

Philip Roth's PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT

BY ELIZABETH LUNDAY

THERE'S REALLY NO TWO WAYS ABOUT IT. PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT IS A DIRTY BOOK.

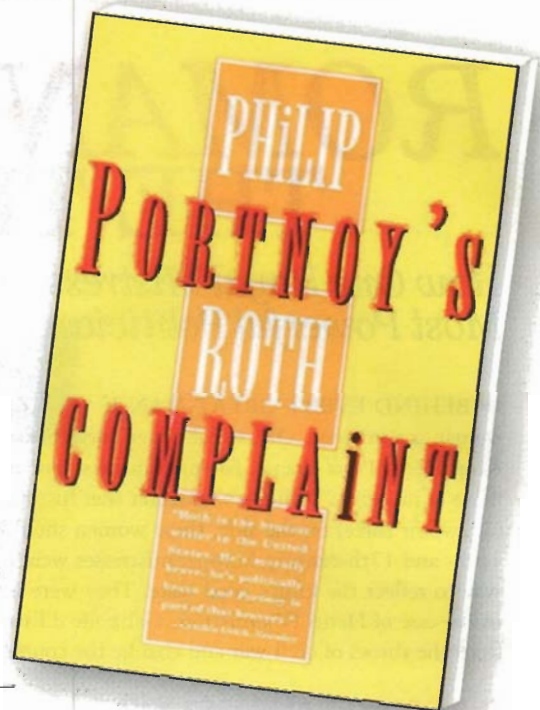
When it comes to R-rated material, you name it; it's got it. And yet, this novel has ended up on almost every great-books ranking out there—from the Modern Library's list of 100 Best Novels of the 20th Century (coming in at No. 52) to *Time's* list of All-Time 100 Novels. But how did such a salacious tome become a beloved American classic?

THERAPY GETS PHYSICAL

To put it simply, *Portnoy's Complaint* is about a sex-obsessed neurotic whining to his therapist. But in Philip Roth's hands, the story becomes much more complex. Roth manages to frame the protagonist, Alexander Portnoy, as a surprisingly sympathetic character, so that—somehow—it's never annoying that Portnoy is sex-obsessed, or neurotic, or whiny.

Portnoy's confessions to his psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel, begin with tales from his childhood in war-era Newark, N.J., as the son of an overbearing mother and an anxious, anal-retentive father. Together, they put tremendous pressure on Portnoy to be the "perfect Jewish boy"—a burden he bitterly resents. Consequently, his adolescent rebellion doesn't manifest in drug use or tattoos, but in a seriously overactive libido. Not surprisingly, his fantasy life (described in shocking detail) centers around burlesque dancers and neighborhood *shikas*—blond-haired, blue-eyed Gentile girls his parents staunchly disapproved of. Fantasy turns into reality during Portnoy's college years and early adulthood, as he lives out his sexual desires with a succession of women who are anything but Jewish.

But Portnoy is skilled at keeping up appearances. In his 30s, he becomes New York City's Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity, working with the poor and downtrodden. This not only gives him public prestige but also wins him big points with his parents. In private, however, his pursuit of pleasure is driven to new extremes—particularly as it relates to his girlfriend, Mary Jane Reed (known as The Monkey), an uneducated beauty from the hills of West Virginia. Portnoy seeks to rescue her from her deprived (and depraved) past, while simultaneously recoiling from her lack of sophistication. Their relationship eventually collapses, and Portnoy flees to Israel, imagining a life for himself among his Jewish people. But there, both his sexual and cultural identities are compromised during an encounter with a young Israeli. When Portnoy finds himself unable to "perform," his would-be lover calls him "nothing but a self-hating Jew." Shattered and groveling, Portnoy ends his monologue with an extended primal scream.



SHOCK AND AWE (BUT MORE AWE)

Portnoy's Complaint began as a series of sketches that appeared in *Esquire*, *Partisan Review*, and *New American Review*. But after it was released as a comprehensive novel in 1969, public reaction was immediate ... and decidedly mixed. *The New Yorker* called *Portnoy's Complaint* "one of the dirtiest books ever published." Yet, in the same breath the magazine admitted, "it is also one of the funniest." *Time* took a more confused approach, declaring the book "too funny not to be taken seriously." Meanwhile, others were downright nasty. Critic Irving Howe, for instance, said, "The cruelest thing anyone can do to *Portnoy's Complaint* is to read it twice."

If *Portnoy's Complaint* were nothing more than a curious literary cocktail of sex and humor, it would have been long forgotten by now. Instead, the novel grapples with issues of ethnic identity never before dealt with in American literature at the time, giving it the kind of historical significance necessary to make it onto all of those "great books" lists. For many Jews, *Portnoy's Complaint* represents the book that introduced WASP America to Jewish-American culture. Along with writers such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, Roth brings to life the post-war Jewish

experience in the 1950s—the liver for dinner, the afternoon mah-jongg games, the chants of the Jewish high school boys (“We play football, we play soccer / And we keep matzos in our locker!”). Yet, he doesn’t ignore the Jews’ fear and resentment of American culture. Via Portnoy, Roth is able to describe the emotional distance between first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants, the limitations of traditional Jewish life, and the struggle to discover what it means to be both a Jew and an American.

