

★ **Philip Roth: A Counterlife****Ira Nadel**

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Ira Nadel's *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* is an intense and illuminating study of the life, times, and work of the Jewish man from Newark who became one of America's most original and provocative writers.

Nadel brings meticulous research, attention to detail, and extensive knowledge of Roth's work to his incisive and intimate portrait of the man whose writings, marked by dark comedy and a tendency toward acidic wit, explored the contradictions and neuroses of being a Jewish man in twentieth-century America. Drawing on interviews and archives, personal correspondence, Roth's own work, and never-before-revealed material, the book traces Roth's life, from his identity-shaping, Depression-era childhood in Weequahic, a Jewish enclave in Newark, New Jersey, throughout his fifty-plus-year career as a writer and educator.

Plagued by physical pain and illness, failed relationships, anxiety, and rage, Roth lived out his inner conflicts, and some of his wildest imaginings, in his writing. Exploring Roth's pleasure in creating a "counterlife" for himself, the book casts light on the stunning degree to which his work blurs the lines between truth and fiction.

Roth was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, three PEN/Faulkner Awards, the Man Booker International Prize, two National Book Awards, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, and a place in the hallowed Library of America, but his work was not universally well received. As Nadel reveals, some found his focus on Jewish men's sexual neurosis distasteful; others were troubled by his acts of revenge (he had a penchant for writing those who had offended him into his books); and several noted rabbis declared his work harmful to Jews.

Nadel's pointed analysis explores how Roth, who once said he "didn't want to be caged in by reality," exposed the realities that all face, but most seek to avoid.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2021)

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