

MY “COUSIN” PHILIP ROTH

Blake Bailey’s new 800+ page biography of Philip Roth was reviewed in *The New Yorker* (March 29, 2021) by editor-in-chief David Remnick. Roth was my mother’s favorite writer and, for her, it was personal because they were distantly related. Born Bella Cohen in 1907 in Newark, Mom was an avid reader and a loyal subscriber to The Book of the Month Club. As best I can interpret our complex family tree, her father’s sister-in-law was a great aunt of the famous novelist which, I like to fantasize, made Roth and me multi-removed “cousins” in some strained definition of that term. Whatever, although we never met, both of us were born at Beth Israel Hospital in Newark — he in 1933, me in 1936.

When my mother devoured Roth’s semi-autobiographical novels, she usually would search for references to her family’s less than admirable stories that she suspected he sometimes disclosed. This was particularly evident in his novel *The Ghost Writer* (first published in two parts in *The New Yorker* in 1979) and the extract from the story that follows next, not only is vintage Roth, but seems to be a fairly accurate account of our family’s gossip.

“A great-aunt of mine, Meema Chaya, had left for the education of her two fatherless grandsons the pot of money she had diligently hoarded away as a seamstress to Newark’s upper crust. When Essie, the widowed mother of the twin boys, attempted to invade the trust to send them from college to medical school, her younger brother, Sidney, who was to inherit the money remaining in Meema Chaya’s estate upon the conclusion of the boy’s higher education, had sued to stop her. For four years Sidney had been waiting for Richard and Robert to graduate from Rutgers — waiting mostly in pool rooms and saloons, to hear the family tell it — so he could buy a downtown parking lot with his legacy.

Loudly — his way — Sidney proclaimed that he was not about to postpone the good life just so there could be two more fancy doctors driving Caddies around South Orange. Those in the family who detested Sidney’s womanizing and his shady friends immediately lined up in support of the boys and their dignified aspirations, leaving Sidney with a phalanx consisting of his ill used, timid wife Jenny, and his mysterious Polish tootsie Annie, whose scandalously florid *shmatas* were much discussed, if never once seen, at family weddings, funerals, etc. Also in the phalanx, for all it was worth to him, was me.

My admiration was long-standing, dating back to Sidney's Navy days, when he had won four thousand dollars on the homeward journey of the battleship *Kansas*, and was said to have thrown into the South Pacific, for the sharks to dispose of, a Mississippi sore loser who at the end of an all-night poker game had referred to the big winner as a dirty Jew. The lawsuit, whose outcome hinged on how exhaustive Meema Chaya had meant to be in her will with the ringing words "higher education," was eventually decided by the judge — a goy — in Sidney's favor, though within only a few years the Raymond Boulevard parking lot bought with his inheritance became such a hot piece of real estate that it was nationalized out from under him by the Mob. For his trouble they gave Sidney a tenth of what it was worth, and shortly thereafter his heart broke like a balloon in the bed of yet another overdressed bimbo not of our persuasion.

My cousins Richard and Robert were meanwhile being put through medical school by their iron-willed mother. After she lost the lawsuit, Essie quit her job at a downtown department store and for the next ten years went to work on the road selling shingles and sidings. So iron-willed was she that by the time she had finally bought carpeting and venetians for the new offices leased by Richard and Robert in suburban North Jersey, there was hardly a working-class neighborhood in the state that she hadn't left encased in asphalt.

Out canvassing one hot afternoon during the twins' internship, Essie had decided to spend an hour in an air-cooled Passaic movie theater. In her thousands of days and nights finding leads and closing deals, this was said to be the first time ever that she stopped to do anything other than eat and call the boys. But now residencies in orthopedics and dermatology were only just around the corner, and the thought of their advent, combined with the August heat made her just a little light-headed. In the dark movie theater, however, Essie hadn't even time to mop her brow before a fellow in the next seat put his hand on her knee. He must have been a very lonely fellow — it was a very stout knee; nonetheless, she broke the hand for him, at the wrist, with the hammer carried in her purse all these years to protect herself and the future of two fatherless sons."

You can appreciate why my mother and other relatives felt that Roth sometimes went too far in airing their family's dirty linen. (Am I doing the same thing now?) The names were changed and I certainly can't vouch for all the details but, after all, this was a novel and it appears that much of the substance was correct. I do seem to recall my mother saying that the indomitable "Essie" at some point was a policewoman and it's true that

both of Roth's twin cousins went on to have long and successful careers — one as a psychiatrist, the other as an infectious disease specialist.

Several years ago, I wrote a medical history essay about polio and began with Philip Roth's novel *Nemesis* that described an epidemic in Newark in 1944. It turned out to be his last novel and the protagonist seemed to me like a dead ringer for my Uncle Lou — my mother's brother-in-law. I sent a copy to Roth thinking that he might be amused, but really wasn't surprised that the famously reticent novelist didn't bother to reply.

In 2014 Philip Roth was given an honorary degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary's commencement exercises in New York. He was hailed as "a giant of modern literature" and, according to Blake Bailey, Roth had recognized the proffered degree as a "peace pipe" with the Jewish community. During the ceremony he was especially moved when all the parents were asked to stand and said, "I have about twelve honorary degrees and I have never been at a commencement where parents were applauded for the success of their children."

At the time my son was Dean of the rabbinical school there, so when handshakes and congratulations were being exchanged on the reception line after the ceremony, he had the chance to greet the honoree and tell him he believed that they were distantly related. Roth appeared surprised, but seemed pleased and remarked, "I didn't know that I had a rabbi in the family." The headline the next day in *The Forward* read "PHILIP ROTH, ONCE OUTCAST, JOINS JEWISH FOLD." I wonder what Roth felt about that? After all, he'd answered his many Jewish critics early and often — notably in such essays as "Writing About Jews" (*Commentary*, December, 1963) and "Defender of the Faith" (*The New Yorker*, April, 1959.)

I wondered whether this encounter at JTS might prompt some literary stirring in Roth's mind that might become grist for a future book, but by this time he'd officially retired from creative writing. As Philip Roth explained to a Weequahic High School reporter when summing up his literary career: "I did the best with what I had....I have dedicated my life to the novel: I studied, I taught, I wrote and I read. With the exclusion of almost everything else. Enough is enough! I no longer feel this fanaticism to write what I have experienced in my life."

Although Philip Roth withdrew from writing fiction, he remained a caustic observer of the cultural and political scene: "Just a citizen like anybody else." In early years he'd been a harsh critic of Republican presidents, but that was nothing compared to his dismay over

Donald Trump: “ignorant of government, of history, of science, of philosophy, of art, incapable of expressing or recognizing subtlety or nuance, destitute of all decency, and wielding a vocabulary of seventy-seven words that is better called Jerkish than English.” Then Citizen Roth remarked, “I’m eagerly awaiting my White House tweet” — apparently one never came.

Newark’s favorite son died in May, 2018 and, afterward, Cynthia Ozick, in *The Wall Street Journal*, took a swat at the Swedish Academy that had denied him a Nobel Prize: “How should those obtuse northland jurors, denizens of a frost-bitten society, highly ranked for alcoholism and suicide, warm to the emotional temperature of the postwar Jewish Weequahic neighborhood of Newark, N.J., out of which the grandson of immigrants might emerge to become one of the most renowned American literary masters of his century?” The BBC agreed, hailing Roth as “arguably the best writer *not* to have won the Nobel Prize since Tolstoy.” No doubt my mother would have been very pleased with that.

Michael Nevins