

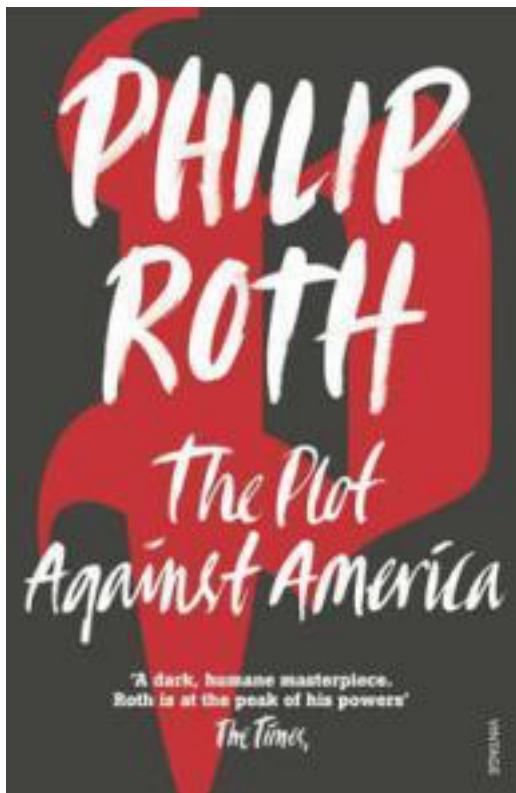


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## Philip Roth: *The Plot Against America*

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After Philip Roth died, a casual friend of mine said, "Roth had no vision."

I actually get stomach cramps when people serve up these high-fructose pronouncements. The truth is, though, I never loved Roth. I admired "Portnoy's Complaint" without feeling much kinship with it. *The Ghost Writer*, which I read because Jesse loves it, struck me as self-involved — but what is "Notes From the Underground" if not self-involved?

A closer friend of mine suggested that we try reading "The Plot Against America."

It was love at first sight. I'm not being glib. I finished the novel a couple of months ago, and it sticks to the ribs.

You cannot get more visionary than this "what if" story that envisions the institutionalization of anti-Semitism in an America with Charles Lindbergh in the White House. Roth's twenty-second novel emits as much dystopian brilliance as, say, Roald Dahl's "Genius and Catastrophe," an unnerving story about the much-desired birth of baby . . . Hitler. "The Plot Against America" is Dahl and a touch of "The Twilight Zone" too. It's not surprising that HBO will present the book as a six-part miniseries.

The novel's thesis — that Lindbergh would have been nightmarishly bad for the Jews — is so convincing that when Roth introduces the pro-Nazi Lindbergh to the story, I Googled "Lindbergh + Hitler." I learned that in 1938 — the same year as the Kristallnacht pogrom against Germany's

Jews — Lindbergh accepted Hitler's Service Cross of the German Eagle, just as Roth writes. Three years later America's aviation hero asks the House Foreign Affairs Committee on the Lend-Lease Policy to negotiate a neutrality pact with Hitler. Another Google verification: For many Americans, Lindbergh's attraction to the German dictator did not compromise his celebrity. Neither did his political stance as an isolationist: In the parlance of the 1930s, Lindbergh declared himself an "America Firster."

Some stuff even a great writer cannot make up. [To buy the paperback from Amazon, [click here](#). For the Kindle edition, [click here](#).]

The book begins with a fictionalized Philip Roth thinking back to Lindbergh's nomination in 1940 at the Republican National Convention. I'm in awe of the way Roth grounds the novel's fictionalized details in his actual family biography: Little Philip, a stamp collector, is seven. His brother Sandy, an aspiring studio artist, is twelve. His father is a thirty-nine-year-old insurance agent, and his mother, who couldn't afford teacher's college, is thirty-six. From his first sentence — "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear" — Roth makes a potentially strained premise so believable that I kept doing Google searches to see what was historically accurate and what was Roth's storytelling genius.

The first sign of institutionalized anti-Semitism comes when Herman Roth, Philip's father, is offered a promotion only if he takes over the Metropolitan Life office in Union, three miles west of the family's home in Newark. A Saturday drive out to Union exposes the Roths to the German-American Bund, a pro-Nazi organization that dominates the New Jersey town. "The intoxicant of anti-Semitism," the narrator says. "That's what I came to imagine [those German-Americans] all so cheerfully drinking in their beer garden that day — like all the Nazis everywhere, downing pint after pint of anti-Semitism as though imbibing the universal remedy."

Herman declines the promotion and only then learns that the Union office was "famous for agents who work two hours in the morning and spend the rest of their time in the tavern or worse. And I was supposed to go in there, the new Jew, the big new sheeny boss the goyim are all dying to work for . . . and remind them of their obligation to their wives and children. Oh, how they would have loved me, boys, for doing them the favor."

The novel is full of similar moments when a well meaning observer might say, "Don't be so paranoid! You're reading way too much into this."

That's what Sandy, the novel's pro-Lindbergh foil, believes. Sandy sketches worshipful images of the new president that he hides from his pro-FDR parents. He signs up for "Just Folks," a Lindbergh resettlement program in the Office of American Absorption that takes Jewish boys out of their urban (Jewish) families and sends them to farms in the south and midwest where they can learn real American (rural white) values. After several weeks on a Kentucky tobacco farm, Sandy derides his liberal parents as "ghetto Jews."

Roth accomplishes Lindbergh's own stealthy changeover from anti-Semitic rhetorician to instigator of pogroms with a series of well placed dog whistles. At a campaign rally, for example, Lindbergh says, "We cannot blame them [the Jews] for looking out for what they believe to be their own interests, but we must look out for ours. We cannot allow the natural passions and prejudices of other people to lead our country to destruction."

By the second year of the Lindbergh presidency, the atmosphere — in colleges, restaurants, hotels, the White House — is rife with anti-Semitic sentiment. Indeed, on a family trip to Washington, D.C., a passerby suffers no repercussions when he calls Philip's father a "loudmouth Jew."

No extreme political movement is complete without its collaborationists, and here Roth gives us Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, a Conservative rabbi who marries Philip's aunt. (A fictional character. I had to do a Google check.) Roth attributes every odious character trait to this Lindbergh apologist and makes him the novel's quintessential self-hating Jew.

"Yes, in 1936, long before the beginning of the European hostilities, the Nazis awarded Colonel Lindbergh a medal," Bengelsdorf sermonizes. "And, yes . . . the colonel accepted their medal. But all the while, my friends, all the while secretly exploiting their admiration in order better to protect and preserve our democracy and to preserve our neutrality through strength."

When the rabbi's intellectual contortions do not even save himself, you can't help but feel a little schadenfreude.

There's so much more to *The Plot Against America*: appearances by Walter Winchell, the radio gossip reporter who attacks Lindbergh's pro-Nazi philosophy; Earl Axman, Philip's ten-year-old daredevil friend; Aunt Evelyn, who waltzes with German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop at the White House; Seldon Wishnow, Philip's awkward friend whose mother is murdered by an anti-Jewish mob; and cousin Alvin, a firebrand anti-Lindbergher who loses his political mooring — and his leg — after shipping out with a Canadian destroyer to fight Hitler.

Philip Roth was famous all his literary life for being a "self-hating Jew." With "*The Plot Against America*," Roth must have forgotten he had a reputation to uphold. He writes here with pathos for an American Jewish community buffeted by the treachery of a once democratic safe haven and a cataclysm yet to come. If "*The Plot Against America*," published in 2004, still has so much valance, it's because the great visionary Philip Roth opens your eyes to what could have been and, who knows, what could still come to pass in the slipstream of time.