



The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

Vol. 1 No. 1

INAUGURAL ISSUE

Fall 2002

A Message From the Society's Founder

Derek Parker Royal

How to begin a literary society, especially one devoted to one of our most significant living American writers? This is a question I have been asking myself, as well as others, since immediately before this year's American Literature Association annual conference in Long Beach, California. After taking the initial steps in founding the Philip Roth Society -- and with a good bit of help -- I feel more confident in my ability to answer.

One step along the way has been the publication of this inaugural newsletter. Here, I have tried to include a variety of information that would be of interest to readers and scholars of Philip Roth. In addition to upcoming events notices, calls for papers, and recent bibliographical listings, the newsletter includes short articles pertaining to Roth's fiction. In this issue, for example, Jessica Rabin shares her thoughts on teaching "Goodbye, Columbus" in terms of audience. M.W.'s contribution, on the other hand, is more of a personal reflection concerning his experiences reading Roth's novels. I hope that others will contribute short pieces

to future newsletters, providing insights as well as brief explications that many will find useful.

Another major step in founding the Philip Roth Society regards organization. Being a new society, we have no elected officers nor do we have a constitution. These matters will be addressed at the 2003 American Literature Association conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts (May 22-25). The time and location of our business meeting will be listed on the Philip Roth Society Web site, as well as in future issues of the newsletter. I strongly encourage all members of the society, and all prospective members, to attend and contribute their voices to this process.

Experience is not only helpful, but downright necessary in taking on a project such as this. And where I lacked in experience, my luck in befriending colleagues more than made up for it. There were those who provided helpful suggestions, and some whose assistance I found particularly significant. Scholars such as Gloria Cronin, Daniel Walden, Ben Siegel, and Daniel Morris provided much needed advice, and I

continued on page 7

About the Philip Roth Society

Founded in July 2002, the Philip Roth Society is an organization devoted to the study and the appreciation of the writings of Philip Roth. Its goal is to encourage the exchange of ideas and texts concerning this most significant author through discussions, panel presentations at scholarly conferences, and journal publications. In order to accomplish this, the Society intends to provide a membership newsletter, information concerning upcoming events, calls for papers devoted to Roth's fiction, an extensive list of bibliographical resources, and a growing directory of organizational membership. Future plans include a Roth Society listserv group and an ongoing sponsorship of panels at a variety of scholarly conferences. The Society welcomes both academic and non-academic readers alike.

The Philip Roth Society is a non-profit community of readers and scholars and has no official affiliation with either Philip Roth or his publishers.

The *Philip Roth Society Newsletter* is published twice a year by the Philip Roth Society and is distributed to all dues-paying members. The newsletter welcomes announcements of upcoming events and conferences, short articles and reviews (500 to 800 words) on topics related to Philip Roth. Disks in Word or email submissions are appreciated. Please send contributions to Derek Parker Royal, editor, *Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, Department of Languages and Communications, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, 77446-0156. email to: roth_society@pvamu.edu

Editor

Derek Parker Royal
Prairie View A&M University

Managing Editor

Amanda Siegfried
University of Houston

Philip Roth Society Web page:
www.pvamu.edu/edir/droyal/roth.htm



Conferences and Events

To publicize a call for papers, lecture, or general event related to Philip Roth, contact the Roth Society at roth_society@pvamu.edu. When deadlines expire in calls for papers, the event will be listed as an “upcoming event.”

Upcoming Events

2002 ALA Jewish American & Holocaust Literature Conference Boca Raton, FL (October 23-27)

The Philip Roth Society will hold three panels of presentation and discussion: “Roth's The Dying Animal,” “Postmodern Impulses in the Works of Philip Roth,” and “Philip Roth, Then and Now.” For more information regarding the conference, including registration materials, please contact Derek P. Royal at derek_royal@pvamu.edu.

2003 Northeast Modern Language Association Conference Boston, MA (March 6-9)

There will be two separate panels devoted to Roth's recent fiction. “Philip Roth's America,” moderated by Charles Mitchell (cmitchell@elmira.edu), will address the three novels in the American trilogy, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*. “Philip Roth's Recent Fiction,” moderated by Matthew Wilson (mtw1@psu.edu), will examine the major currents of post-war American history and Roth's interpretations of that history. For more information visit the NEMLA Web site at <http://www.nemla.org>.

