

PROFESSOR ANTHONY WEXLER WEIGHS IN ON PHILIP ROTH'S LIFE & LEGACY

By Alanna E. Cooper | October 24, 2018

In advance of [Anthony Wexler's](#) October 29 lecture, "[Why Philip Roth Matters](#)," I sat down to speak with him about Roth's incredibly productive writing career. Our lively conversation covered a range of topics addressed in Roth's novels including aging, anxiety, sex, and the Holocaust.

Alanna Cooper: I understand Roth figures prominently in your own writing

Anthony Wexler: Yes, the book I'm working on focuses on the American culture of the Holocaust, and Roth has a lot to say about that topic. Roth was interested in the ways American Jews feel haunted by events they did not experience directly, and how their ideas about the Holocaust have changed over time. I look specifically at Roth's late work, which includes novels that focus on aging.

AC: What do you mean by "novels that focus on aging"?

AW: I mean novels that feature characters who are old – or characters who think of themselves as old – and who are looking back on their lives. They worry about events they took too seriously, or not seriously enough, and they feel overwhelmed by the traumatic events that defined the century. They want to fully integrate their pain into a coherent life story, but that's hard to do when your life has overlapped with the Holocaust.

AC: Can you tell me a little about the Zuckerman series?

AW: Nathan Zuckerman is Roth's best-known character, and he plays an important role in nine of Roth's novels. He goes through a process of aging as Roth himself ages. The series begins in 1979 with *The Ghost Writer* and ends in 2007 with the publication of *Exit Ghost*. Zuckerman is one of the great characters in postwar American fiction.

AC: Does Roth use Nathan Zuckerman to say something about the Holocaust?

AW: Well Zuckerman is certainly critical of the way American Jews – particularly those who are not survivors – tried to make the Holocaust their own. In *The Ghost Writer* (1979), the young Nathan Zuckerman fantasizes about Anne Frank. He imagines that she survived the war, and ends up in the United States. He meets her, and marries her. The story is satirical. It's Roth's way of critiquing American Jews who were turning the genocide of the Jews into sentimental, kitsch, pop-culture.

AC: Would you call Roth a Jewish writer?

AW: I would. His characters, his humor and his subjects all place him within a Jewish tradition.



Anthony Wexler & Alanna E. Cooper

AC: But he had many Jewish critics, right?

AW: Yes. His early works outraged members of the Jewish community because he depicted some of his Jewish characters as sexually devious, cunning, and eager to capitalize on their suffering.

AC: Does this bother you?

AW: No. Roth is simply doing what writers do. Roth is under no obligation to present people acting on their best behavior. As a novelist, he has the freedom to depict the ugly and unseemly sides of human nature, which people would prefer to ignore.

AC: When did you start reading Philip Roth?

When I was in my teens. I found *Portnoy's Complaint* on a bookshelf and was shocked when I started reading it! Here was a neurotic Jewish son who had gone public with his angst, neuroses, and sexual desire.

AC: Do you teach Philip Roth to undergraduates?

Roth has always been a challenging writer to teach. People have long criticized his work as demeaning to women. And, in today's climate he's become especially hard to teach because so many of his male protagonists are white, straight, privileged, and so strongly sexualized. His candor and explicitness can be unnerving.

AC: I imagine *Portnoy's Complaint* is particularly triggering

Yes, that's the right word to use here. I happened to be teaching *Portnoy's Complaint* around the time of the 2016 election, and the release of Trump's Access Hollywood tapes. I had a few students who started reading the book, and refused to continue. They couldn't bear the protagonist's bravado and the sexual impropriety.

AC: How did you handle this?

AW: I think the suggestion that Portnoy equals Roth equals Trump is deeply mistaken. But I understood why students' might draw this analogy. In fact, Roth's whole mission is to confront readers with things that are unsettling or shameful. So, I had to start with students' initial reactions, which are important, but then work back to the text to see exactly what Roth is up to.

AC: That sets up a difficult classroom dynamic. Is there a Roth book that is more straightforward to teach?

AW: Yes. *American Pastoral*, which tells a remarkable story of three generations of American Jews. Many characters in Roth's books are angry sons rebelling against parents or communal elders. *American Pastoral* is different. It's about a about a decent, but flawed guy – a Jewish father trying to make sense of his daughter who has become radicalized by the Vietnam War.

AC: Does Roth inspire you as you work on your own writing?

AW: Roth's work ethic certainly inspires me. And I think he captures a period of American Jewish life better than anyone else.

To learn more about Philip Roth, register for upcoming lecture, "[Why Philip Roth Matters](#)" on October 29 at 7 p.m. with Professor Anthony Wexler.

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