great undertow of anguish races beneath this work. As a novel it's far from morbid; indeed in some ways it's uplifting. It is emphatically not, however, for those who would prefer to go blinkered into that good night.

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Remember to Renew Your Society Membership:

Please Make Certain that Your Society Membership is Up-to-Date and that we have the Correct Contact Information on File for you

As the President's message makes clear, we have done very well as a society, continuing to gather members, sustaining a journal, and regularly generating panel presentations and other collaborative efforts.

As we grow, however, managing our membership and mailing information becomes an ever greater challenge. If you can, please help us out:

- Renew your membership in a timely way. We have to rely on you to remember to sign up again each year. The more quickly you do so, the more we can use our resources for growing the society.
- Make certain that we have your correct addresses. If you have not received an e-mail asking you to renew your membership for this year, then it is likely that we have the wrong e-mail address on file. Please e-mail us with the correct one.
- If you have not received a copy of the newsletter, then e-mail us as well. With every issue we send out, there are a

handful of newsletters that get returned with address unknown.

- Remember to subscribe to our journal *Philip Roth Studies*. Your subscription to the journal is separate from your membership dues.

As ever, we encourage you to visit our website, www.rothsociety.org. You will find information there on how to join the society, and you will find several good resources for studying Roth and his work.

As part of that, consider taking part in the on-line discussions that we maintain. To receive occasional updates on the society and news on work about Roth, you can join the listserv by following the directions at <http://mailman.tamu-commerce.edu/mailman/listinfo/rothsociety>.

To take in the interactive forum, visit the society website and click on the link for "Forum."

Thank you for all that you do to make us work as a society. We look forward to another strong year.

Reviewing the Reviews

(Continued from page 9)

Jerome Groopman, *The Forward*

Everyman is a cautionary tale to be read by both the healthy and the sick. Few of us, when healthy, pay sufficient attention to what is substantial in our lives, and when we fall ill we often are hard pressed to make up for lost time. Roth brings into tight focus what endures and what falls away as we approach the end.

Nadine Gordimer, *New York Times*

If Portnoy has never been outgrown, only grown old, he is, in his present avatar, an everyman whose creator makes the term "insight" something to be tossed away as inadequate. What Roth knows of the opposition/apposition of the body and the intellect is devas-

tatingly profound and cannot be escaped, just as Thomas Mann's graffiti on the wall of the 20th century cannot be washed off: "In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms." Roth has dealt with this other great theme in human existential drives — politics — as searchingly as he has sexuality. Roth's people, whether politically activist or not, live in our world — and the bared-teeth decorum of academe is its gowned microcosm — terrorized by fear of the Other abroad and State authoritarianism at the throat at home.

David Gates, *Newsweek*

This is a novel with, literally, Nothing to offer — except moving scenes with lovingly presented people, a beautifully shaped narrative and the resolution with which it faces the unfaceable.

*The View from North of the Border:***Penguin Gives Roth his First Canadian Publisher in a Decade**

By Judy Stoffman, *Toronto Star*
January 26, 2007

The Penguin Group (Canada) has announced that it will bring out *Exit Ghost*, the next novel by Pulitzer Prize-winning U.S. author Philip Roth, in September. Penguin's move ends a bizarre situation in which the man considered America's greatest living writer has been without a Canadian publisher.

In May 2006, when the *New York Times Book Review* asked several hundred prominent critics, writers and editors to name the single best work of American fiction of the past 25 years, they came up with 22 titles, of which six were by Roth. More prolific than ever, the 73-year-old author reportedly writes 10 hours each day and brings out a new book every two years.

"It seemed very odd that Roth had not been published in Canada because Canadian publishers are pretty good at picking up important international writers," said David Davidar, Penguin's publisher, in a phone interview. "We approached Andrew Wylie (Roth's New York agent) and expressed an interest in Roth. This was then the first book up for grabs and we got in on it right away. Most writers benefit from being published separately. At this point we have no idea what will happen to his backlist."

Roth's hardcover books, published in the U.S. by Houghton Mifflin, have been distributed here for the past decade by Thomas Allen and Son Ltd., while paperbacks under the Vintage imprint of his 24 novels and two non-fiction works are imported by Random House Canada. But this is not the same as having a Canadian publisher committed to creating a local market for his books.

Penguin Canada is not the first Canadian publisher to go around the dance floor with Roth. In 1995, McClelland & Stewart brought out *Sabbath's Theatre*, possibly Roth's most obscene book, which went on to win a National Book Award that year. Mickey Sabbath, its title character, is an aging puppeteer who rages against the death of his mistress and life in general by engaging in transgressive sexual behaviours.