Call for Papers

2003 American Literature Association Conference Cambridge, MA (May 22-25)

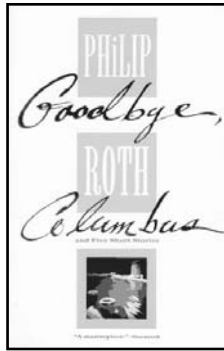
The Philip Roth Society welcomes formal submissions on any aspect of Roth's writings. Two areas of particular interest include the early fiction which helped to establish Roth's reputation (e.g., “Goodbye, Columbus” to *The Professor of Desire*) and his most recent American trilogy. Please email a 300-450 word abstract, along with contact information to Derek P. Royal at roth_society@pvamu.edu. Deadline for proposals is January 15, 2003.



From "Fancy-Schmancy" Seminars to the Composition Classroom: Reflections on Teaching "Goodbye, Columbus"

Jessica G. Rabin, Anne Arundel Community College

I first came to "Goodbye, Columbus" as a student in a senior-level Jewish-American literature seminar in a small private college in the Northeast. My classmates were a lot like me -- Jewish and about twenty years old. Eight years later and one thousand miles south, I first taught "Goodbye, Columbus" in a similar venue and to a similar audience. The novella resonated with me, and it resonated with my students. As an indictment of Jewish materialism and an examination of the tension between Americanization and ethnic heritage, "Goodbye, Columbus" undoubtedly retains its value in Jewish-American literature courses.



More recently I decided to teach the novella in a first-year composition and literature course at a community college in the mid-Atlantic. My students are largely non-Jewish and range in age from teenagers to baby boomers. Attracted by the text's manageable length, engaging style, and strong formal elements, I set out to see how "Goodbye, Columbus" would stand up as an introduction to the novel genre and to literary analysis.

In the process, I discovered some interesting carry-overs and particularities when taking the novella out of its natural habitat and exploring it with a broader audience.

Background Material: Some Assembly Required

Nearly forty-five years after its publication, the novella requires some contextualizing in most any classroom. In particular, today's students don't necessarily arrive with an understanding of the conformity culture of the 1950s, the newness of the suburbs, the difficulty of obtaining birth control, and the stigma of premarital sex. Questions like "what was the Cold War?" and "who was McCarthy?" often meet with blank stares, though with some prodding, students can generally come up with the essentials. Jewish students have at least some sense of what "nice Jewish boys" and "nice Jewish girls" do (respect their parents) and do not do (sleep around), but few have heard of Mary McCarthy or possess an appreciation for why Neil's

diaphragm request elicits such a strong negative reaction. Some students in both seminars and composition classes recognize Garden of Eden motifs, though Gauguin and primitivism generally require at least a brief introduction.

Cultural Gaps

The major theme of the tension between Americanization and ethnic identity is perhaps the hardest for composition students to grasp. Whereas Jewish-American students quickly recognize Roth's irony with regard to the Patimkins and their religious observances, such nuances tend to get lost on students who are unfamiliar with the distinctions between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism. My composition students generally take Mrs. Patimkin at her own estimation, viewing her apparent devotion to Hadassah as conclusive evidence that she is "deeply religious." The conversation in which Neil "faintly" concludes that he, like Martin Buber, is an Orthodox Jew (88) requires a certain amount of cultural translation, as does Mr. Patimkin's assertion that his children are "goyim," an appellation Neil avoids through his ability to define "gonif" (94). Non-Jewish students might also fail to recognize Aunt Gladys as a stereotype, instead thinking that she's overworked, unappreciated, and miserable in her appointed tasks of "taking out the garbage, emptying her pantry, and making threadbare bundles for what she still referred to as the Poor Jews in Palestine" (7). Such gaps can be bridged without difficulty, but it is important to clarify when Roth is being playful, facetious, or even "a little nasty" (17).

