PHILIP ROTH (1933-2018): HIS WORKS, HIS LITERARY HEIRS, HIS LEGACY

Introduction:

When Philip Roth passed away last year, he was almost universally honored by the literary community as a “propulsive force,” an “astonishing force field.” The New Yorker eulogy suggests that he was “in competition with the best in American Fiction—with Melville, James, Hemingway, Faulkner, Bellow, Updike, and Morrison—but he was funnier, more spontaneous than any of them.” Some of his novels are enduring classics—from the savage youthful exuberance of Portnoy’s Complaint, through his most fertile mid-career with American Pastoral, The Human Stain, and Sabbath’s Theatre (Roth’s favorite), unto his prescient late novel—The Plot against America—that anticipates the authoritarian menace of the Trump era. With a final burst of creative energy, from ages 75 to 80, he concentrated on the condensed form of the novella and tackled the difficult passage into what he described in Everyman as the “massacre” of advanced old age.

In this session, I intend to evaluate Roth’s legacy, particularly as a provocative Jewish America writer, paying heed to both his acolytes and his detractors. We will read several of his shorter works for close scrutiny in the following chronological sequence—Goodbye Columbus (a novella and stories), The Ghost Writer, Everyman, and his final work of fiction—Nemesis. This core reading will be supplemented by select non-fiction essays, op-eds, and speeches (including his late Trump observations). In subsequent sessions, some of Roth’s literary “heirs” among the current crop of mostly, but not exclusively, Jewish American fiction writers will be sampled, such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Allegra Goodman, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen, and Gary Shteyngart. While not required reading, his classic above-mentioned full-length novels will be considered and placed in the context of his 50 year fiction writing career (30+ published works).

The great Jewish American literary triumvirate of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth are often grouped together as expressing a certain post-World War II secular Jewish sensibility (though Roth was half a generation removed from the Jewish immigrant world of Bellow and Malamud), one that is characterized by “a kind of alienation that is enlivened and exacerbated by what binds it.” At the same time, each of these distinguished writers subscribes to various iterations of heroic and humanistic values from previous American eras (the New Deal, World War II) that now seem all but lost with the perversion of the American Dream in our compromised contemporary era.

In so many of Roth’s works in particular, one discovers a palpable nostalgia for the lost mythic world of his Jewish childhood in the Weequahic neighborhood of
Newark, New Jersey. For Roth, this was part and parcel of the American experience writ large as he rejected the parochial label as a Jewish writer. Some of his most poignant passages emanate from vivid recollections from “the world of our fathers” (to borrow the book title from distinguished critic and historian Irving Howe).

Yet, for some fine contemporary writers and critics, such as Jewish American novelist Dara Horn, Roth’s legacy seems antique and narcissistic and brims with white male privilege that is so antithetical to feminist sensibilities in the Me Too era. Still, the preponderance of the literary community, including leading female novelists such as Joyce Carol Oates and Nicole Krauss and biographer Claudia Roth Pierpont (no relation), would beg to differ. Oates succinctly regards the essential Roth as sui generis—something like “Kafka riotously interpreted by Lenny Bruce.”

As we explore a representative group of Roth novellas and other commentaries and place these within the larger context of his distinguished place in American literature, I trust that we will bring Philip Roth into sharper focus. I will supplement the class with some revealing documentary film footage and other images. Thanks to Maxine Einhorn, our after hours film sessions will feature three movies based on Roth novels. In the end, I trust that this session will provide an entertaining and provocative inquiry into Philip Roth—his life, his work, his influence, and his profound legacy.

**Reading Calendar:**

Week One (April 11): Introduction

Week Two (April 18): **Goodbye Columbus** (the novella).

Week Three (April 25): **Goodbye Columbus** (stories). Start **The Ghost Writer**

Week Four (May 2): Finish **The Ghost Writer**

Week Five (May 9): Start **Everyman**

Week Six (May 23): Finish **Everyman**

Week Seven (May 30): **Nemesis** (first half)

Week Eight (June 6): Finish **Nemesis**

**Supplemental Reading** (not required, but will be reviewed in context):