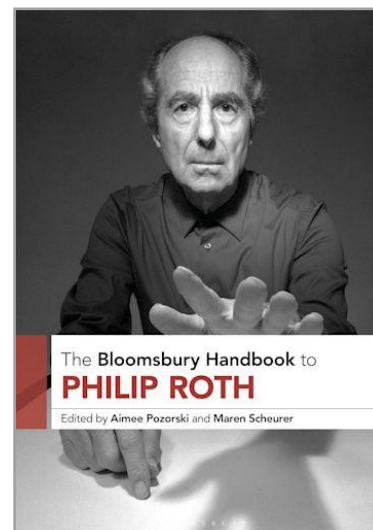


Aimee Pozorski and Maren Scheurer, eds.

The Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth

New York, Bloomsbury, 2024, pp. 424

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Keywords: *Philip Roth, Roth Studies, contemporary American literature*

Six years after his death, and three years after the publication of both his biography (Bailey 2021) and counter-biography (Nadel 2021), Philip Roth still proves to be one for the limelight. Throughout the years, his talent and his tendency to pinpoint and contradict what scholars, journalists, and even Wikipedia had to say about his production (Roth 2017) offered numerous reasons for reimagining and reinterpreting his work. The 2024 *Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth*, edited by Aimee Pozorski and Maren Scheuer, takes on both the present and the upcoming challenges of discussing his legacy, whilst demonstrating to be a remarkable achievement in Roth's scholarship.

The extensive collection of essays derives from Pozorski and Scheuer's role as executive co-editors of the Purdue University Press journal *Philip Roth Studies*, a role that put them "in an ideal position to observe the field's development and continue [their] conversations with Roth readers around the globe" (1). This ongoing dialogue resulted in a comprehensive collection of thirty-three chapters and three appendices that serve as a compass to navigate Roth's legacy and lead the way to new critical approaches in the field of Roth studies. Each chapter traces a *fil rouge* in his oeuvre not by focusing on a novel or nonfiction work but by attesting to their interconnectedness and, simultaneously, to Roth's vision at large. This is one of the preliminary aims of the book, which is articulated into six thematic sections, all of which prove to be coherent with this purpose.

Part one is titled "Roth through the Genres," and it provides an overview of the author's works "to highlight experimentation and the influence of earlier texts on subsequent novels

throughout Roth's writing" (4). The first chapter of the *Handbook* is written by Pia Masiero, who gets into the heart of the debate as she explores the author's use of voices, describing it as a "ventriloquistic endeavor" (16), thus substantiating the importance Roth ascribed to the very notion of character. It was with his first publication, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), that he began to introduce his famously provocative and performative protagonists to the public, proving, as Victoria Aarons argues in her chapter, that the genre of the short story looked ideal in portraying the state of the divided self that constantly accompanied his characters. Melissa Schuh's essay examines autobiography and autofiction, genres that Roth frequently employed to deceive his readers. In contrast, Joshua Powell gives an insight into how his writing "interrogates the discourses of mid-century liberalism as they were emerging in the early 1960s" (48). Particularly, he addresses the author's use of drama to discuss such defining topics. One of the most provocative genres Roth embraced in his career is nonfiction. In her essay, Elèna Mortara unmasks the structure of those books that fall under this definition, thus revealing once again the author's ability to deceive his readers even in works that claim to be faithful to the truth. Eventually, Jack Knowles's chapter provides a comprehensive perspective on Roth's propensity to supervise the production process of the entirety of his creations. In fact, his "editorialist" attitude proved decisive in the making of his fortune. It even became vital for others' fortune as well: he played, in fact, a crucial role as promoter of the Penguin's series "Writers from the Other Europe," through which he edited the English versions of the novels by dissident writers such as Bruno Schulz and Milan Kundera.

One of the most interesting features that emerges from the author's prolific production is his natural disposition towards other disciplines besides fiction. Matthew Shipe inaugurates the second part of the *Handbook*, titled "Roth across Disciplines," with an insightful consideration of the role of music as a "counternarrative" to which Roth's characters turn "as a means of shaping their sense of both the past and the present" (81). In her essay, Valérie Roberge delves into the ways in which Roth practiced philosophy, a discipline that helped him solve problems related to the construction of the self, such as norms, identity, and will. Another defining discipline in the author's life and novels has been sport, to which Mike Witcombe dedicates his analysis, emphasizing the fascinating connection between athletic characters and death (105). David Brauner's essay turns to Roth's treatment of the aesthetics of fine art, while Timothy Parrish tackles one of the most critical and debated disciplines in Roth's work: religion and the "quarrel with God," thus anticipating the topic of the third section of the book as he emphasizes the ongoing dialogue between religion and history. Finally, David Gooblar shifts the focus to the

subject of academia in Roth's novels, a field in which the author also used to work and from which he built the foundations of his long-lasting career.