Points of Connection

Close in age to Neil and Brenda, traditional college students in both Jewish-American seminars and composition courses seem most taken with the love story. It is worth noting, however, that many of them seem surprised at how quickly Neil and Brenda -- in my students' lingo -- "hook up." Once reminded of the summertime setting, however, these same students concede that summer love has its own rules -- or, for the novella's purposes, lack thereof. While acknowledging the importance of the love story, my older returning com-

continued on page 5

How Philip Roth Cured My Depression

by M.W.



I will try to keep this simple and unadorned because it is true and it may sound false otherwise.

Both Chris and I attended Howard University, Coleman Silk's alma mater. We took Advanced Essay Writing with a Jewish teacher working on his first novel, called "Martyrs." We were young and black and enthusiastic about writing; he was young and Jewish and enthusiastic about writing. He had no cache with the English department; the English department was an array of Ph.Ds. He was an MFA. He wrote restaurant reviews and penned his novel and read his novel at the Jewish Center and absolutely adored Philip Roth. As he told me, sliding his laptop across the table so that I might read his novel-in-progress, he had once met Philip Roth.

There is a passage in one Philip Roth novel about a Holocaust survivor who writes his memoirs and his memoirs are lurid porn. The passage is hilarious and disheartening. That a Holocaust survivor could recall the Holocaust as no more than a backdrop for his libido is harrowing and absurd. That a Holocaust survivor could recall the Holocaust as no more than a backdrop for his libido is entirely possible. But it is not something one would wish to accept. It would seem as nonsensical as discovering there was a Holocaust and you were its target. The human thing to do is laugh. To laugh from fright.

"Martyrs" is about refugees. It is about father figures like *The Ghost Writer*. It is about malaise like *The Anatomy Lesson*. It is about funerals like *The Counterlife*. It is about manhood like *Patrimony*. It is about paranoia like *Operation Shylock*. It is about marriage like *My Life As A Man*. And somehow we are all metaphysical refugees. It is a poor imitation of a Philip Roth novel. It is a transcendent experience, an absurd exaltation, that has annealed into viscous porn. "Martyrs" is about a man with no hope and an obsession with Philip Roth. He copies Philip Roth stories because he cannot conjecture his own. He is a dilution. As I stared at his laptop screen, I asked the dilution what prompted him to write "Martyrs." He told me about the time he had met Philip Roth.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I told him about my novel, you know. That I was writing it and everything."

"What did he say?"

"To keep writing."

And he is still writing. Still shaping "Martyrs." One time he called to tell me he had changed the tense to the present. Chris saw him read a present tense excerpt at the Jewish Center to tepid applause. An elderly man in a wheelchair and an Orthodox woman refused to clap. Chris said that the dilution had thrown a Holocaust victim into the plot for no reason. It was shameless.

I met a couple that survived a concentration camp. They showed me the fading green numbers on their wrists. They let me touch the fuzzy yellow Jewish star, a patch they had kept. They trembled as they spoke about their past. The meeting was televised. Linda Ellerbee discussed the Holocaust with us, a group of junior high schoolers, and then brought out Holocaust survivors unannounced. Our discussion devolved into utter solemnity. The idea of a discussion was absurd: we children had nothing to say. But it turned celluloid newsreels and moral platitudes into bone and blood and wrinkles and eyes.

I read my first Philip Roth novel in the abyss of depression. *My Life As a Man* spoke to me and encouraged my dissolution. I identified with the dismal despair. I had almost drowned to death the summer prior. The anti-depressants were not working. To exorcise my grief, I emulated Philip Roth by creating an alter-ego. While I wrote stately editorials for my collegiate rag, my alter-ego wrote acerbic sermons. No one understood the biographical author-implied author schism, and so I was branded a misanthropic schizophrenic on campus, which only furthered my depression and metastasized my alter-ego. My point of contact with reality was so negligible that I might as well have mutated into a giant breast. A psychotic girl who read my columns began to stalk me, to phone me at four in the morning and pretend to be other stalkers. I was genuinely frightened. This was absurd.

continued on page 5

Depression - continued from page 4

This was not my life. This was a joke. But I could not laugh.

Chris and I often laughed about our former professor. His restaurant reviews and intermittent book reviews stank. His novel sounded dreary. He was pedantic and pretentious. I told the professor that he would never be Philip Roth. I told him by e-mail. Epistolary was more Rothian. I had by then read all of Roth's books, and considerable criticism on his books. I eviscerated my former professor. I walked by him in the parking lot, in his compact car, looking sullen, his wife beside him. His wife saw me and her eyes bulged with fright.