"It was a great book, but risky," recalls fiction editor Ellen Seligman, who bought the book for M&S. "It's hard to sell U.S. writers unless they are Danielle Steel. A major hurdle was that Roth would not do any

publicity. It did not do very well at all. When it came time for (signing up) his next book, we felt it was not going to work."

How well does the best American writer sell? A profile of Roth by David Remnick in the *New Yorker* in 2000 called his U.S. sales "modest," between 30,000 and 45,000 in hardcover. Since then Roth has published *The Plot Against America*, which turned into a surprise bestseller. However, Seligman recalls that *Sabbath's Theatre* sold only about 1,000 copies in Canada.

Michael Tamblyn, who heads BookNet Canada, a sales tracking service for books in Canada, says he cannot give out an actual number, but Roth's last book, *Everyman*, was among the top 100 on the fiction list in the weeks after its release.

Says Davidar, "Whatever he sold in Canada in the past, I'm confident that we can do better."

The acquiring editor was Nicole Winstanley; she would not disclose the amount paid for rights to *Exit Ghost*.

It will be the last of Roth's Nathan Zuckerman stories, Zuckerman being Roth's alter ego whom he first introduced in 1979 in his novel *The Ghost Writer*. Zuckerman was then a young writer with only a few short stories to his credit.

The new book is a portrait of Zuckerman as an old man, his powers waning, his desires still ungratified. Zuckerman leaves his home in rural Massachusetts, where he lives alone, to return to New York to visit a dying friend whose revelations unsettle him. "It's an astonishingly insightful study of loss, grief (and) aging," Davidar said.

In between *The Ghost Writer* and *Exit Ghost*, Zuckerman has appeared in seven other novels, including the trilogy of critical novels about postwar America that may be Roth's greatest achievement: *American Pastoral* (1997), about the cataclysm of the '60s; *I Married a Communist* (1998), about the 1950s McCarthy period; and *The Human Stain* (2000), set in the Clinton era.

Reprinted with permission, Torstar Syndication Services; original headline, "Penguin fills book gap: One of America's greatest living writers has had no publisher here."

Abstracts from Papers Delivered at Recent Conferences

An asterisk * indicates that the scholar is a member of the Philip Roth Society

American Literature Association Symposium on American Fiction – San Diego, CA, Sept 29-30, 2006

Panel: Philip Roth Society Panel

Chair: * Aimee Pozorski, Central Connecticut State University

Paper 1: A Kiss is Still a Kiss: The Significance of Incest in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* — * Matthew Shipe, Washington University in St. Louis

Abstract: Although a great deal of recent Philip Roth scholarship has focused on *American Pastoral* (1997), a trend that is not surprising considering both the novel's complex narrative structure and its being the first installment of Roth's critically praised "American" trilogy, not much attention has been paid to the incestuous kiss between father and daughter that initiates Nathan Zuckerman's re-imagining of Swede Levov's life, a fiction that Zuckerman invents as the possible origin of Merry Levov's seemingly insatiable and uncontrollable fury. During the course of this paper, I plan to explore the possible ways in which this incident impacts not only our understanding of *American Pastoral*, suggesting how Zuckerman forges a narrative of American decline around one man's private hell, but also how this moment would seem to make possible Roth's ensuing examination of America in novels such as *The Human Stain* (2000) and *The Plot Against America* (2004). In a novel saturated with overt violence, the passionate kiss that the Swede momentarily shares with his daughter perhaps remains the novel's most disturbing incident, an inexplicable transgression that the Swede latches on to as a possible explanation for his daughter's incomprehensible violence. The impulse that informs Zuckerman's invention of this incident, an incident that appears to have no basis in the known facts of the Swede's life, is in many respects transparent enough; this kiss is both the moment that Zuckerman needs in order that to imagine the Swede's life, "not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable life" and the transgression which allows the Swede to assume responsibility for his daughter's violence (89). On the other hand, there is also something horribly excessive about Zuckerman's narrative impulse here, the fictitious incest undermining the validity of Zuckerman's imagination from the very beginning of his narrative. More than just deflating Zuckerman's nostalgic memory of the Swede, however, the kiss between father and daughter is the incident that would seem to give his narrative its mythic heft, the incestuous kiss a symbolic shattering of American innocence. For just as the kiss offers the Swede a tantalizing, if ultimately unsatisfactory, explanation for his daughter's crimes, it similarly intimates that the violence of the Sixties cannot be simply understood, either as a historical aberration or as a simple byproduct of past generations, suggesting the complex conception of history that will Roth will pursue in his subsequent work.

