



Exit Ghost

Philip Roth

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Like Rip Van Winkle returning to his hometown to find that all has changed, Nathan Zuckerman comes back to New York, the city he left eleven years before. Alone on his New England mountain, Zuckerman has been nothing but a writer: no voices, no media, no terrorist threats, no women, no news, no tasks other than his work and the enduring of old age.

Walking the streets like a revenant, he quickly makes three connections that explode his carefully protected solitude. One is with a young couple with whom, in a rash moment, he offers to swap homes. They will flee post-9/11 Manhattan for his country refuge, and he will return to city life. But from the time he meets them, Zuckerman also wants to swap his solitude for the erotic challenge of the young woman, Jamie, whose allure draws him back to all that he thought he had left behind: intimacy, the vibrant play of heart and body.

The second connection is with a figure from Zuckerman's youth, Amy Bellette, companion and muse to Zuckerman's first literary hero, E. I. Lonoff. The once irresistible Amy is now an old woman depleted by illness, guarding the memory of that grandly austere American writer who showed Nathan the solitary path to a writing vocation.

The third connection is with Lonoff's would-be biographer, a young literary hound who will do and say nearly anything to get to Lonoff's "great secret." Suddenly involved, as he never wanted or intended to be involved again, with love, mourning, desire, and animosity, Zuckerman plays out an interior drama of vivid and poignant possibilities.

Haunted by Roth's earlier work *The Ghost Writer*, *Exit Ghost* is an amazing leap into yet another phase in this great writer's insatiable commitment to fiction.

Exit Ghost Details

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From Reader Review Exit Ghost for online ebook

Doug says

A phenomenal five star book. Looks like a tiny book to be read on a Friday, but I found that I needed time to read and reread many sentences. So many of the sentences and paragraphs belong in quotes stand there and force you to wonder how one can write so perfectly. I started off reading this in my Film Noir inner voice then shifted to my Tell Tale Heart voice - finally I just read it the way I read Springsteen lyrics with respect. There is a great story, settings and characters in there too, but I admired the words above all.

Robin Friedman says

Growing Old With Fiction

Set in Manhattan in 2004, Philip Roth's novel "Exit Ghost" (2007) is a product of the writer's old age which plays tantalizingly with both biography and autobiography. The book is a story of the nature of fiction and creative writing and of the vicissitudes of aging.

The novel's voice is that of Roth's frequently-used character, the author Nathan Zuckerman. At the age of 71 Zuckerman has left his 11-year home in a remote community in the Berkshire mountains of Massachusetts for a trip to his former home of New York City. Zuckerman has become a solitary, especially after the events of September 11, 2001. He has few friends, sees few people, does not follow current events, and is devoted solely to his writing and to rereading books he enjoyed in his youth. Zuckerman decides to travel to New York in hopes for a surgical cure to the incontinence which has plagued him following surgery for prostate cancer some years earlier. The surgery also left the once virile Zuckerman impotent, a circumstance for which there appears to be no cure.

The Berkshires were also home to the great American novelists, Hawthorne and Melville, as Zuckerman is aware, and to a fictitious short story writer that becomes an important character in this book, E.I. Lonoff. Lonoff is described as a mentor of Zuckerman who offered the fledgling writer encouragement in the mid-1950s. The young Zuckerman was visiting Lonoff when the older writer's wife of 35 years walked out on him because Lonoff was romantically involved with a young woman named Amy Bellette who also was present during the night that saw the effective end of Lonoff's marriage.

When Zuckerman reports to the Manhattan hospital, he has a passing encounter with Amy Bellette, Lonoff's former lover, who is now 75 years old and disfigured from brain cancer. Zuckerman begins to think again about Lonoff and about his own younger years. Then, on an impulse, Zuckerman responds to an ad in a literary magazine in which a young couple offer to swap their Manhattan apartment for one year in exchange for a rural home in New England. The couple placing the ad are a pair of aspiring authors, Bill Davidoff and his wife Jamie Logan. The aging, impotent, and incontinent Zuckerman becomes instantly smitten with the young wife Jamie.

To complicate the story further, Jamie has an old Harvard friend, Richard Kliman, himself eager to make a literary name for himself. Kliman is writing a biography of the now-undeservedly forgotten writer, Lonoff, and he believes Zuckerman can help him. Jamie gives Kliman a lead to the unwilling Zuckerman which in turn leads Zuckerman back to Amy Bellette for their shared recollections of the great short story writer.

