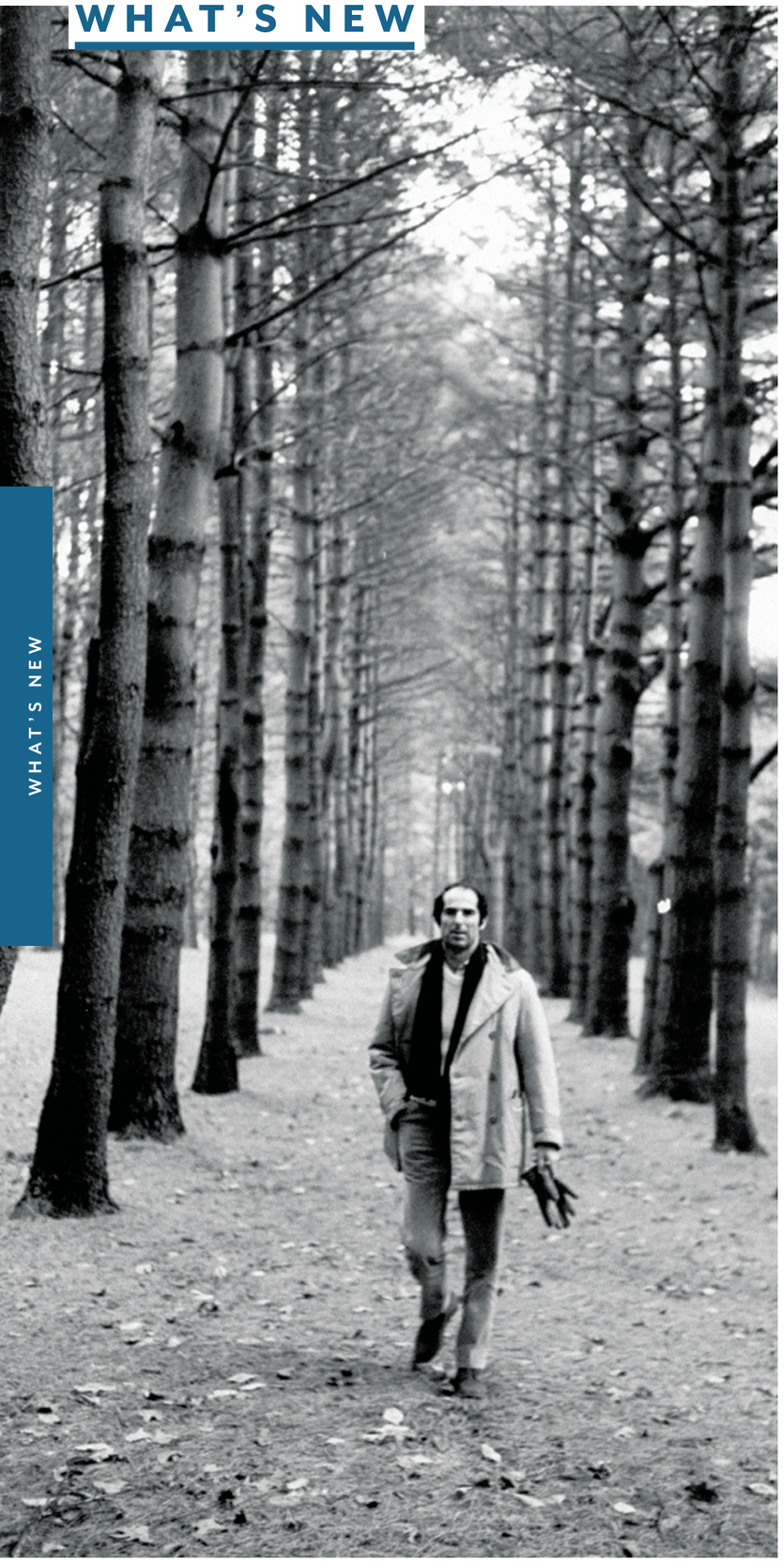

LIFE AFTER ROTH?

With the death of Philip Roth in May, America lost one of its literary greats. But, says **Mike Witcombe**, it's time to embrace a new generation of novelists whose outlook offers a refreshingly diverse picture of Jewish American life

The recent death of American Jewish writer Philip Roth was a huge loss to literature. As a long-time reader, scholar, and admirer of his works, his passing also deeply personally saddened me. It's been some consolation that the last few months have seen a large number of obituaries and articles on his work, most of which celebrate the tremendous scale of his achievement. The New York Times, for example, called him "the preeminent novelist of our times"; others called him "one of the greats of post-war American literature" and "the most prolific writer of his age". It's a big billing, but one that Roth earned over the course of a long and remarkable career, which led to him becoming the Jewish American writer par excellence.

Roth followed in the footsteps of Jewish writers who gained fame in the years immediately following World War II – most notably Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow. The still-dominant reputation of the 'big three', especially Bellow and Roth, may give the impression that Jewish American literature is slightly stodgy, set in its ways. The disenchanted intellectuals who haunt Bellow's fiction still command an audience, but they're showing their age. There's also less appetite for Malamud's tales of Jewish suffering and crisis – though Snoop Dogg, who starred in a 2005 film adaptation of Malamud's novel The Tenants, might disagree.

It's an obvious but important point that all of the "big three" writers are men. There has been a lot of great academic work in recent years to challenge this idea that men must dominate the Jewish literary canon. Brilliant women such as Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick and Adrienne Rich were often overlooked in their day by academics and critics, and the whole field had the feel of a boy's club. This was underlined by the content of some of the books being canonised; the journalist Vivian Gornick once argued that "if in Bellow misogyny was like seeping bile, in Roth it was lava pouring forth from a volcano", and she isn't alone in her opinion. People like me who research these writers for a living are used to being on the defensive – mentioning Roth around academics can produce eye-rolls as readily as enthusiasm.

