



Last update - 00:08 11/11/2007

Zuckerman unplugged

By Yael Goldstein

Tags: Jamie Logan, Philip Roth >>

Exit Ghost, by Philip Roth, Houghton Mifflin, 304 pages, \$26

I always wonder when a reviewer says of a book that it shows the author at the height of his or her powers. How can anyone possibly know how high the powers in question might extend before the author has written his very last line? The judgment presumes the omniscience of the critic, which, come to think of it, may be why critics are so fond of it.

On the face of it, you'd think it would be a whole lot easier to gauge when a writer is toward the ebb of his or her powers, but it turns out that's not so easy either. Take for instance Philip Roth's latest offering, "Exit Ghost." The latest - we're given to believe the final - Nathan Zuckerman novel is a book told in the first person from the perspective of a monumental talent on the wane - as a writer and as a

man. After starring or playing amanuensis in eight previous novels, in the course of which (in no particular order) he became world-famous, bedded scores of women, feuded bitterly with at least one critic, had several 300-page

Advertisement

[del.icio.us](#)
[Digg It!](#) new

Today Online

Jessica Balaban: Why should world Jewry aid Israeli Arabs?

Responses: 178

Jacob Victor: Mukasey is the latest victim of the malaise of U.S. Jewish leadership

Responses: 143

Israel, PA agree future deals conditional on carrying out road map

Responses: 203

Top Hamas official: We'll conquer W. Bank if Israel withdraws

Responses: 151

Israel seeks fresh Holocaust reparations deal with Germany

Responses: 315

M. Firillas: Pakistan turmoil raises specter of an Islamic bomb

Responses: 63

Rosner's Domain

18%, 28%, 46%, 52%: how many really support military action in Iran? (WTR)

Annapolis dictionary: P is for photo-op

Rosner's Guest: Why not a women's Talmud?

Poll: Should American Jews have a voice in shaping Israel's policies?

Advertisement

Invest in Macedonia

New Business Heaven in Europe

Long-term Israel programs

MASA is your gateway. More programs. More grants.

Eldan Rent a Car

Israel's leading car rental company offers you a 20% discount on all online reservations

JOIN FREE AT JDATE.COM

The most popular online Jewish dating community in the world! Explore the possibilities! Click Here!

Dead Sea Salt

Beauty and skin care from the Dead Sea. Coupon code HAARETZ for 10% off!

Junkyard

Junk a car - get free towing nationwide and a tax-deductible receipt.

Holiday Inn and Crown Plaza Israel

Lowest internet rate Guaranteed at ichotelsgroup.com !

conversations that tapped into the very essence of 20th-century America, beat up an old widower in front of the man's wife's grave, and possibly killed his own father, Roth's novelist alter ego is old, tired, leaky and running out of steam. So how are we to know which of the lags and sags in the plot, the personalities, or the pace are Philip Roth's fault and which are the fault of the narrator himself?

Are we to blame Roth, for instance, or Zuckerman, for the shallow portraits of all the characters under age 31, for the fact that each of them could be summed up by the word "young" plus one more adjective - young and sexy Jamie Logan, young and sweet Billy Davidoff, young and obnoxious Richard Kliman? And is it on purpose that those signature Zuckerman monologues - once exhilarating in their self-involved, infuriating brilliance - have grown weary and even occasionally wearying? And what about the extended fantasies Zuckerman scribbles down on hotel stationery after every disappointing meeting with Young and Sexy - was the point to make us cringe in an "Oh Zuckerman, you poor, deluded, slightly creepy man" kind of way, rather than in the old "I can't believe you just said that!" kind of way? Is it on purpose that there's none of the madly energetic intelligence throbbing through these scenes, the intelligence that used to allow us to believe that maybe these sick little fantasies were actually nutritious mental fare? And what is the deal with the nine-page panegyric to George Plimpton?

Because I have long worshiped Roth as a literary deity, I am willing to stipulate that, yes, all of this was carefully calculated, even (though I can't think of how) the nine pages on Plimpton. I am willing to say that all these seeming flaws were in fact Roth's way of depicting the decline of that exuberantly angry, irreverently cowardly, narratologically maniacal life-form that is Nathan Zuckerman. I am willing to believe that the apparent narrative weakness is just one more trick up Roth's sleeve, one more instance of his playing with us, playing with the relationship between author and character, between art and life, between our desire to read as he tells us we ought to - our eyes firmly on the fiction itself, straying no where else - and our nasty, shameful urge to peek behind the fiction in order to glimpse the writer.

Am I stupid to believe this? Possibly. But I will say in my defense that Roth's sentences are still economically lovely, and that there are some wonderfully funny lines scattered throughout. For instance when Young and Obnoxious shouts at Zuckerman, "You smell of death," Zuckerman muses, "But what could a specimen like Kliman know about the smell of death? All I smelled of was urine."

