

have never represented, and likely never will represent, a monolithic voting bloc. There is still more that needs to be done in order to truly understand the factors that influence female voting.

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Ira Nadel, *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, £22.99). Pp. 568. ISBN 978 0 1998 4610 8.

When Blake Bailey's authorized biography of Philip Roth was published by Norton in 2021, it was hailed by Cynthia Ozick in the *New York Times* as "a narrative masterpiece."<sup>1</sup> But in the weeks that followed, disturbing stories about Bailey began to emerge online, including accusations of sexual assault. He was quickly dropped by his agent, and then his publisher, Norton, announced that *Philip Roth: The Biography* would be taken out of print, with unsold copies pulped. You can still get hold of it, though; the biography was picked up by Skyhorse Publishing, whose other titles include Woody Allen's memoir and Michael Cohen's account of his time as Trump's bagman. According to reports, Skyhorse will next year publish Bailey's side of the story in a memoir entitled *Repellent: Philip Roth, #MeToo, and Me*.

The Bailey scandal could've been lifted straight out of a Roth novel, where biographers are always nefarious characters. Media commentators linked the accusations against Bailey to the familiar charge that Roth's novels are misogynistic, tarring author and subject with the same brush and muddling fact and fiction – a confusion Roth himself liked to court in his writing. The coverage also recalled the reaction to *Leaving a Doll's House*, Claire Bloom's 1996 memoir, which divulged details of her tumultuous marriage to Roth and portrayed him as manipulative and vengeful (as well as unfaithful and litigious). Roth worried that the fallout would ruin his reputation; he blamed Bloom for the fact that he never got the Nobel. After his retirement from writing fiction in 2012, Roth spent much of his time collaborating with Bailey, putting together a 295-page document entitled "Notes for My Biographer" – a detailed rebuttal of Bloom's charges, and of just about every other slight he felt himself to have suffered during his long, complicated life.

Ira Nadel's *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* appeared just as Bailey's book was heading to the pulpers. Nadel's subtitle suggests that his biography will give details not captured in the official account; it also seems to "indicate an awareness," as one reviewer noted, of his book's "also-ran status."<sup>2</sup> But now that the authorized narrative has been discredited, the counterlife has taken on a life of its own. With Roth scholars still a little uneasy about citing Bailey, Nadel's might well become the standard biography.

In his final chapter, Nadel describes Roth's working relationship with Bailey, noting how the author sent his biographer hundreds of documents accompanied by "meticulously typed memos" outlining "how they were to be used, and what to think about the material." Roth, Nadel claims, "was directing and even writing his biography ...

<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Ozick, "His Life as a Man," *New York Times*, 11 April 2021, "Sunday Book Review," 1.

<sup>2</sup> James Wolcott, "Sisyphus at the Selectric," *London Review of Books*, 20 May 2021.

ensuring that the unfinished business of life would be completed as he wanted" (427). The implication is that Bailey was too close to Roth to see him clearly, but there's perhaps also a note of professional envy regarding Bailey's unfettered access to all those documents. By contrast, Nadel did not get permission to quote from the core collection of Roth's unpublished papers, while his quotations from Roth's published works are minimal. He never got to see Roth's "Notes for My Biographer."

These restrictions mean that Nadel has had to be creative with his sources. He relies on summaries of works and long paraphrases of letters, and draws on some unusual archival troves – we get a lot of Roth's rather mundane correspondence with his editors at Random House, for instance. It also leads him to focus, illuminatingly, on some of Roth's overlooked friendships – with R. B. Kitaj, Al Alvarez, and Janet Malcolm, for example. What's missing, however, is a sense of who Roth was, or who he was able to transform himself into, once he got behind his writing desk. You'll have to read Bailey's book for that.