When Roth retired in 2012, he still commanded a large readership. Nonetheless, people were starting to look at the field of Jewish American literature with a new eye. Bellow had died seven years before, preceded by Malamud back in 1986. The old guard were disappearing, and the search was already on for who would take their place.

The journalist David Sax was one of the first to bring the idea of a post-Roth generation into popular discussion. His 2009 article, 'Rise of the New Yiddishists', explored a new generation of "outwardly, proudly, Neil Diamond–ly Jewish" writers who seemed to suffer far fewer hang-ups than their predecessors. Rather than wallowing in their neuroses, there was something celebratory – and maybe even fun – about a lot of these writers. Sax raised a potent and timely question about what this new generation of writers might be bringing to the table. Sax suggests Jewishness is suddenly 'cool': whether or not this is true, it's certainly manifesting itself in new and unusual ways.

But it seems only fitting that it's now women who are leading the way. Take Girls, the TV show written by Lena Dunham (who has a Jewish mother). It takes Roth's ideas in a fascinating new direction and turns the male-led, sexual adventures of Portnoy's Complaint on their head. In Girls, female sexual desire is put front and centre as the show follows the main protagonist, Hannah, as she dabbles in the New York dating scene. Roth's own books even make an appearance in the show. In one episode, Hannah, who is a teacher, assigns her eighth-graders Goodbye Columbus. In series 6, in one of many Rothian plot allusions, Hannah is given a copy of Roth's 1967 novel, When She Was Good, as she is about to be seduced by Chuck Palmer – a novelist who is celebrated for his confessional work. "I know I'm not supposed to like [Roth] because he's a misogynist," says Hannah as she praises the novel, before adding, "Never let politics dictate what you read or who you fuck."

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Jill Soloway also takes on the Roth baton and his obsession with Jewish identity in Transparent, her televisual exploration of gender and Jewish family life. The plot line of season 4 gives the issue an irrevocably contemporary tint with its focus on one character's journey to identify as gender non-binary.

Nicole Krauss is another example of the new generation's ambition. Her novels range widely over time, and include a great many different narrators and characters. Meanwhile Elisa Albert takes the Rothian model of self-interrogation in fascinating new directions, exploring motherhood and terminal illness in her novels After Birth (2015) and The Book of Dahlia (2008) respectively. Fearlessly ambitious and taking pleasure in scandalising her readers, Albert dubs herself "a lobotomized Philip Roth writing chick lit". However, an academic article on her work has already called her "Roth's literary heir", and a glance at her powerful (and often hilarious) writing shows this to be no exaggeration.

Those of a more historical bent may find Dara Horn's work more to their taste – her novel How This Night is Different (2009) tracks the experience of a Jewish soldier in the American Civil War, exposing unexpected Jewish themes in a pivotal moment in American history. Ayelet Waldman's Love and Treasure (2014) expands outwards from the chaos of the end of World War II to encompass a swathe of 20th-century Jewish history. There has also been a rise in fiction and memoirs focused on Jewish religious identity – Pearl Abraham and Allegra Goodman have both written brilliant novels exploring the lives of Chasidic communities in America, and every year seems to bring forth more memoirs of writers, often women, who have left the faith.

Whilst these novelists are causing a stir (as are some brilliant playwrights and poets), some of the most exciting writing of the new generation can be found in graphic novels. One of my current favourites is Sarah Glidden, whose work blurs the line between autobiography and journalism. Her book How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less examines American-Israeli relations, and how individual Americans trying to make sense of the country can have conflicting emotions.

In the book, Glidden accepts an opportunity to go on a Birthright trip, a programme offering young diaspora Jews a tour of Israel designed to reaffirm their sense of Jewish identity. The title is a nod to how her attitudes towards the country have become more complex through her experiences, as well as a gentle dig at the idea of Birthright tours. Glidden has a distinctive art style strongly influenced by Hergé's Tintin books. Her calm watercolours suggest that the book is quite a simple read – yet it is one of the most complex works on the subject.

Another brilliant graphic novelist is Anya Ulinich, whose book Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel is probably better compared to Girls than to any other work of literature. It's a heavily autobiographical novel about a Russian Jewish woman who divorces her husband and tries her hand at Internet dating. Ulinich's book looks and reads like a sketchbook diary or 'zine' that's been photocopied and sent out to friends. This gives Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel a sense of intimacy that matches the topics it discusses, which range from sexual assault to the difficulties of raising young children within a failing marriage.

These books are changing the way that people think about the whole field of Jewish American literature. It's not just that a lot of these writers are women, but that the position of women in Jewish culture is a key topic in many of these works. In a departure from previous decades, women are no longer a specialist topic but central to the conversation. It's been a slow process – but it's been gratifying to watch it unfold.

Roth may have left us, but his books aren't going away any time soon. They still sell in large numbers, and can be found on a huge number of university course lists. Film adaptations of his work are still coming out almost every year. But with his legacy seeming assured, I like to think that Roth would approve of how these younger female writers are changing the conversation, given how much he changed conversations himself back in the day. His loss is a great blow to literature, but the field is blossoming with new ideas. ■

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Left: Philip Roth, walking in the woods in Newark, New Jersey; Below: Hannah (Lena Dunham) with a copy of Roth's When She Was Good, in Girls