Philip Milton Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1933, the son of American–born parents and the grandson of European Jews who were part of the nineteenth-century wave of immigration to the United States. He grew up in the city’s lower-middle-class section of Weequahic and was educated in Newark public schools. In works as generically diverse as *The Facts* (1988) and *The Plot Against America* (2004), Roth pulls from his Weequahic experiences in ways that are both evocative and confounding, problematizing distinctions between “fact” and “fiction.” He later enrolled as a pre-law student at Newark College at Rutgers, but eventually transferred to Bucknell College, where he received his BA. He completed his master’s degree at the University of Chicago; afterward he taught creative writing at both Iowa and Princeton, and for many years he taught comparative literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He retired from teaching in 1992.

Although publishing several apprentice-quality stories throughout the mid-1950s, Roth first gained critical notice with *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959). Composed of previously published stories as well as new short fiction and the title novella, this first book brought quick critical attention to the young writer and made an impact that would resonate throughout his career. *Goodbye, Columbus* was hailed by such critics as Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler, and
Roth's ironic portrayal of middle-class Jews in postwar America, caught between the anchors of tradition and the temptations of assimilation, earned him the ire of many readers, and several influential rabbis denounced him as a self-hating Jew. This became a critical tendency that would mark the first years of Roth's career. Careful readers of the texts, however, would notice a more complicated or ambivalent relationship between the author and his Jewish roots. Indeed, throughout his oeuvre, Roth has pitted his protagonists' need for independence and self-discovery against the demands of the (ethnic) community. They rebel against what the narrator of The Human Stain (2000) describes as “the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head” (108). In terms of his readership, this tyranny played itself out from the very beginning. Many believed that narratives such as "Defender of the Faith" (1959) and the novella Goodbye, Columbus presented Jews in a way that would only fuel the longstanding prejudices against and even hatred of Jews in the United States. Roth spent the next couple of decades writing against such assumptions, even using this resistance as material for his 1979 novel, The Ghost Writer, whose protagonist is accused of airing his family's, and by association his ethnic community's dirty laundry.

Nonetheless, the two novels that followed Goodbye, Columbus have much less of a "Jewish feel" to them. Both Letting Go (1962) and When She Was Good (1967) are exercises in a more straightforward Jamesian realism – Roth has said that when writing his first novel, he had a copy of Portrait of a Lady beside him, and indeed, the nineteenth-century novel undergirds Roth's text – and while stylistically similar to Goodbye, Columbus, their manner stands apart from the kind of humor that will largely define the first half of his career. Partly for this reason, they are two of the most underappreciated texts in Roth criticism today. This is unfortunate, since both of these novels were early testing grounds for Roth's everrevolving voice. Of particular note is When She Was Good, the story of a young Midwestern woman trapped by societal restrictions – à la Flaubert's Madame Bovary – and one of the only narratives in which Roth focuses through a female perspective.

For many readers, Roth is best known for the wildly popular and comedic tour de force Portnoy's Complaint. It was the New York Times's bestseller for the entire year of 1969, an unheard-of accolade for a "literary" novel, and it became for many readers the defining text of the sexual liberation movement. Perhaps even more significant, it also made a celebrity out of Roth, an uncomfortable – yet experientially rich – predicament that he would later use as narrative grist in such novels as Zuckerman Unbound (1981), The Anatomy Lesson (1983), and Operation Shylock (1993). Portnoy's Complaint is the first-person tirade of Alexander Portnoy, whose overprotective mother leaves him with guilt and insecurity that can only be relieved through elaborate masturbation and sex with forbidden Gentile women, or shiksas. The entire novel is Portnoy's meandering and salacious spiel to his psychiatrist, Dr. Spielvogel, and many have called it the literary equivalent of a Jewish mother joke. But the novel is much more than a vulgar comedy shtick, an accusation leveled by Irving Howe, who had once been one of Roth's most prominent defenders. It is a highly experimental work whose genesis can be found in four separate projects that Roth had begun and then abandoned throughout the 1960s: a vaudevillian narrative entitled The Jewboy, a dramatic work-in-progress first performed as The Nice Jewish Boy, an outrageous monologue centered around the genitalia and private anatomy of famous individuals, and a highly autobiographical work of fiction whose working title was Portrait of the Artist. Through the synthesis of these unlikely literary trajectories, Roth established the volatile style that would define his writing for the next 40 years.