Still, whether or not all that's wrong with "Exit Ghost" really is just a tricky master's latest trick, what it has to come down to in the end is this: Is it a good read, is it enjoyable, thought-provoking, is there a payoff for turning the pages? The answer is yes and no.

Lured back into life




When "Exit Ghost" begins, the famous novelist Nathan Zuckerman has just left the New England hideout where he's spent the past 11 years, and ventured into New York City for a medical procedure. The plan is to be in and out in a few days, but soon after his arrival, a conspiracy of coincidences threaten to seduce him back permanently into the thrumming world of life lived outside literature.

First, in the elevator on the way down from his doctor's office, he runs into Amy Bellette, the once-beautiful young mistress of Zuckerman's erstwhile literary hero, E.I. Lonoff, now looking partway mad and very ill. He follows her to a deli, but finds it impossible to approach. Still, it is the thoughts and memories stirred up by this run-in that lead him to follow up on a house-swap ad he notices in the back of The New York Review of Books the next evening, paying a spur-of-the-moment visit to a young couple looking to trade their Upper West Side apartment for a Berkshire hideaway. Both members of this couple are writers, and the 30-year-old wife immediately grabs Zuckerman's interest in a way no woman has since he took to the hills.

With the entrance of the young couple into Zuckerman's life comes the entrance of a far more pernicious force as well, a furiously ambitious young Harvard graduate who is writing a Lonoff biography and wants Zuckerman's help in exposing the "terrible secret" that fueled Lonoff's fiction. He of the radically quiet existence suddenly has himself a nemesis (Zuckerman is intent on preventing the biographer from exposing the dubious secret), a love interest, a New York

Advertising Feature
P 2 K
PARTNERSHIP
2 0 0 0
Jewish Agency
for Israel

יהודית לארץ ישראל
click here

 Print
 Send to a friend
 Send response

More Headlines

17:20 Mausoleum of late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat unveiled in Ramallah

21:46 IDF wounds militant, two civilians in strikes on Gaza rocket squads

17:01 PA Police seize 40 bombs in militant stronghold in Nablus

20:23 Germans irate over initiative to reopen Holocaust reparations deal

19:34 Report: Annapolis summit to be followed by meeting in Moscow


23:23 Teachers' union rejects latest offer by state to end strike

19:35 Egyptian police shoot Eritrean trying to cross border into Israel

19:30 Police suspect Or Yehuda man of stabbing his wife while inebriated

22:36 Torah damaged during Kristallnacht returned to Cologne synagogue

Previous Editions

Select Day 

bachelor's pad, and even someone to protect in the form of the ailing, addled and impoverished Amy Bellette, who is being played as a pawn by the would-be biographer. But all Zuckerman wants, really, is to find the strength to let go of these plot lines and shut himself back into his cabin.

A Zuckerman virgin

The best, most Zuckerman-like writing in the book comes in the form of a letter-to-the-editor written by Amy Bellette (or E.I. Lonoff, depending on how willing you are to believe in ghosts), in response to a New York Times article about the real-life inspirations for some early Hemingway characters. As Amy/Lonoff rages about our culture's facile, sensationalistic way of confronting literature, one yields to that familiar euphoric mix, that blend of gratitude and horror, awe and pity that one expects from a Zuckerman novel. "The way in which serious fiction eludes paraphrase and description- hence requiring thought - is a nuisance to your cultural journalist," Amy/Lonoff writes. "If I had something like Stalin's power, I would not squander it on silencing the imaginative writers. I would silence those who write about the imaginative writers... I'd leave the readers alone with the books, to make of them what they would on their own. I'd do this for as many centuries as are required to detoxify the society of your poisonous nonsense."

The three pages of this gleefully disgusted letter are the book's purest pleasure, though that is not to say that there aren't other pleasures to be found in "Exit Ghost." It is only to say that in order to enjoy these other pleasures you need to have satisfied some prerequisites. I can't imagine a Zuckerman virgin getting much of a kick out of "Exit Ghost"; but as the coda to the eight previous Zuckerman volumes, it is, ultimately, affecting, and for precisely the reasons that it may not wow new readers. In the same way that the "Zuckerman Bound" trilogy and epilogue builds the base on which "The Counterlife's" cruelly playful dazzle can unfold - that book would have been nothing more than clever pyrotechnics if one didn't already intimately know Zuckerman and his narrative hang-ups - so the whole lot of them, from "The Ghostwriter" down through "The Human Stain," build the base on which a muted, flawed, weary book like "Exit Ghost" can leave you satisfied in the end.

[Subscribe to Print Edition](#)

 [Bookmark to del.icio.us](#)



Remembering Yasser

PA Chair Mahmoud Abbas unveils a \$1.75 million mausoleum for Yasser Arafat.



Spiritual spat

U.S. synagogue ties with 'women priests' draws ire of Catholic church.



[Top](#)

[Home](#) | [TV](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Diplomacy](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts & Leisure](#) | [Sports](#) | [Jewish World](#) | [Underground](#) | [Site rules](#) |

© Copyright Haaretz. All rights reserved