Kliman wants to restore Lonoff's literary reputation, but he also believes he has uncovered a secret in Lonoff's personal life: an affair that the writer had beginning at the age of 14 and continuing to the age of 17 with his half-sister.

As the tangled story develops, Zuckerman must deal with his passionate but futile feelings for Jamie and with his desire to prevent Kliman from publishing what Zuckerman believes to be questionable and scurrilous information about his former literary mentor. As a writer will do, Zuckerman takes his few brief, cryptic encounters with Jamie during his stay in New York and blows them up in his imagination. Zuckerman writes for his own edification a short play consisting of fictitious versions of dialogue between Jamie and himself that he titles "He and She." From a literary standpoint, "He and She" is awful.

There are several levels to this book. We have the author, Roth, telling a story in the words of what may be his thinly-disguised alter ego, Zuckerman. Zuckerman becomes irate when he learns a literary hero of his, Lonoff, is about to become the subject of a biography exposing sordid details of the writer's early life. The Lonoff story seems to warn the reader about taking the Zuckerman story too closely as a biography of the aging Roth while at the same time it suggests the connection. And again, in writing the fictitious play "He and She" Zuckerman takes his own infatuation with the beautiful and articulate young Jamie Logan to a level of reality that it does not possess in what Zuckerman tells the reader in fact transpires between Jamie and himself. In the meanwhile, Zuckerman shows himself as troubled by impending loss of memory, possible senility, his continued and hopeless sexual impotence, and ultimately by death. After a long meditation on the death of a friend, George Plimpton, Zuckerman observes: "[h]e died, as we all do: as a rank amateur." (p.264)

Roth's book is about the nature of literature and how it captures reality in a manner different from and deeper than mere factual reportage. The book is full of literary allusions in addition to the allusion to the fictitious writer Lonoff. The primary literary reference is to Joseph Conrad's late novel "The Shadow Line" with its references to coming to terms with age and maturity and perhaps to ghosts as well. (One of the references to "ghosts" in the novel uses the figure in terms of lost sexuality, as in Zuckerman's feeling for Jamie as the "ghost of my desire", p. 66). Other literary allusions in the book include T.S. Elliott, E.E. Cummings, Hemingway, Bellow, Faulkner, Chekov, Keats, and Hawthorne and Melville. This book is less successful than many of Roth's other books, probably due to the contrived plotting and to the weaknesses of the "He and She" segments. But it remains a thoughtful, ironic exploration of the nature of literature and of growing old.

Robin Friedman

W.D. Clarke says

I've read a lot of Roth (not all of them, but most of the Zuckermans, and this was a fitting send-off for old Nathan, and an ambiguous riposte of sorts to those readers and critics who would speciously equate him with Roth—as we all tend to do at times with authors, in our moments of forgetfulness, weakness, envy or spite), and this was one of the most purely enjoyable for me for some weird reason, and I wish it wasn't as short as it is. It has something to do with my not knowing quite where I stand as a reader (and in this it definitely reminded me of two of my favourites, *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*), and that in this feeling of existential doubt and disorientation I was definitely joined by the main character, Zuckerman. I won't get into the details—there are plenty of other, and better reviews that do this most admirably, but reading it alongside (longtime friend of the author) Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke* and I am most poignantly struck by parallels in the existential crises experienced by Zuckerman here and Ludvik in that novel—how everything you

believe in, stand for and work towards can be swiftly and irrevocably ripped away from you by forces beyond our control, be they forces of the societal or unconscious variety, or both, working, conspiring we almost feel, in tandem against us.

Jen says

With the election around the corner, *Exit Ghost* struck a nerve with me because it takes place in the weeks around the 2004 election - and in NYC, where the young characters are passionately hoping that Kerry will win.

Nathan Zuckerman is a renowned writer who has lived in isolation in nature for the last 11 years because he started getting death threats in NYC addressed: "Dear Jew Bastard." A prostate cancer survivor, he returns to New York in his 70s for treatment for his incontinence. He's swept back into modern life when he sees a woman he knew and admired as a young adult - she's now a senior as well, and has surgery scars on her once beautiful head. She was the mistress of a talented but forgotten writer, and an ambitious young biographer is hounding her for that writer's last, unpublished novel. Zuckerman also impulsively decides to swap homes with a young couple with literary aspirations, and his attraction to the young lady leads him to write a play called "He and She," based on imagined conversations between them.

