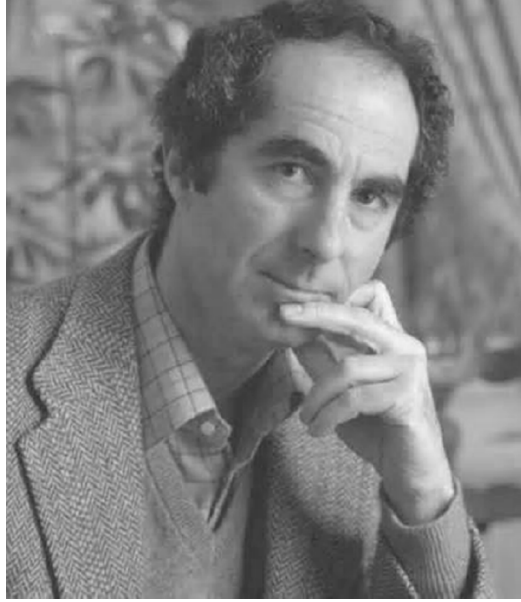


## 79 QUOTATIONS



### Philip Roth

(1933- )

Philip Roth is an autobiographical Postmodern novelist prominent since the 1960s, who has published over 30 books but no masterpieces. His collection of stories *Goodbye, Columbus* won a National Book Award in 1960 while offending many in the Jewish community. In 1969 his satirical novel *Portnoy's Complaint* became a bestseller, made him rich and offended many in and out of the Jewish community. Roth has a following of readers who enjoy his storytelling, his bold independence of mind, his brazen irreverence, and his sense of humor. His Postmodern characteristics include secularism, atheism, solipsism, alienation, cynicism, liberalism, hatred of President Ronald Reagan, hedonism, antagonism toward the opposite gender, lack of spirituality, adolescent tone, and preoccupation with sex.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, psychoanalysis, autobiographical fiction, teaching, Jews, memory, literature, writing, Postmodernism, sex, Feminists, Political Correctness, America, human nature, old age, love, death:

#### YOUTH

“You shouldn’t hit me about God, Mamma.”

Unless one is inordinately fond of subordination, one is always at war.

My own household environment as a youngster was much closer to Zuckerman’s than to Portnoy’s.

Seventeen. I was certainly fine with masturbating by then, but the idea that a writer was free to write anything—*anything*—any way he wanted had never dawned on me.

I am marked like a road map from head to toe with my repressions. You can travel the length and breadth of my body over superhighways of shame and inhibition and fear.

## PSYCHOANALYSIS

The experience of psychoanalysis was probably more useful to me as a writer than as a neurotic.

The exhibitionism inherent to a confession has only made the misery worse.

Spring me from this role I play of the smothered son in the Jewish joke! Because it's beginning to pall a little at thirty-three!

The loan was to help pay for my analysis, which I needed primarily to prevent me from going out and committing murder because of the alimony and court costs incurred for having served two years in a childless marriage.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

I am like somebody who is trying vividly to transform himself out of himself and into his vividly transforming heroes.

I write fiction and I'm told it's autobiography, I write autobiography and I'm told it's fiction, so since I'm so dim and they're so smart, let them decide what it is or it isn't.

It isn't that you subordinate your ideas to the force of the facts in autobiography but that you construct a sequence of stories to bind up the facts with a persuasive hypothesis that unravels your history's meaning.

You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance.

## TEACHING

I've enjoyed teaching—not teaching writing. I taught literature at the University of Pennsylvania, and I liked that very much.... I got to read and think about books and study books. My education comes from teaching, really.

## JEWS

Fear tends to manifest itself much more quickly than greed.

A Jewish man with his parents alive is half the time a helpless infant!

A Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old boy, and will remain a fifteen-year-old boy until they die.

"Doctor, doctor, what do you say, let's put the id back in yid."

I think this may be why so many Jews were incensed by *Portnoy's Complaint*. It wasn't that they'd never heard about kids masturbating before or about Jewish family fighting. It was, rather, that if they couldn't even control someone like me anymore, with all my respectable affiliations and credentials, all my seriousness of purpose, something had gone wrong.

They'd never really got off my ass for publishing *Goodbye, Columbus*, which was considered in some circles to be my *Mein Kampf*. Unlike Alexander Portnoy, my education in petit-bourgeois morality didn't come at home, but after I'd left home and begun to publish my first short stories...the censorious small-mindedness and shame-ridden xenophobia that I ran into from the official Jews who wanted to shut me up. The moral atmosphere of the Portnoy household in its repressive aspects, owes a lot to the response of persistent voices within the official Jewish community on my debut.

I knew less about anti-Semitic repression from personal experience than I did about the repressions Jews practiced upon themselves and upon one another as a consequence of the history of anti-Semitism.

Talking about Jewishness hardly interests me at all.

It isn't what it's talking about that makes a book Jewish—it's that the book won't shut up.... I knew what I was doing when I broke Zuckerman's jaw. For a Jew a broken jaw is a terrible tragedy. It was to avoid this that so many of us went into teaching rather than prizefighting.

#### MEMORY

I didn't get high, no. I was—one was delighted by the theatrics of the sixties. I'd come out of the fifties, and we didn't have these theatrics.... I was living in New York at the time, so the theatrics around me gave me confidence....

Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imaginings of the facts.

#### LITERATURE

Literature takes a habit of mind that has disappeared. It requires silence, some form of isolation, and sustained concentration in the presence of an enigmatic thing.

