

David Brauner. *Philip Roth*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. 272 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0719074257.

One of the surprises that William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" wields to the first time reader is the realization that the passions and powerful will of old age are not to be taken lightly by the younger generation. One of the biggest surprises of Philip Roth's literary career has been his triumphant literary comeback from the late eighties on as well as his incredible production of powerful novels—a total of 27 to date.

In his "Introduction" and "Afterword," David Brauner sketches how criticism has responded to such a long and controversial career, how Roth's writing has evolved over the years from realist to postmodern and meta-fictional back to realist once more, and how Brauner himself has remained Roth's faithful follower during the years of critical controversy. Ultimately, the book Brauner writes focuses on thematic and aesthetic issues, while the author builds his argument around what he perceives as the basic paradoxes of Roth's fiction. Such paradoxes function "both as a rhetorical device ... and also as an organising intellectual and ideological principle" (8), and involve the questions of Roth's Jewishness, his preferred generic choices as well as his politics.

Although studies of a single author's work tend to be too narrow in their approach as well as too hagiographic, Brauner provides a literary and political context that assists the informed reader who has not kept up with Roth's career. Bypassing but not ignoring the author's early fiction, Brauner initially focuses on the most experimental novels/memoirs and discusses Roth's preoccupation with European modernism, but also, albeit briefly, with the achievement of the Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow, as well as Bernard Malamud. Then, he discusses *My Life as a Man* (1974) vis-à-vis Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), *Counterlife* (1986) along with Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). More comparisons of this kind, both expected and unexpected, involve Brauner's book and Roth's novels in a rich dialogue, and intentionally place the latter's work within the heart of the American literary canon.

Such a move essentially foregrounds Roth's importance as a writer, exorcises any concerns that his work might be at times too "ethnic," and hence too programmatic and/or marginal, and at the same time provides ammunition to the discussion of whether the marginal *is* American. Thus, Roth's latter-day critical triumphs that begin with *Sabbath's Theatre* (1995),

a novel that Brauner believes should be the measure against which all the others should be judged, and continue with the so-called “American Trilogy” (including the novels *American Pastoral* [1997], *I Married a Communist* [1998], and *The Human Stain* [2000]) and *The Plot Against America* (2004) make him a quintessential American writer, according to Brauner.

What one would wonder about is the meaning of the critical and popular appeal that such works as “American Trilogy” and *The Plot Against America* have had. These are novels which have moved many readers with the tragic plots and stories, but they are also novels that lack much of the author’s earlier self-questioning and, therefore, bear a sense of moral rigidity that his earlier and less acclaimed work lacked. This is certainly a question that Brauner’s book evokes but does not address, especially when he discusses the development of Roth’s favorite character, Nathan Zuckerman. Zuckerman’s return and demise in Roth’s *Exit Ghost* (2007), perhaps addresses such a question since Zuckerman once again becomes a central and controversial character in the book.

In general, Brauner’s *Philip Roth* is a demanding book as it requires that the reader has read through the entire Roth canon. However, and in spite of the complicated references to Roth’s more experimental work, it rewards the reader as it contextualizes and foregrounds the controversies surrounding Roth’s *oeuvre*, historicizes the different twists and turns of the plots, and raises interesting questions regarding Roth’s more accessible recent novels.

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