There's a good deal of rumination on writing in the book; it reminds me of the way Ian McEwan did in *Atonement* - two masters of the craft who can't help but fixate on the written word.

"It was as though there were some color previously missing or withheld from our literary spectrum and Lonoff alone had it. Lonoff was that color..."

"I dialed her number as though it were a code to restoring the fullness that once encompassed us all; I dialed as though spinning a lifetime counterclockwise were an act as natural and ordinary as resetting the timer on the kitchen stove."

And something I hope to eventually achieve in election years (no luck yet!):

"...having lived enthralled by America for nearly three-quarters of a century, I had decided no longer to be overtaken every four years by the emotions of a child - the emotions of a child and the pain of an adult."

Adam Dalva says

And so with this I come to the end of the Zuckerman books. I can't imagine reading this w/o the context of the earlier writing, particularly without the ghostwriter, which this neatly bookends. As a stand-alone work, it, alone of the Zuckermans, wouldn't quite work. But as the last chapter in a massive writing project - it's lovely. It's melancholy, but there are moments where the Zuckerman of old surfaces that are thrilling. The other strange aspect is encountering, for the first time, Nathan in a world I know. It is formally bold, and has the loveliest pure writing, I think, of any of it. Recommended only as part of the series, but highly recommended.

I've been thinking about the comparison between the Rabbit books and the Zuckermans. The Rabbits, in the

end, I would say reached higher literary highs. But Rabbit himself is no Nathan. This is a character who lives for 50 years, and changes for all of it, and despite all his flaws, you end up falling for him. I'm sorry there won't be more.

Lee says

First-person Zuckerman. My fave sort. Enjoyable, readable. Generous conversational narration with typical Shakespearean flourishes. Trailblazes a new genre of chick lit for the geriatric set: instead of being all about men, marriage, fashion, and babies, it's about death, impotence, incontinence, dead 20th century literary figures, senility, and arrow of desires aimed at the much-younger loins of alluring ladies. Like Everyman, I felt this one was a little less than Roth can do. Everyman felt like a sketch for a Roth novel -- and in a way it may have been a sketch for Exit Ghost, which feels like 4/5ths of a recent Roth book, compared to Plot Against America or American Pastoral or even The Human Stain. Lots of theatrical dialogue speeds things up, as though he's in a rush, self-consciously, to get this story out before his mind dissolves. It's a fine story, with occasional stereotypes he presents to a sort of readerly queasiness but then to which he miraculously applies pages of extraordinarily generous, flowing, insightful prose till the semi-jarring ughness of a plot twist or character revelation is totally triaged, that is, made believable in such a way that you, or I at least, admire the man's audacity. Almost a great book. But almost a great book that, if great, might not have been as great as it is, because a failure to be great is sort of required of this one's thematic content? A dissolution? Repetition not for emphasis but as a memory aid? Totally worth reading. Quick. Fun. A great essayistic eulogy on George Plimpton so surprisingly placed in the novel I feel like I should have written SPOILER WARNING before I wrote this sentence.

Michael Finocchiaro says

I started reading Roth with American Pastoral which intrigued me and then Portnoy's Complaint which fascinated me. I have become deeply attached to Roth's writing having now read 19 of his books over the past few months. As much as I loved Sabbath's Theater, The Counterlife, Operation Shylock. the Nemesis tetralogy (and not having read any of the David Karp books as yet), I feel that the most monumental writing of his is the Zuckerman cycle which Exit Ghost closes. It is a neat, clean closure.

The death of Nathan Zuckerman was even eulogised in the The Yorker (<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-t...>). He was, of course, Philip Roth's fictional alter-ego. The Zuckerman Unbound tetralogy starts with The Ghost Writer which introduces E.I. Lonoff who the young Nathan idolizes and who is will leave with his student Amy Bellette who Nathan fantasies to be Anne Frank. The other three books of the trilogy talk about Nathan's life following the scandal around his book Carnovsky (the fictionalised doppelganger for Portnoy's Complaint). The Anatomy Lesson talks of his aging and an abortive attempt at becoming a doctor. In The Prague Orgy, he goes to the police state Czechoslovakia and fails to recover the short stories of the father of a Czech political refugee in NYC. In all these stories, we see Nathan go from a young, enthusiastic writer-to-be and his semi-retirement from writing. The American Trilogy, in which Nathan is a character sopping up the biographies of three fascinating people in his life plus Carnovsky is his output. Until Exit Ghost.