The third part, "Reading History through Roth," addresses one of the main concerns in the author's production and seals its importance in the field of Roth studies at large. Strictly intertwined with the question of history is politics, "the great generalizer" (Roth 1999, 223), which complicates the author's relationship with Americanness, as highlighted by Claudia Brühwiler. Dean Franco narrows the analysis to the growing commitment to describing the possibilities and limits of democracy in Roth's later production, while Daniel Doufournaud provides an account of upward mobility and the welfare state in relation to Jewishness. Strictly related to American history and identity as a social construct is the theme of racial passing, which Aimee Pozorski brings to the center stage as she insightfully reflects on *The Human Stain* (2000) as a passing novel. The other major historical concern in Roth's fiction is, most evidently, the Holocaust. James Wigren highlights the difficulties of writing about such a defining moment in history. The author bypasses these difficulties by cleverly mixing them with American myths and history (194). This outcome is patiently achieved, as Bryan Cheyette correctly claims in the final essay of the section, through Roth's most famous diasporic character, Nathan Zuckerman. Part four, as the title—"New Directions in Roth Studies"—suggests, includes essays that lead the way to new critical approaches in the field. Eric Leonidas reflects on the pastoral genre, analyzing the convergence of nature and urban space from an ecological viewpoint. Concerning the topic of urban space, Naomi Taum's essay chooses Whiteness Studies as a critical lens to provide a new perspective on the questions of race and Jewishness within a specific cultural landscape. Ira Nadel shifts the attention to the inevitable human conditions of pain, illnesses, and death, taking the cue from the Medical Humanities and their contribution to the narrativization of illness. Continuing on this topic, Joshua Lander offers a close reading of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), reflecting on the role of the Jewish body in Roth's fiction. RL Goldberg confronts an unusual topic of discussion in the field of Roth Studies, that of 'queerness,' and addresses how "[a]cross Roth's corpus, queer characters invoke silence" (261), a silence that mostly comes from his notorious male protagonists such as Nathan Zuckerman, Philip Roth, David Kepesh, and Marcus Messner. The last chapter of this thought-provoking section is written by Maren Scheurer, who persuasively discusses the themes of old age and disability, with a focus on Roth's later novels.

"Adaptations and Influences" is the title of the fifth section of the *Handbook*, which focuses on the "creative response[s] to Roth" (7). It begins with an essay written by Miriam Jaffe that centers on cancel culture, a thorny issue that has often been at the center of debate not only

within Roth's fiction but also throughout his life and, especially, after his death. Another curious feature of Roth's influence is investigated by Michael Kalisch, who reflects on the responses to his alleged misogyny given by authors such as Nicole Krauss and Lisa Halliday, while Brett Ashley Kaplan gives insights into Roth's reception abroad, especially in those countries he frequently visited and actively engaged with, such as the Czech Republic, Italy, and France. Debra Shostak, who is also the author of "Appendix Three," offers a comprehensive overview of all the challenges that involved movie adaptations, especially because Roth "devote[d] comparatively little of his narrative energies to the visual" (317). The last chapter of the section is an interview conducted by the editors with Bryan Zanisnik, a New York City-based artist who, in 2016 and 2017, created a site-specific installation titled "Philip Roth Presidential Library." The conversation highlights Roth's influence on different aesthetic forms and other people's creative processes and, at the same time, provides a recollection of his uncompromising tendency to control his own legacy.

Part six, "Shop Talk," owes its title to Roth's 2001 collection of interviews with writers such as Primo Levi, Aharon Applefield, and Milan Kundera, just to mention a few, and focuses on the challenges of carrying on Roth's posthumous legacy in both the academic and the non-academic field. Maggie McKinley investigates the "unique challenges" of teaching such a complex author, arguing that all "the density, length, point of view, tone, sense of humor, and at times essential historical context" (337) of his work could be overcome by playing out a "pedagogy of compassion" (339). Jesse Tisch's chapter traces Roth's ongoing quarrel with his most feared enemies: death and, most notably, his biographers; Gustavo Sánchez Canales provides an interesting testimony of the censorship attempts during the "late Francoism" that affected the translations of Roth's already controversial texts. The final chapter of this intensive journey through Roth's legacy is dedicated to the genesis, purpose, and content of The Philip Roth Personal Library, which is hosted by the Newark Public Library and was inaugurated in June 2021.

Three Appendices conclude the *Handbook*: the first is an "Annotated Bibliography" of all monographs, edited collections, and biographical works dedicated to Roth. Then, an annotated inventory of the author's "Uncollected Published Stories," with a bibliographic indication and summary of each story. Finally, Appendix Three sets out "A Guide to Film and Television Adaptations of Roth's Fiction" by listing them all with a selection of comparative criticisms and reviews.

When reading this exceedingly informed recollection, the first impression that comes to mind is the resourcefulness of Philip Roth's lifetime work, a versatility that Pozorski and Scheuer successfully managed to get organized while allowing its numerous reinterpretations to engage

in a fervent debate. Their approach valued “collaborations among women, international scholarship, interdisciplinary methods, and support of emerging scholars” (1), and resulted in a comprehensive outlook of one of the most debated and influential authors of contemporary American literature, a prospect that succeeds in providing detailed close-readings and original interpretations. In light of this, *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth* serves not only as a general guide to getting acquainted with Roth, but also manages to give an up-to-date *status quaestionis* of where Roth Studies are, and where they are currently heading, thus becoming an indispensable tool to navigate an authorial legacy that uncompromisingly provokes, deceives, and, with its “sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness” (Roth 2017, 120), is still able to entertain.

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