Chris was stabbed in the chest nine times by some Crips who thought he was a Blood. He had just gotten the tattoos. He planned to become a novelist.

I called my old professor to inform him that one of his former students was dead. I secretly wanted to know about "Martyrs." He accepted the collect call (he wasn't worth long distance) and asked me how I was doing. I was fine but Chris was dead, stabbed nine times in the chest by gang members. I said how absurd it was that the world would never get a novel of his in print. The dilution sighed and said, "Well, we all are refugees. We all are martyrs."

And I wasn't depressed anymore: I was laughing.

Teaching Goodbye, Columbus - continued from page 5

position students tend to bring a different perspective to the novella. Unlike traditional students, who see the misplaced diaphragm as centrally involved in the break-up and try to assign blame accordingly (Neil, for making Brenda get it to begin with; Brenda for leaving it home), older students highlight another dynamic: the diaphragm represents yet another way for Brenda to try to get back at her mother. Regardless of which aspect of the story they find most compelling, students in both literature seminars and introductory composition classes seem to find the novella accessible and easy to get through.

Differential Emphasis

In the context of the upper-level literature seminar, we tend to focus on what the novella has to contribute to conversations about the Jewish-American experience. Hence we emphasize themes such as materialism and the pitfalls of financial success, assimilation and becoming American, and the lingering influence of the past on the present. Roth's use of humor and anger and the ensuing controversy his works created in the Jewish-American community also enter into the discussion in the seminar forum.

Although the focus in composition class is as much on literary techniques as on themes, the Jewish-American experience can certainly serve as an entry point for broader discussions about diversity, multiethnic communities, and the American Dream. From a formalist perspective, the novella offers a good introduction to subplots and foils (the African-American

boy in the library, Ron's engagement and wedding, Leo Patimkin's American nightmare), motifs and symbols (the Patimkin forbidden fruit, ritual immersion in the Short Hills swimming pool, and the centrally-located sporting goods tree on the Patimkins' Edenic lawn), and themes (loss of innocence, trouble in paradise, ethnicity vs. Americanization, costs of the American Dream). Thanks to the plethora of secondary sources currently available, the novella lends itself to literary research papers. The continued relevance of its concerns also allows the novel to be used as a springboard for non-literary research papers on topics as varied as the meaning of the American Dream in the 21st Century, the legacy of Title IX, and the debate over bilingual education.

Back to the Library?

While Neil's attempt to "become a Patimkin with ease" runs its course and leaves him at the Newark Library on Rosh Hashana "in plenty of time for work" (120, 136), I like to think of my effort at stretching (academic) class boundaries as potentially having a longer shelf life. Certainly my experiences suggest that the pedagogical promise of the novella extends from the upper-level seminar to the first-year composition classroom and, I hope, beyond.

Works Cited

Roth, Philip. *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. 1959. New York: Vintage International, 1993.

Selected publications on Philip Roth and his works January 2001 - October 2002

Chapters from books

Daleski, H. M. "Philip Roth to Jerusalem and Back." *Ideology and Jewish Identity in Israeli and American Literature*. Ed. Emily Miller Budick. Albany: SUNY P, 2001. 79-94.

Omer-Sherman, Ranen. "'No Coherence': Philip Roth's Lamentations for Diaspora" (191-233) and "'A Stranger in the House': Assimilation, Madness, and Passing in Roth's Figure of the Pariah Jew in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *American Pastoral* (1997), and *The Human Stain* (2000)" (234-66). *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth*. Hanover: Brandeis UP, 2002.

Parrish, Tim. "Philip Roth: The Jew That Got Away." *Walking Blues: Making Americans from Emerson to Elvis*. Amherst: U of Mass P, 2001. 141-80.

Journal essays

Bлга, Carmen. "Ambiguity in Philip Roth's *The Breast*." *B. A. S.: British and American Studies* 7 (2001): 82-91.

Chase, Jefferson. "Two Sons of 'Jewish Wit': Philip Roth and Rafael Seligmann." *Comparative Literature* 53 (2001): 42-58.