Exit Ghost in a brilliant tour de force in that he inverses the relationship between himself as the young admiring acolyte to Lonoff to become the antagonistic relationship between a would-be sensationalising

biographer of the now-dead Lonoff, Richard Kliman. Richard is brash, uncouth, and unconcerned with literature as literature but just obsessed with literature as sensationalism. That would not be enough to make this an extraordinary book. No, not for Roth. He adds incredible levels of depth but having the aging Nathan in NYC for surgery to aid his problems with inconstancy following a successful prostate surgery - but also, he is fleeing death threats made to him at his house in the Berkshires. As coincidence would have it, he decides to exchange his house for the apartment of Jamie and Billy Logan. Of course, Nathan would not be Nathan if he didn't fall for the beautiful Jamie who it turns out is probably the impulsive Richard's lover. Add to this the fact that Amy Bellette, who has a brain tumor from which she is certainly dying is drawn into the mess via the boisterousness of Richard ruthlessly pursuing his biography of Lonoff by harassing Amy for Lonoff's last manuscript. I won't spoil anything further here. I just want to demonstrate how Philip Roth can take a single string and make it into a beautiful, elaborate quilt about love, adultery, ageing, dying, and literature.

Two short examples:

At one point, he is with younger friends who help care for his Berkshire house and when they ask what it is like to be 70 years old, he stands up and says, "It'll be a short speech. Think of the year 4000...Think seriously about 4000. Imagine it. In all its dimensions, in all its aspects, The year 4000" after which he sits down and says quietly, "That's what it's like to be seventy." I found that absolutely brilliant.

The other quote which I adored was "For some very very few that amplification, evolving uncertainly out of nothing, constitutes their only assurance, and the unlived, the surmise fully drawn in print on paper is the life whose meaning comes to matter most."

Read Roth. Enjoy Zuckerman. Carpe diem. And may Roth someday (before he, like Zuckerman passes from this world) get that Nobel Prize for Literature that he so well deserves.

RIP (1933-2018). One of America's literary giants has left us and unfortunately before getting a Nobel :(

rachelle says

Phillip Roth is killing Nathan Zuckerman. And he's doing it in the least humane – but most human – ways: depriving him of his dignity, stripping him of his sexual prowess. Roth, who for much of his career has allowed readers to view Zuckerman as an extension, if not mirror, of himself, toys with this conceit even more obviously in *Exit Ghost*. Impotent Zuckerman (living an acetic mountain life shared in reality by reclusive Roth) meets a young woman who excites sexual feelings that he's by now incapable of consummating. The book's style echoes this failure; unlike Portnoy's *The Monkey*, whose filthy pillow talk and raunchy behavior are presented as real, the mild flirtations between he and Jamie Logan are imagined in a dialogue of Zuckerman's creation. However, of the losses most deeply felt by the aged Zuckerman, the most poignant is his memory, which, in its fading, threatens to rob him of his gift with language, and thus his lifeblood. Clearly this is the end of Nathan Zuckerman – "Nothing is certain any longer except that this will likely be my last attempt to persist in groping for words to combine into the sentences and paragraphs of a book – but it's less evident what this means, if anything, for Roth.

Andrew Smith says

To say that this is a grim story of an old man's battle with incontinence, impotence and lust for a much

younger woman would be technically correct, but it really doesn't do this book justice. Nathan Zuckerman (Roth's alter ego) is the fictional writer Roth has featured in nine of his novels, with this almost certainly being the last.

The story follows the absorbing *The Human Stain* as Zuckerman travels back to his native NYC after a prolonged exile in the rural Berkshires. In Manhattan he meets the object of his desire and picks up the thread of a story laid out in an earlier book, *Ghost Writer*. Though it is sometimes uncomfortable reading (Roth's books often are), as Zuckerman struggles with the loss of his physical and mental potency, the writing is of the very highest quality and I found the whole thing totally engrossing.

Cynthia says

This is only my second Roth novel and my first of his Zuckerman series. Roth does not protect himself. He puts his guts on the page. I like that about him. Zuckerman has become impotent and incontinent and has been Thoreauing it in an isolated cabin when circumstances lead him back to New York City where he runs into his deceased writing mentor's lover, now 70 something and with a brain tumor that disfigures her ancient face. She's confused and rambling around in the past. He also meets a young couple who have advertised in the 'New York Times Review of Books'. The wife, Jamie, catches his mind and his useless lust. He and the couple arrange to trade their homes for a year which gives Zuckerman an excuse to spend more time with Jamie. She introduces him to an obnoxious, Zuckerman wannabe, her ex-boyfriend. This near stalker wants to write an inflammatory biography of Zuckerman's mentor. He and Zuckerman meet and scream abuse at one another. I'm not sure how he did it but Roth made me care very much for these less than attractive characters. I felt a well of compassion open for them.