Paper 2: "*American Pastoral* and the Traumatic Ideals of Democracy — * Aimee Pozorski, Central Connecticut State University

Abstract: Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) appears to be a novel nostalgic for some unnamable moment "before the war": a time before the Vietnam Era brought home to the United States the reality of violence experienced in other parts of the world. Generally, when critics read the novel within this elegiac framework, they focus their readings upon such aspects as ethnicity, identity, and the generation that produced America's most vocal war protesters. However, in "*American Pastoral* and the Traumatic Ideals of Democracy," I propose that the unexpected trauma of the novel – the moment which disrupts our sense of "American" identity —

is not the Vietnam War, but rather the very ideals upon which America was first founded. According to Zuckerman's narrative frame, the founding of the U.S. was traumatic in its purest sense: the ideals of equality and democracy, while both desired and desirable, came too soon to be adequately implemented by a governing body. As Zuckerman would have it, the earliest citizens of the democratic state were not yet ready to live in such an Eden as they themselves proposed, and Merry Levov's homegrown terrorism — returning Vietnam to U.S. soil—suggests that we have been trying to catch up with the ideals of democracy ever since.

Paper 3: “Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*: Imagining the Already Ethnic Self as Other” — * Miriam Jaffe-Foger, Rutgers University

Abstract: In 2005, Philip Roth was inducted into the American Academy of Letters, an honor usually bestowed as a memorial to America's most revered writers, like Hawthorne and Melville. Among the first of his volumes to be officially canonized in the exclusive series of black-spined, uniform editions is the very collection of short stories that, half a century ago, outraged much of the Jewish community, who felt betrayed by Roth's unflattering representations of Jewish life. Beginning his career with such controversy, Roth has openly struggled with his identity as a Jewish writer.

In *The Human Stain* (2000), Philip Roth creates a unique protagonist, Coleman Silk, as a Black double of himself. Imagining Coleman Silk's life allows Roth to examine from an-“Other” perspective what it means for an individual to represent an entire ethnic community. The twist is that Coleman Silk decides to cast off the limits of African-American identity, using features of his mixed heritage (olive skin, kinky hair and green eyes) to pass as Jewish for the rest of his life. Though his Jewishness implicates him as a member of an ethnic community, he finds greater opportunity to free “Others” from within its bounds. This also essay explores the way Roth presents a Black body passing as Jewish alongside Roth's typical Jewish double and trusted narrator, Nathan Zuckerman. Zuckerman, whose sexual exploits inform the majority of Roth's plotlines, is left impotent due to prostate cancer in *The Human Stain*. As the teller of Silk's story, Zuckerman contrasts himself against Silk's virility, drawn to imagining his body. This essay also explores the reputed connection between Silk and the famous book critic, Anatole Broyard, who shaped the American canon as a white man in order to avoid the stigma of being a Black writer.

Paper 4: “A Defense of *Everyman*” — * Jay L. Halio, University of Delaware

Abstract: Roth's *Everyman* is a modernized version of the old medieval play without the religious allegory but with an important meditation on death. It does not provide a gloomy or pessimistic outlook on the end of life, as some have felt; on the contrary, it emphasizes, somewhat in the way Stevens does in “Sunday Morning,” the value of this life and our natural reluctance to leave it.



Bibliographical Update

For a complete listing of bibliographical resources in English, go to the Roth Society Web site at <http://rothsociety.org>. Individual book chapters are cross-listed with their sources. An asterisk * indicates that the scholar is a member of the Philip Roth Society

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President's Message

(Continued from page 1)

ideas or topics, do not hesitate to contact me. We are always on the lookout for fresh approaches to conference presentations.

Future scholarship on Roth, at conferences or otherwise, will certainly not flag due to a lack of new fodder as the novelist continues his impressive output. Just six months after the publication of *Everyman*, Houghton Mifflin announced that it will be publishing *Exit Ghost*, a novel which will be the swansong for the perennial Nathan Zuckerman. According to a statement from Roth's publisher, the book will be a "portrait of the artist as an old man." Houghton Mifflin goes on to describe the novel this way: "Bedeviled by the powers he's lost, fearful of losing the powers that remain — and that are vital to his vocation — Nathan Zuckerman returns to New York after 11 years of living as a solitary, reclusive writer in the rural hills of western Massachusetts.

His encounters in New York with a new generation of writers and with an old, dying friend produce revelations that gravely unsettle him and make of the final Zuckerman book a moving study of obsession, forgetfulness, resignation, and ungratifiable desire." On top of this, the Library of America has just recently published the third of its projected eight volumes devoted to the novelist. *Philip Roth: Novels 1973-1977* includes what are arguably three of the most formative works by Roth — *The Great American Novel*, *My Life as a Man*, and *The Professor of Desire* — and as with other volumes in the series, it is edited by Roth's biographer, Ross Miller.

Roth's output may indeed be prodigious. But a look through this and past issues of the *Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, particularly at its conference activity and bibliographic update sections, will show that society members are more than willing to keep pace.

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(Continued from page 14)

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The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

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