



Is this the end for the great male novelist bio?

The reverberations of the scandal over the latest Philip Roth biography might just sound the death knell for the era of doorstopping biographies of American Jewish male writers, says **David Herman**

At the beginning of April, Blake Bailey's Philip Roth: The Biography received rave reviews and sold like hot cakes. Then came the scandal. Less than two weeks after its launch, allegations emerged that the author, who taught eighth-grade English in New Orleans in the 1990s, had behaved inappropriately with students. Further accusations emerged that he had raped two women, including a former student.

Bailey has denied all allegations but his American publisher WW Norton immediately announced it had 'decided to pause the shipping and promotion of Philip Roth: The Biography pending any further information that may emerge'. His agents, the Story Factory, dropped him as soon as the allegations became public.

The last few years have seen a wave of biographies of major Jewish American writers but the Bailey story has been by far the most dramatic, more for the allegations about the author than because of what it reveals about Roth. These biographies have really taken off in the past 20 years, starting with Bellow: A Biography (2000) by James Atlas. Bellow and Roth were both dismayed by Atlas's biography, and Atlas is one of several biographers who have become fall-

guys in Bailey's huge, 900-page work. The question of who Roth would choose as his authorised biographer is oddly one of the central themes of Bailey's book.

In 2005 Stephen G Kellman published Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth, about the author of Call It Sleep (1934), one of the great masterpieces of Jewish American writing – perhaps the greatest before Bellow's Augie March, 20 years later. Redemption received huge acclaim, but sadly it is best known for revealing the incestuous relationships Roth had with his pre-pubescent sister and cousin.

Then came two books about Bernard Malamud: Janna Malamud Smith's memoir of her father, My Father Is a Book (2006) and Bernard Malamud: A Writer's Life by Philip Davis (2007), followed by the brilliant Rosenfeld's Lives: Fame, Oblivion, and the Furies of Writing by Steven J Zipperstein (2009), one of the leading American critics of his generation.

Almost ten years later, Zachary Leader published the first volume of his two-volume biography of Bellow, The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune, 1915-1964, followed by The Life of Saul Bellow: Love and Strife, 1965-2005. These are huge, well-researched books. Together with

Saul Bellow: Letters (2010) and Bellow's collected non-fiction (2015), both edited by Benjamin Taylor, they give as much information about Bellow, man and writer, as any fan could wish for.

At around the same time, there was an explosion of biographies and memoirs of Philip Roth, starting with Roth Unbound (2014) by his friend Claudia Roth Pierpont, then Benjamin Taylor's moving memoir, Here We Are: My Friendship with Philip Roth (2020), and then two massive biographies by Bailey and Ira Nadel's Philip Roth: A Counterlife (both 2021). Steven Zipperstein's book on Roth in the Jewish Lives series is still to come.

What do we make of all these? First, it is no surprise that Bellow and Roth dominate the field. They were the two great post-war American writers, and critics still argue about who was the best. If Roth had been run over by a bus on his 60th birthday there would have been no contest. Bellow's greatest work was behind him, he had won the Nobel Prize (Roth did not) and had written some of the great novels and short stories of his time, from Augie March and Herzog to Humboldt's Gift and The Dean's December. But then came Roth's American turn: five great novels in nine years and Shop Talk, his most underrated work, a book of interviews with other writers which confirmed him as a great reader and critic. For many, the novels about big American history, from antisemitism in the 1930s to McCarthyism, Vietnam and political correctness in the Clinton years, established Roth as the greater writer.

But reviews of Bailey's book, by a number of women critics in particular, suggest that Roth's reputation, at least on college campuses, may not survive the

publication of this biography. In his review of the book, David Baddiel writes, "It is true that a licence was granted between the end of the 1950s and the mid-1990s for male novelists to write excessively, and prize-winningly, about their libido, and that licence has now been revoked..."

Nadel's book raises similar questions. "Throughout his teaching," he writes of Roth, "he found the classroom an almost unending source of young and often willing [sic] females... Roth's exploits with students began at the University of Iowa and accelerated at Penn with a student in 1971, when he was thirty-eight and she was nineteen... In the late 1990s, a relationship with one more student began... Their age difference was forty-two years." Among the women he married or had relationships with, Nadel concludes, only his two wives and one lover, Ann Mudge, were older than him.