Kathy says

If you liked this book, I have some very fine cloth to sell you. It has special properties which make it invisible to the eyes of fools and simpletons. You might want to make a nice sweater out of it. It is very, very expensive, though -- a cloth fit for an emperor.

All right, that's obnoxious of me. But I don't come to this novel as someone who is unfamiliar with Philip Roth (I liked *Ghost Writer*, loved *Goodbye, Columbus* and think *American Pastoral* is almost a masterpiece), and thus I don't feel I need to hedge my bets by suggesting that Roth is somehow over my head. This is simply an amorphous mess -- a jumble of half-baked thoughts, poorly imagined scenes, annoying and barely believable characters (except, perhaps, for Zuckerman himself, but he benefits from the reader's extra-textual or intertextual familiarity with his foibles).

I like Nathan Zuckerman better when he has a clue that it's just not all about him. To the Nathan Zuckerman of *Exit Ghost*, I say goodbye and good riddance.

Lisa Reads & Reviews says

I need not critique Roth, I think. He is a skilled and professional writer recognized as such through numerous

awards, etc. Instead, I'll use this review to remind myself of what was interesting and instructive about this novel: 1) The narrative flow, sentence construction, and all mechanics of writing are smoothly modeled here, and make for good reference. I simply enjoyed the writing. 2) The overwhelming theme, and one that will be useful for understanding a population of humanity that I'll not directly experience: the aging of successful men "has-beens" as they look back on their lives and interact with the young "not-yets" and all the emotional turmoil that entails. Women have their version, I'm certain, but I felt an empathy for the physical and emotional adaptations that come with aging. They were especially poignant here--perhaps due to the modern references of 9/11 and the tragedy of Bush's re-election. All that pain is a tad more bearable in hind-sight, and through a pair of old man's glasses.

Jason Koivu says

Reading Roth makes me so depressed. I grew up on Charlie Brown holiday specials and Mr. Rodgers, so I feel right at home!

In *Exit Ghost* we have an aging writer, greatly concerned with his failing bladder and memory, worrying his way to an early grave. However, before he's allowed a graceful exit, a young woman comes along and reignites his useless libido. As if that wasn't enough, a young man forces himself upon the writer compelling him to defend a revered and long dead author with feeble rage and indignant righteousness, remnants of his lost youth.

Expect no sweeping dramatics, no whirlwind physical force. This is well-written reality. Whether or not these scenarios actually happened to him, Roth is essentially writing about himself. He and his main character are the same age, come from the same sort of background and have had the same kind of career. When he writes of 9/11 and the death of George Plimpton, you get the sense these are more or less essays by Roth inserted into the novel. The fiction of *Exit Ghost* may very well be no more than a tweak or two of day to day happenings in his life. It is not as banal as a daily diary by any means, but if you came for excitement you'll find it in short supply here.

What you get with Roth is an easy flow of erudite observations on the minutia of human behavior and the occasional carver's chisel tap upon the great marble block that is mankind. The language is never too flowery to bury meaning in platitudes or too obtuse to go beyond understanding, it's just a matter of whether the reader's mind is prepared for a marathon of thought. And don't expect encouragement along the way. This reads like the middle miles, not the jubilant starting line or the heady finish.

Perhaps I should have read Roth's *The Ghost Writer* first, since *Exit Ghost* is its sequel. It seems to stand alone well enough, but reading the initial novel would've perhaps made the characters' lives more meaningful. Perhaps it would've made all the desperate feelings of the inevitability of death all the worse. I'm over 40 and already worried about contracting the big C or copping it from a heart attack in the middle of the night. I don't need stuff like this to add to my concerns!

David Schaafsma says

"Exit, ghost."—Shakespeare, Hamlet, (and Macbeth, Julius Caesar).