While *Portnoy’s Complaint* is, in many ways, a book about the Jewish diaspora, it also manages to be characteristically American. Portnoy is more than a Jew; he is a young man searching for his sense of individuality—a theme that resonates with readers of

all ethnicities. “It is coming out my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews!” Portnoy cries. “I happen also to be a human being!” In addition, Portnoy is relatable to readers as a child who can’t reconcile his family’s expectations and inculcated beliefs with his own desires and failings. He feels trapped by his need to be “good”—seeing the price of goodness as a life robbed of all pleasure. The extremes of sexuality he explores serve to illustrate just how far he’ll go to flee his parental trap. “Doctor,” he asks, “what should I rid myself of, tell me, the hatred . . . or the love?”

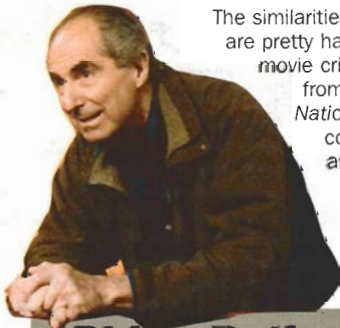
LIVING TO TELL THE TALE

Portnoy’s Complaint was Roth’s fourth book. And even though his 1959 effort, *Goodbye, Columbus, and Five Short*

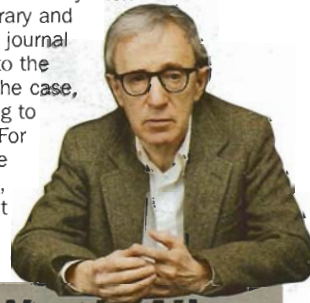
Stories, won him the National Book Award, Portnoy made Roth rich and famous. Before the book was even released, in fact, Roth sold the film rights to a production company. Sure, the 1972 movie was a flop, but it allowed Roth to quit teaching and write full-time. Fame, however, seemed to annoy Roth more than it gratified him. Many critics point to *Portnoy’s Complaint* as a thinly-veiled autobiography of Roth (they’re both Jews who grew up in Newark in the 1930s), and it’s probably no coincidence that Roth’s later literary alter-ego, author Nathan Zuckerman, spends his life irritated by the continued attention surrounding his own early, sexually explicit novel.

Roth has gone on to write nearly two dozen books since *Portnoy’s Complaint*, and his themes seem to be growing increasingly political. His 2000 novel, *The Human Stain*, deals with the excesses of political correctness, while 2004’s *The Plot Against America* is commonly interpreted as a criticism of contemporary conservative politics. Regardless, Roth has won more awards than you can shake a stick at: two National Book Awards, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, two PEN/Faulkner Awards, a Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. What’s more, the Library of America is currently publishing an eight-volume collection of his novels and stories—making Roth only the third American writer (after Saul Bellow and Eudora Welty) to have his works thus preserved during his lifetime, and solidifying his reputation as a living legend. 🍷

SEPARATED AT BIRTH?



The similarities between Philip Roth and Woody Allen are pretty hard to ignore. In fact, literary and movie critics at every established journal from *The National Enquirer* to the *National Post* have been on the case, comparing notes and trying to analyze the connections. For the first time, here’s the overwhelming evidence, presented in convenient chart form:



Philip Roth

VS

Woody Allen

Born to Jewish immigrants in Newark, N.J., in 1933	BACKGROUND	Born to Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1935
Neurotic Jewish man with an overbearing mother and a voracious sexual appetite	CHILDHOOD THEME	Nerdy Jewish man with an overbearing mother and a voracious sexual appetite
Has written 28 books	PROLIFIC CREATORS	Has directed 37 movies
Actress Claire Bloom, who wrote a tell-all memoir describing Roth’s attempted seduction of her daughter’s young friend.	FAMOUS EX-WIVES ...	Actress Mia Farrow, who wrote a tell-all memoir describing Allen’s affair with her young adopted daughter.
Farrow dated Roth after ending her relationship with Allen.	... WHO STRANGELY CROSS PATHS	Bloom appeared in Allen’s movies “Mighty Aphrodite” and “Crimes and Misdemeanors.”
In Roth’s 1993 book <i>Operation Shylock</i> , one of the characters criticizes Allen for the director’s reaction to Israeli violence.	MIXING LIFE AND ART	The main character in Allen’s 1997 movie “Deconstructing Harry” is a Roth-like author who mines the lives of his friends and family for material.