After the publication of Portnoy's Complaint, Roth began a series of experimental comic narratives that, although never living up to the promise set by his bestselling novel, further pushed the boundaries of literary outrageousness. Our Gang (1971) is a Swiftian satire of the Nixon administration whose absurdities uncannily anticipate the revelations of the Watergate trials. Another short novel, The Breast (1972), is a Kafkaesque tale of David Kepes, Roth's first professor of desire who literally turns into a female breast. But perhaps the most notable of Roth's post-Portnoy works is his 1973 baseball narrative, The Great American Novel, a farcical mixture of Frank Norris's novelistic quest and the great American pastime. With its politically incorrect humor, insouciant handling of literary icons, and attack on every sacred American ideal, the novel gives new meaning to the term "extreme sports."

With My Life as a Man (1974), Roth began focusing on what would become his most enduring, and arguably his best defining, theme: the responsibilities of the author and the intersection of text and self. He would describe this in his first book of non-fiction, Reading Myself and Others (1975), as a "preoccupation with the relationship between the written and the unwritten world" (p. xi). My Life as a Man was Roth's first overt engagement with self-reflective fiction, and it is perhaps the first work in which he could unequivocally be defined as a postmodern writer. It is the story of Peter Tarnopol, a writer who creates a fictional character named Nathan Zuckerman (his first appearance in a Roth novel), and how his narratives become the testing fields of subjectivity. Just over 10 years later, Roth expands upon this theme in his postmodern tour de force, The Counterlife (1986), an ambitious and meticulously crafted novel whose characters constantly negotiate or "rewrite" their selves in ways that are underscored by the novel's very structure. Each
of the book's five different sections is rewritten by the sections that follow, so that the “facts” that are presented in one chapter appear to be fabrications in another. In essence, the entire novel is an exercise in narrative deconstruction.

What many scholars of post–1960 American literature tend to overlook is the fact that Philip Roth is in many ways a postmodern writer. While his narratives may not overtly resemble the metafictional absurdities of a Donald Barthelme or emphasize the cultural frivolousness found in Thomas Pynchon, they nonetheless betray characteristics that are not dissimilar from the work of these authors. If, at the risk of overgeneralizing, postmodern narrative can be defined as problematizing both originality and authenticity, emphasizing indeterminacy and contingency, representing experience as fragmented, subverting distinctions between “high” and “low” culture, and revealing subjectivity as a negotiated construct, then most of Roth's works could be read within this context.

Such is indeed the case with the series of books that make up the Zuckerman Bound collection: the novels The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound, The Anatomy Lesson, and the novella epilogue, The Prague Orgy (1985). The opening Kunstlerroman of the series, The Ghost Writer (1979), stands as a telling example of the post–modern subject. In the novel, the first in which Nathan Zuckerman serves as the central protagonist, the up–and–coming artist appropriates and rewrites the fate of Anne Frank through the fantasized life of a young student, Amy Bellette. By re–imagining Bellette as an older Anne Frank, one who never died in the Holocaust but instead made her way to America, Zuckerman attempts to narrate or “write” himself directly into the literary (and Jewish) community, and by so doing, legitimize his art. In Zuckerman Unbound (1981) and The Anatomy Lesson (1983), Roth directly addresses, via his narrative doppelganger Zuckerman, the kinds of criticism leveled at him in being both vulgar and disrespectful of his Jewish heritage.

In fact, there is a tendency among Roth's critics to read him primarily as a great chronicler of contemporary, and assimilated, Jewish life in America. Such prejudices are what Saul Bellow had in mind when he sardonically observed that he, Roth, and Bernard Malamud are often lumped together as the Hart, Schaffner, and Marx of American literature, assuming that just because each came from Jewish backgrounds (just as the famous clothiers), they should be read in light of their ethnicity. However, in 2002, upon winning the National Book Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award, Philip Roth said in his acceptance speech that he has always thought of himself as an American writer: “I have never thought of myself for the length of a single sentence as an American Jewish or a Jewish American writer, anymore than I imagine Theodor Dreiser or Ernest Hemingway or John Cheever thought of themselves as American Christian or Christian American writers.” His statements may appear provocative, but this was not the only occasion where Roth expressed uneasiness at being labeled a Jewish writer. Throughout his career he has performed a curious balancing act of inscribing his Jewish roots while at the same time denying the ethnic–specific signifiers that place him in the contemporary American canon.