“Reading/writing people, we are finished, we are ghosts witnessing the end of a literary era.”—Lonoff, in *The Ghost Writer*

“. . . The end is so immense, it is its own poetry. It requires little rhetoric. Just state it plainly.”—Roth, *Exit Ghost*

Exit, Ghost is the last of the Nathan Zuckerman series of ten books (yay, done!), Zuck at 71, as was Roth at the time. No one really knows who Roth is, of course; he’s the literary version of Jokerman, like Dylan, a man of many disguises. In some of his books “Philip Roth” is featured; is that the author?! Zuckerman has been his “ghost writer” for decades, since his introduction in 1976 in *My Life as a Man*, where he is featured as a writer in a couple short stories within the novel. In *Exit*, Zuck is, post-prostate cancer surgery, incontinent and impotent, living eleven years in the mountains in upstate New York, isolated, just writing every day and re-reading the works of some of his beloved novelists, references to whom make their way through this book: Conrad, Hardy, Bellow, and others.

Roth decides, encouraged by some (possible) medical news about his bladder, to try to “begin again” in Manhattan, and tries to house-swap for a time with young writers Jamie and Billy. Zuck, 71, unable to perform, nevertheless makes a kind of move for Jamie, 30, who is happily married to Billy. This Woody Allen stuff I read at the wrong historical moment to be sympathetic, during the great expose of Sexual assault all over the country, so it feels (in part!) tired and sad to read that Zuck still succumbs to “the greed of desire,” yet he makes it clear this is part of the impulse (in addition to reading and writing) that keeps him on the planet:

“And so I set out to minimize the loss by struggling to pretend that desire had naturally abated, until I came in contact for barely an hour with a beautiful, privileged, intelligent, self-possessed, languid-looking 30-year-old made enticingly vulnerable by her fears and I experienced the bitter helplessness of a taunted old man dying to be whole again.”

I love women, so sue me, as Zuck might say. Desire is part of being human. Zuck is also a fiction writer, too; he may not be able to have Jamie, but as long as he can imagine her, he is whole again. At various points we can see this is fiction, this is his fantasy. The way the Jamie issue resolves itself is in part tied up with Zuck’s meeting, after decades, with Amy, the woman he met in 1956 visiting his literary hero E. I. Lonoff (Zuck fantasized Amy might actually be Anne Frank, yes, still-alive, escaped-from-Bergen-Belsen; so the secular atheist Jew that Jews saw as self-hating could make restitution, Zuck could marry Anne Frank!) (He doesn’t). We meet Amy and Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer* (there’s that ghost!). Amy, now 75, and Zuck at 71, have compromised brains; she from brain cancer, he from what he fears is senility; his memory is going fast. At any rate, Zuck falls for Amy 50 years ago, and again falls for Jamie. It never ends; or, it will only end when Zuck does.

As with *The American* trilogy, we return to yet another moment in American politics in this one as the 2004 re-election of Bush is raged about by Jamie “these people are evil!” but reflected on by Zuck as yet another moment of outrage in American history just as were Pearl Harbor, Vietnam, the assassinations of JFK and MLK, the making of war-hawk LBJ, the rise of crook Nixon, and so on. [What does Roth say about Trump, asked recently about him by *The New Yorker*? He says Trump is way worse than Roth’s fascist alt-history nightmare, *The Plot Against America*].

In case you think Zuckerman’s is a story about just another arrogant libidinous American male, well he is, but he is also darkly, comically honest about the incontinence/impotence/memory loss. I want to live, Zuck says! I want to write and be fully human in all respects! And who can blame him!? But can he be happy in

physical and mental decline? And is Jamie fully human to him, or just a fantasy for his own satisfaction?

I wouldn't read this book at all unless you are familiar with some of the Zuckerman books (or at least, *The Ghost Writer*, to which it is a kind of sequel, decades after). It is a book about aging and decline, sometimes sad, yet still somehow defiant and unapologetic about writing and desire. It's about talk, about vibrant dialogue, as usual in Roth, and still good work. It's about fiction! Roth retired from writing in 2012, but this isn't weak, over-the-hill writing. It is a fitting end to the Zuckerman series.

Roth's last interview?:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

But there will be a definitive, author-sanctioned biography by Blake Bailey (2022 is the date Bailey says it will come out)

Mauoijenn ~ *Mouthy Jenn* ~ says

I guess today is not my day with books. Another one I tried to get into but it just lost me about 30 pages into it. The man is dying. Doesn't like modern technology and well that's about all I got out of this.