In addition to Bellow and Roth there are Isaac Rosenfeld, Allen Ginsberg, Malamud and Norman Mailer. All men. But, crucially, all of the generation born between the wars, writers formed by the New Deal and World War II, the children of FDR. "Our Zion," Roth told his friend Benjamin Taylor, "was the United States. Our divinity was Franklin Roosevelt."

These writers were also prolific. Roth wrote 31 books in 51 years, Bellow 21 books in 57 years, not including five posthumous books of letters and collected fiction and non-fiction. This is what sets them aside from the generation that came before and the generation that followed. Nathanael West, Delmore Schwartz and Henry Roth were fine writers, but they never produced shelves of novels. West and Schwartz died young, West at 37 and Schwartz at 52, and Henry Roth was paralysed by writer's block for years. Bellow and Roth lived long and were enormously productive. When Roth moved to his rural home in Connecticut he would fret, "Malamud has already been at it for two hours." He was a Stakhanovite, writing and rewriting, sending off drafts to a select few chosen readers.

These writers were part of the generation that exploded onto the American scene in the 1950s and '60s. They were secular but haunted by memories of the old Jewish immigrant neighbourhoods, whether Chicago (Bellow), Brooklyn (Malamud) or Newark, New Jersey (Roth). They were not especially interested in the Holocaust, despite Mr Sammler, Roth's fascination with Anne Frank and his 1959 short story Eli, The Fanatic; or Israel, despite Bellow's To Jerusalem and Back and Roth's Operation Shylock; or Judaism. Cynthia Ozick famously wrote to Bellow, challenging him about why he came to the Holocaust so late and never really took it on as a subject. A younger generation was

far more interested in Israel, Judaism and the Holocaust, and was often more soaked in religion. The critic Mark Schechner wrote of Roth, "He grew up knowing neither Beethoven nor Sholem Aleichem, neither Scarlatti nor Isaac Babel... neither Rashi nor Trotsky... neither Zionism nor Yiddishism, Talmud nor Torah." In 2012 Jonathan Safran Foer and Nathan Englander produced an edition of the Haggadah. It is inconceivable that Bellow and Roth would have done this.

For writers such as Bellow, Roth and also Joseph Heller, Jewishness was about a particular voice, a distinctive mix of high and low, serious and funny. Roth was once asked what was distinctive about Jewish writing. He replied that it was a sensibility: "the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatising, the indignation, the obsessiveness, the touchiness, the play-acting – above all the talking," adding, "It isn't what it's talking about that makes a book Jewish – it's that the book won't shut up."

This in part explains their success. They were Jewish but not too Jewish. This fitted perfectly with the times as assimilated suburban Jews, identified by characters

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such as Neil Klugman in the title story of Goodbye, Columbus, or Moses Herzog in Herzog. The writers of the 1950s, '60s and '70s were never as Jewish as Cynthia Ozick, but they were far more famous. Writing in Tikkun magazine in 1997, the critic Morris Dickstein asserted that this generation "were a secular generation that had broken out of the ghetto and broken into the university... They brought real Jews into modern American literature but left Judaism out."

They also told the truth about American cities, Bellow's Chicago, Roth's Newark, and America itself, "the indigenous American berserk" in Roth's great phrase, "the moronic inferno" in Bellow's. They wrote about big history, but also about recognisable people. And they lived dramatic lives full of wives and alimony. Bellow had five wives, Roth had two disastrous marriages and countless affairs, and his women friends included Jackie Kennedy, Ava Gardner and Mia Farrow.

These biographies are for their adoring readers: middle-aged Jewish men above all. And all the biographies here are of men. Why do we not have biographies of Grace Paley and Cynthia Ozick?

But time has not been kind to some of these writers. Who reads Malamud now? Are Bellow and Roth too misogynistic, even too racist, for a younger generation, especially in American colleges? Keep an eye on the biographies. There may not be many more. ■

David Herman is a regular contributor to JR.

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