Beginning with The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography (1988), Roth published a tetralogy of works that explored the interplay between “fiction” and “fact” in ways that far surpassed his earlier works. Through his protagonist in these works, a character named Philip Roth, the author questions any static understandings of the autobiographical and fictional genres, and he mischievously encourages the reader to become caught up in this literary game of where one ends and the other begins. The Facts, purportedly a work of non–fiction, is framed by letters to and from Roth's fictional double, Nathan Zuckerman, and the one text specifically billed as a work of fiction, Deception: A Novel (1990), reads more like a dramatic script than it does a novel. The style and plot of Patrimony: A True Story (1991) are novelistic in nature – and it even contains passages reminiscent of Roth's earlier fiction – and Operation Shylock: A Confession (1993), one of Roth's most ambitious works, is based on a premise so outlandish that its autobiographic pretense becomes part of the joke.

Sabbath's Theater (1995), considered by many scholars to be Roth's masterpiece, is a return to the outrageous psychosexual (and tragicomic) form that entertained and outraged so many in Portnoy's Complaint. Its "hero," the lewd and arthritic puppeteer Mickey Sabbath, is the very embodiment of transgressive behavior, but one through which his author clearly establishes an "American character." Indeed, national character is the primary focus of his multiple–award–winning American Trilogy: American Pastoral (1997), I Married a Communist (1998), and The Human Stain. Each of these three novels reflects a key moment in late–twentieth–century American experience – in the 1960s, 1950s, and 1990s, respectively – and each is chronicled by an older Nathan Zuckerman, no longer the audacious young writer he once was. In this later trilogy, the aged and reclusive author reveals through his narration a series of memorable individuals who, in many ways, represent the social, political, and psychological conflicts that define postwar America. Roth followed his American Trilogy with still another historically conscious novel, The Plot Against America, his biggest seller since Portnoy's Complaint. The book is, among other things, a work of speculative fiction, an alternate history where Charles Lindbergh wins the 1940 presidential election; an allegory of the George W. Bush administration and post–9/11 America; and an example of historiographic metafiction, a demonstration of the contingent and constructed nature of both fictional and historic narratives.
More recently, Roth has been employing the novella or short novel form with increasing regularity. Perhaps his most ambitious example of this is *The Dying Animal* (2001a), a first-person confessional on sex and aging, and the third in a trilogy of novels focusing on the protagonist David Kepesh – *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire* (1977) being the other two. Roth further explores the travails of aging in *Everyman* (2006) and *Exit Ghost* (2007), the latter supposedly being the final Zuckerman installment, and in terms of plot and focalization, it functions as a thematic bookend to *The Ghost Writer*. By bringing his protagonist full circle, Roth underscores many of the themes that have defined his narrative oeuvre and in doing so paints a vivid – and, at times, frantic – portrait of the artist as an old man. Other late novellas, *Indignation* (2008) and *The Humbling* (2009), similarly focus on the dark crossroads of death and desire.

In addition to his fiction, Roth has also proven to be an accomplished essayist. In collections such as *Reading Myself and Others* and *Shop Talk* (2001b), his focus is on the act of writing, both his own and that of other authors. The lengthy interviews that make up *Shop Talk* are a testament to Roth's unwavering and ongoing admiration of some of the most significant writers in the last half of the twentieth century. Until 1989 he was the general editor of the Penguin book series Writers From the Other Europe, which he inaugurated in 1974. The series helped to introduce American audiences to, among others, Milan Kundera, Primo Levi, Aharon Appelfeld, and Ivan Klima.

Unlike many prolific novelists, whose productive qualities may wane over time, Roth has demonstrated a unique ability to not only sustain his literary output, but also even surpass the achievements of his previous writings. His latter fiction is arguably his best work, as demonstrated by the succession of awards he received in the 1990s. His many accolades and honors include a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, two National Book Awards, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, three PEN/Faulkner Awards, the National Medal of the Arts, the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and the PEN/Nabokov Award for lifetime achievement, and he was the very first recipient of the PEN/Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction. To call him one of the most accomplished American writers in the past 50 years would be an understatement.

**SEE ALSO:** Bellow, Saul (AF); Ethnicity and Fiction (AF); Historiographic Metafiction (AF); Humor and Satire (WF); Jewish Fiction (BIF); Malamud, Bernard (AF); Postmodernist Fiction (AF); Social–Realist Fiction (AF)

**REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS**


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