Ginny_1807 says

"Forse le scoperte più potenti sono riservate all'ultimo"

Nathan Zuckerman è l'ombra dell'uomo che è stato, un morto volontario alla vita nel presente, essendosi ritirato in un luogo isolato da undici anni per dedicarsi unicamente alla scrittura, lontano dai giudizi e dagli occhi indiscreti del mondo.

Una scelta di solitudine estrema, in origine maturata col pretesto di sfuggire a inquietanti, anonime - e forse vuote -, minacce di morte e in seguito consolidatasi come replica orgogliosa e sprezzante di fronte all'insorgere del decadimento fisico e mentale, imputabile all'avanzare dell'età e agli esiti umilianti della malattia.

A stanzarlo dal suo eremo, però, riaffiora impetuosa e inattesa la speranza, che lo riporta per un breve soggiorno a New York e, di conseguenza, a tutto ciò che credeva di avere ormai lasciato per sempre.

Il fantasma riappare così sulla scena del mondo, richiamato dalla remota possibilità di recuperare parte della sua integrità fisica. Una settimana di ritorno abbacinante alla vita, ai sentimenti, alle emozioni: la politica, gli ambienti letterari, la frequentazione di conoscenze vecchie e nuove, perfino l'ossessione sessuale per una giovane donna.

Amaro, spietato e struggente, questo romanzo richiama nei toni e nei temi trattati lo splendido *Everyman*, con in più una differente prospettiva nel modo di rapportarsi al passato: là infatti l'amore per la vita era esaltato dal rimpianto di chi dal nulla non poteva più farvi ritorno, mentre qui è proprio il ritorno frastornante alla vita tanto amata a consolidare la certezza di non potervi più prendere parte pienamente e di avere il nulla come unica alternativa possibile.

Shane says

A book on aging, the unpleasant sides of it, and the urge of the human spirit to be young again despite infirmity and the looming prospect of insignificance and death.

An aging writer, Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's fictitious self, has retreated from the literary and celebrity world of New York into the mountains of New England, in the aftermath of death threats. Once safe in his hideout, cut off from TV, the Internet and other distractions, he is afflicted with prostate cancer which renders him impotent and incontinent. Returning to New York after a 11-year absence for experimental treatment that may restore bladder control, he is revisited with the joy of living again, especially when thrown into the company of a thirty year old writer and ardent fan, Jamie, and her husband, Billy, who want to do a house swap with him. What follows is a pathetic narrative of a man on the downward slope desperately trying to re-ascend an impossible mountain.

In New York, he also encounters Amy Bellete (a supposedly fictitious version of Ann Frank who survived the holocaust despite diaries to the contrary) who was the former lover of E.I. Lonoff (a fictitious fusion of Bernard Malamud and Henry Roth), the writer Zuckerman revered in his youth. Amy reflects his own failing body, for she is undergoing treatment for a brain tumour; she awakens Zuckerman to the fact that he too is losing his memory, and with that, the only purpose left to him in life: his writing. The villain of the piece is the ambitious literary hound Kliman, the lover of Jamie and a reflection of the once bold Zuckerman, who is out to write a biographical exposé on Lonoff's "dark secret." Zuckerman, out of loyalty to Lonoff and a bruised ego due Jamie's infidelity, is determined to thwart Kliman. The scene is set for a literary showdown.

And yet the book veers off into multiple directions after that brilliant set up and never gets to a satisfactory climax. We are treated to lengthy reflections by Zuckerman on the lives of Lonoff, George Plimpton and other literary greats, and to a take on Chekov's story "He and She" in which Zuckerman conducts an intimate dialogue with Jamie, one he can never carry on in real life. Zuckerman (Roth) also gets to air his political preference for the Democrats and takes pot shots at George Bush on the eve of Dubya's second term win. The biographer is cast as the villain by the writer who seeks to preserve his privacy, for "A biography is a patent on a life. The biographer holds the patent."

This book is probably best read after reading *The Ghostwriter* in which a younger Zuckerman first comes into contact with Lonoff and Bellete and forms his life-long connection with them. There are references to that first meeting in *Exit Ghost*.

Roth seems to be trying to come to terms with his own mortality via the life of Zuckerman, and, in this book, boldly faces the embarrassments of memory loss, bladder loss and potency loss, aging factors that make men, especially celebrity figures like him, fall from great heights, leaving them the one exit left. Zuckerman takes his, but Roth spins it in such a way as to leave his fictional twin ready to return for yet another novel (or three) on the angst of the aging male animal.