Duban, James. "Being Jewish in the Twentieth Century: The Synchronicity of Roth and Hawthorne." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 21 (2002): 1-11.

Greenstein, Michael. "Secular Sermons and American Accents: The Nonfiction of Bellow, Ozick, and Roth." *Shofar* 20 (2001): 4-20.

Levy, Paule. "The Text as Homeland: A Reading of Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 21 (2002): 61-71.

Moraru, Christian. "Intertextual Bodies: Three Steps on the Ladder of Posthumanity." *Intertexts* 5 (2001): 46-60.

Pinsker, Sanford. "Art As Excess: The 'Voices' of Charlie Parker and Philip Roth." *Partisan Review* 69.1 (2002): 58-67.

---. "Climbing over the Ethnic Fence: Reflections on Stanley Crouch and Philip Roth." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 78 (2002): 472-80.

Posnock, Ross. "Purity and Danger: On Philip Roth." *Raritan* 21.2 (2001): 85-103.

Royal, Derek Parker. "Fictional Realms of Possibility: Reimagining the Ethnic Subject in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 20 (2001): 1-16.

---. "Postmodern Jewish Identity in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 48 (2002): 422-43.

Safer, Elaine B. "Tragedy and Farce in Roth's *The Human Stain*." *Critique* 43 (2002): 211-27.

Spargo, R. Clifton. "To Invent as Presumptuously as Real Life: Parody and the Cultural Memory of Anne Frank in Roth's *The Ghost Writer*." *Representations* 76 (2001): 88-119.

Tierney, William G. "Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus." *Journal of Higher Education* 73 (2002): 161-73.

Wirth-Nesher, Hana. "Resisting Allegory; or, Reading 'Eli, the Fanatic' in Tel Aviv." *Prooftexts* 21 (2001): 103-12.

Dissertations

Klimek, Julia. "Conversions and Counter-Narratives: Jewish American Autobiographies in the Twentieth Century." Diss. U of California, Davis, 2001.

Mackin, Jonna. "Subject to Laughter: Comedy and Ethnicity in Contemporary American Fiction." Diss. U of Pennsylvania, 2001.

Pagano, Rachel. "Depictions of Suburbia in American Fiction." Diss. Columbia U, 2001.

Membership Information

To become a member of The Philip Roth Society, fill out this form and mail it to the address at the bottom of the page. Annual membership fees are \$15 (\$20 for libraries and overseas addresses), which includes subscription to the Philip Roth Society Newsletter, and should be paid by check or money order (made out to "The Philip Roth Society"). If you would like to be listed in the directory of members on the Society's Web site, please indicate so by checking the appropriate space(s) on the form.

Name: _____

Academic Affiliation (if any): _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Web Page: _____

I give permission for the following information to be listed on the directory of members at The Philip Roth Society's Web site (please check all that apply):

- ALL of the above information
- Name
- Email Address
- Postal Address
- Phone Number
- Web Page Address

Full Name Signature: _____

Mail to:
 The Philip Roth Society
 c/o Derek Parker Royal
 Department of Languages and Communications
 Prairie View A&M University
 Prairie View, TX 77446-0156

.....

Message - continued from page 1

appreciate their willingness to continuously address my many questions. Other literary groups, particularly the Saul Bellow Society and the Bernard Malamud Society, were instrumental in helping a fellow organization get off the ground (perhaps in an effort to form the Hart Schaffner & Marx of literary societies?). And publishers such as the University of Nebraska Press -- which publishes *Studies in American Jewish Literature* and *Shofar* -- helped in providing me with the means to announce the founding of the Society. To all of these individuals and organizations, I express my deepest gratitude.

As I continue to answer the many questions involved in establishing a literary society, I hope others will join me in contributing to the growth of the Philip Roth Society, its sponsored events, and the ongoing publication of its newsletter.



The Philip Roth Society Newsletter

In this issue:

Message from the Society's founder

Articles on reading Roth and teaching Roth

Recent Roth publications

Upcoming events and calls for papers

The Philip Roth Society
Derek Parker Royal, newsletter editor
Department of Languages and Communications
Prairie View A&M University
Prairie View, TX 77446-0156