I always knew that literature satisfied a taste for considering life in a certain way, but that it wasn't a guide to living.

The belief it inspires is what counts.

*The Nigger of the Narcissus*. It's an absolute masterpiece. Beyond belief. And about race, it's brilliant. So brilliant. Conrad is rich. He's very rich.

#### WRITING

Memoirs lie, but fiction tells the truth.

Discretion is, unfortunately, not for novelists.

Writing turns you into somebody who's always wrong; the illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on. What else could? As pathological phenomena go, it doesn't completely wreck your life.

I was experimenting with excess. You know what that's like? I just wondered how far I could go, and I discovered what my limit was.

What I want is to possess my readers while they are reading my book—if I can, to possess them in ways that other writers don't.

Zuckerman is a writer who wants to be a doctor impersonating a writer who wants to be a doctor impersonating a pornographer—who then to compound the impersonation, to barb the edge, pretends he is a well-known literary critic. Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life *is* my life.

There has to be some pleasure in this job, and that's it. To go around in disguise. To act a character. To pass oneself off as what one is not.

Nothing has a more sinister effect on art than the artist's desire to prove that he's good.... You must achieve mastery over your idealism, over your virtue as well as over your vice, aesthetic mastery over everything that drives you to write in the first place—your outrage, your politics, your grief, your love!

The artist's success depends as much as anything on his powers of detachment, on de-narcissizing himself.

The road to hell is paved with works in progress.

The ending is immense. Tell it plainly.

## POSTMODERNISM

Nothing keeps its promise.

The flashing bullshit of this world.

Life is just a short period of time in which you are alive.

He had learned the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense.

That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong.

As for himself, however hateful life was, it was hateful in a home and not in the gutter.

You don't have to work in a mental hospital to know about husbands and wives.

People think that in falling in love they make themselves whole? The Platonic union of souls? I think otherwise. I think you're whole before you begin. And the love fractures you. You're whole, and then you're cracked open.

The number of homeless in America couldn't touch the number of Americans who had homes and families and hated the whole thing.

"I assure you, Alex, you are never going to hear such...mixed-up crap and disgusting nonsense as the Christian religion in your entire life."

Nor had I understood til then how the shameless vanity of utter fools can so strongly determine the fate of others.

When we lay waste, when we efface, it isn't with raging fists or ruthless schemes or insane sprawling violence but with our words, our brains, with mentality, with all the stuff that produced the poignant abyss between our fathers and us and that they themselves broke their backs to give us.

Something had turned him into a human platitude.

## SEX

A man wouldn't have two-thirds of the problems he has if he didn't venture off to get fucked.

It's sex that disorders our normally ordered lives.

## FEMINISTS

You know, the dirty little secret is no longer sex; the dirty little secret is hatred and rage.

People are unjust to anger—it can be enlivening and a lot of fun.

The pleasure isn't in owning the person. The pleasure is this. Having another contender in the room with you.

Conversation isn't just crossfire where you shoot and get shot at! Where you've got to duck for your life and aim to kill! Words aren't only bombs and bullets—no, they're little gifts, containing meanings!

Don't elevate that by calling it a feminist attack. That's just stupid reading. Lucy Nelson [in *When She Was Good*] is a furious adolescent...confronted and opposed by men who typify deeply irritating types to many women. She is the protector of a passive, defenseless mother whose vulnerability drives her crazy. She happens to be raging against aspects of middle-class American life that the new militant feminism was to identify as the enemy only a few years after Lucy's appearance in print—hers might even be thought of as a case of premature feminist rage.

It was as though while their lives were rich and full they were secretly sick of themselves and couldn't wait to dispose of their sanity and their health and all sense of proportion so as to get down to that other self, the true self, who was a wholly deluded fuckup.

#### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

You cannot observe people through an ideology. Your ideology observes for you.

Undermining experience, embellishing experience, rearranging and enlarging experience into a species of mythology.

Everybody else is working to change, persuade, tempt and control them. The best readers come to fiction to be free of all that noise.

I'm sorry if my men don't have the correct feelings about women, or the universal range of feelings about women, or the feelings about women that it will be OK for men to have in 1995.

#### AMERICA

America is the opiate of the people.

When I was in Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes and everything matters.

Only in America do these peasants, our mothers, get their hair dyed platinum at the age of sixty, and walk up and down Collins Avenue in Florida in pedal pushers and mink stoles, and with opinions on every subject under the sun. It isn't their fault they were given a gift of speech. Look, if cows could talk, they would say things just as idiotic.

#### HUMAN NATURE

You can no more make someone tell the truth than you can force someone to love you.

All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing.

Is an intelligent human being likely to be much more than a large-scale manufacturer of misunderstanding?

Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you.

We leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there's no other way to be here... Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption.

#### OLD AGE

Old age isn't a battle; old age is a massacre.

Stop worrying about growing old. And think about growing up.

To give yourself over intimately to a much, much older man provides this sort of younger woman with authority of a kind she cannot get in a sexual arrangement with a younger man. She gets both the pleasures of submission and the pleasures of mastery.

#### LOVE

That is when you love somebody—when you see them being game in the face of the worst.

#### DEATH

Just like those who are incurably ill, the aged know everything about their dying except exactly when.

That's all we're given in life, that's all we're given of life. A taste. There is no more.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from  
"Philip Roth, *The Art of Fiction*" (1984)  
*The Paris Review Interviews IV*  
(Picador, 2009)