Robert says

Exit Ghost is a literary puzzle palace in which the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, struggles with his own ghost,

the ghost of a writer he admired, E.I. Lonoff, and late in the book, the ghost of George Plimpton.

Perhaps the best line in the book has to do with describing fiction as rumination in narrative form...not as representation. Zuckerman, a writer, comes up with this line as he attempts to persuade a brassy litterateur named Kliman (recent Harvard grad in need of a subject) not to write a biography that borrows the theme of incest from Lonoff's unfinished novel and inserts it into Lonoff's life.

Complicating matters, Lonoff's elderly paramour, Amy Bellette, thinks she remembers Lonoff confessing incest with his elder half-sister, but Zuckerman tells her she's wrong. In fact, he says, Lonoff was riffing on the literary speculation surrounding Nathaniel Hawthorne and his sister.

Well, it's hard to say who's right. The fact is that Zuckerman is becoming elderly himself, has memory and urinary problems, is now contemplating leaving the Berkshires for a return to his old life in New York City, and has fallen in love with a young woman in such a way as to echo Lonoff's love affair with a much younger Bellette.

But Zuckerman, told by Kliman that his old friend George Plimpton has died, begins comparing himself to the totally realized person/writer Plimpton and crashes into the fact that he isn't much of a person anymore, just a writer, and a writer who is defenseless against the annoying predations of literary New York. He doesn't have, like Plimpton, a go-to persona that handles public stuff for him (Plimpton made a lot of hay pretending to be a bumbling athlete). He's just serious-minded Zuckerman in an old man's diaper, quite incapable of sexually consummating any relationship with a young woman. Time for the old ghost to exit.

This novel is written with Roth's typical clarity and economy. There are some male/female exchanges that strike me as a bit too cool and sophisticated for human life forms to generate, but the world Roth is describing...ahem, ruminating...is pretty rare stuff.

Sam K G says

In characteristic Roth style, the novel is filled with references to the great writers. Joseph Conrad features prominently; Zuckerman and Jamie discuss his novella 'The Shadow Line' in depth. E.I. Lonoff is often compared with Bernard Malamud, and a small biographical conundrum in the life of Nathaniel Hawthorne receives rather intense scrutiny. Passing references are made to Isaac B. Singer, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, and William Faulkner. One of Saul Bellow's novels is mentioned by title. Of living contemporaries, I caught references to Salman Rushdie and Norman Mailer, though neither in relation to his literature. (I considered the Mailer reference generous, considering his boisterous history on the New York literary scene.) And there is a beautiful anecdote where Amy loses her self-control in the New York Public Library over an exhibit on contemporary American writers.

But Roth does not just drop names. This is not a reading-review list. Every author he mentions has a purpose; each is woven into the narrative. In a recent interview with Newsweek's David Gates, Roth said, "What I'm doing is bidding adieu to the great writers." In his interior play 'He and She,' Conrad's phrase "rash moments" receives much focus. Throughout the book, Roth mentions Melville's remarks on the life of Hawthorne, which ties into Lonoff's unknown early biography, and then Lonoff's being compared with Singer (as both being Jewish-American short story writers) in the publications of the Library of America. And near the end of the novel there is an unexpected but wonderfully received panegyric to George Plimpton, given by Zuckerman (or Roth), one feels, as a parting homage to the dead men of a much different literary age.

Roth of course has his favorites, the writers who show up again and again in his works, but the book can still be read in enjoyment without playing literary “Where’s Waldo.”

There is simply no doubt that Roth is a master at the written language. Every sentence and every paragraph is a minor work of art and poetry. And Roth the storyteller has been proved once again to be still at the top of his game. But this novel is more an epilogue to a literary life than a work that can hold its own. This is not a book I would suggest to a first-time Philip Roth reader. While Roth recaps some of Zuckerman’s background, there is simply too much complexity in the character for a summary to do him justice. If you have not lived with Zuckerman from the beginning, have not seen who he was before he grew old and impotent, then this book will lack most of the gravity that it had for me.

What then would I recommend? Start from the beginning. Read ‘Goodbye Columbus’ and then some of the early short stories. Nathan Zuckerman is as much a product of the early Roth as any of the later fiction, so begin where Roth began and work forward. But read Philip Roth. His work will be the literature that is talked about long into our adulthoods. Find the time. It’s worth it.

(Extracts from an article originally written for the Washington Square News, New York University's Student Newspaper.)

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