Roth's was a messy, full life, rich with contradictions: a writer equally drawn to high seriousness and low comedy, to privacy and self-exposure, responsibility and recklessness; someone deeply, even sentimentally attached to American culture who for years became preoccupied with Eastern Europe; a man of disastrous marriages and loving friendships; a boy-wonder who received a National Book Award at twenty-six but who many critics felt only hit his stride in his sixties, with the American Trilogy (1997–2000). Nadel tries to impose some order on all this by framing Roth's life as a series of real and imagined betrayals: by his mother (who made a belittling joke to do with an ill-fitting swimsuit when he was eleven), by his psychoanalyst (who wrote an article revealing details of their sessions), by his first wife (who faked a pregnancy to trick him into marriage), and by Bloom. Each of these betrayals fuelled the "anger" that was, in Nadel's telling, the galvanizing force behind all of Roth's work. Nadel focusses in particular on Roth's betrayal by his analyst, Hans Kleinschmidt. Roth's analysis with Kleinschmidt in the 1960s provided the inspiration for *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), but Roth was distraught to learn that his analyst had also been working up his notes from their sessions for an essay entitled "The Angry Act: The Role of Aggression in Creativity." Roth would turn the tables by fictionalizing the episode in *My Life as a Man* (1974), but, as Nadel claims, in a confusing sentence, "The betrayal by his analyst confirmed that a lifetime of distrust began literally at Roth's front door, one of a series of deceptions that led to his sustained unhappiness and anger and that filtered through his life and defined his work" (4). Nadel describes Kleinschmidt as "wedded to psychoanalytic dogma" (183), but his own reading of Roth as driven by rage and resentment clearly echoes the argument the analyst makes in "The Angry Act." Later, Nadel approvingly cites Kleinschmidt's interpretation that Roth's way of avoiding "any true confrontation with emotional reality has always been to libidinize both anger and anxiety." "This sentence," Nadel writes, "more than any other in the essay, pinpoints Roth's behaviour in his life and in *Portnoy's Complaint*" (186–87). Whether that is a Freudian slip in the final clause, or just clumsy phrase making, is up to you.

Do writers get the biographers they deserve? Who knows. But when one considers, for example, how well-served Roth's friend Saul Bellow has been by Zachary Leader's terrific two-volume biography, it is hard not to feel that, by contrast, Bailey's and Nadel's biographies will, in their different ways, only lead to their subject continuing to be misunderstood. But that, according to Roth's fiction, is our fate in any case. In *The Human Stain*, Nathan Zuckerman spots a little tattoo – "the words 'U.S. Navy'

inscribed between the hooklike arms of a shadowy anchor” – on the upper arm of Classics professor Coleman Silk, whose biography Zuckerman will piece together (and concoct) over the course of the novel. The tattoo is a “tiny symbol,” Zuckerman writes, “of all the million circumstances of the other fellow’s life, of the blizzard of details that constitute the human biography – a tiny symbol to remind me why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong.”<sup>3</sup>

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Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, *Fit Nation: The Gains and Pains of America's Exercise Obsession* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2022, \$29.00 cloth, \$28.99 ebook). Pp. 443. ISBN 978 0 2266 5110 1, 978 0 2266 5124 8.

How and why did a practice once considered marginal, dismissed to the spaces and the media of American counterculture, ultimately transform into a central and dominant element of the US nation's cultural fabric? In her chronologically structured book, Petrzela delves into the evolution of the moral conceptions surrounding fitness in the USA, tracing its journey towards complete normalization and integration within the political ideals fostered by and within modern American society. She places the body at the core of its political history and explains how the American fitness industry has developed nationwide. In doing so, she discusses the socio-economic and political factors that contributed to its historical success and examines the resulting cultural influence. By chronicling the successive emergence of body-building in the Californian public sphere, the mainstreaming of yoga, and the proliferation of sports practices that value self-performance like CrossFit, Petrzela situates the history of the US nation within the context of the growing individualism in America.

Given her emphasis on the body as a means to examine the socioeconomic foundations of the US nation, it came as no surprise to me that California was a recurring example throughout the book. Drawing on contemporary research conducted on California, Petrzela demonstrates how the historical development of fitness culture is intricately intertwined with the construction of American national identity and territory. This research aligns with Petrzela's cultural perspective, as it examines the construction of America's national ideology by analyzing bodily representations and practices that originate from a territory often regarded as the laboratory of the American Dream. The ideals of the Fit Nation are indeed shaped within the influential spaces and locations of the USA. As fitness became increasingly industrialized, those ideals transformed into products of the discourses and practices that originated from private media outlets and fitness-related venues where they were promoted and pursued. Petrzela's account captures the progressive assimilation of the ideals crafted by consumerism into the fabric of the American national narrative. She elucidates how the pursuit of spiritual and physical fulfillment, as prescribed by the fitness industry, has progressively evolved into both a right and a duty of the American citizen

<sup>3</sup> Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2000), 22.