



The Counterlife

Philip Roth

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The Counterlife is about people enacting their dreams of renewal and escape, some of them going so far as to risk their lives to alter seemingly irreversible destinies. Wherever they may find themselves, the characters of The Counterlife are tempted unceasingly by the prospect of an alternative existence that can reverse their fate. Illuminating these lives in transition and guiding us through the book's evocative landscapes, familiar and foreign, is the mind of the novelist Nathan Zuckerman. His is the skeptical, enveloping intelligence that calculates the price that's paid in the struggle to change personal fortune and reshape history, whether in a dentist's office in suburban New Jersey, a tradition-bound English Village in Gloucestershire, a church in London's West End, or a tiny desert settlement in Israel's occupied West Bank.

The Counterlife Details

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From Reader Review The Counterlife for online ebook

Michael Finocchiaro says

An extraordinary tour de force from Roth. Varying styles of narration, sub-text commenting on subtext like Pale Fire, it was an exhilarating read.

There was a lot of quotable material:

Nathan Zuckerman at the Wailing Wall: "Rock is just right, I thought : what on earth could be less responsive. Even the cloud drifting overhead, Shuki's late father's "Jewish cloud," appeared less indifferent to our encompassed and uncertain existence."

And later with his brother Henry near Hebron: "What if that was to be Act Three's awful surprise, the Zuckerman differences ending in blood, as though our family were Agamemnon's?"

Later, Nathan in the plane from Tel Aviv to London:

"The treacherous imagination is everyone's maker-we are all the invention of each other, everyone a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors."

I was debating the merits of Philip Roth with a friend who, like me, idolizes Melville, Proust, Faulkner, Joyce, and Dostoyevsky and I was trying to see if/how Roth could be compared to that sacred group. He can create psychological tension like Melville (the end of the plane ride), he can explore the subconscious and unconscious memory (the various perspectives and particularly the first person narrations with all their perceptive insights), rather than Yoknapatawpha County, Roth's universe revolves around Newark and everyone who Nathan/David/Philip comes in contact with or as I was also thinking, the uncharted geography of Roth's mind. I think he comes up short though because he does not achieve the incredible flexibility of language of Joyce, the promethean power of Faulkner and Dosto's writing, the intimate lucidity of Proust or the epic struggle with nature like Melville. His subjects are vast though: Family, marriage, friendship, memory, pain, loss, discovery, love, israel, diaspora, manhattan, father-son, brother-brother, husband-mistress, husband-wife, husband-brother's mistress, lovers, ex's, cancer, heart problems, depression, angst, parenting, guilt, history, choices and consequences, alternative realities and interpretations. And nearly all of these elements are present in The Counterlife.

Ultimately, history will decide where Roth belongs in the pantheon of epic writers. One thing for sure, The Counterlife was pure, unadulterated reading pleasure.

RIP (1933-2018). One of America's literary giants has left us.

Kimberly Erskine says

I loved Philip Roth's The Counterlife. It was one of those rare books that could make me feel a multitude of emotions and it took me by surprise. It is rare that books truly take me by surprise and have unexpected twists in the plots. This book did everything.

In the beginning this book offended me. I was outraged by the raw, raunchiness of it. I hated the character of Henry. He disgusted me. I hated the way he left his family to have an affair. I hated the way he risked his life to have a dangerous and unnecessary heart surgery just so he wouldn't be impotent anymore so that he could continue his sexual affair with his dental assistant. I hate how immoral he was. I hated the way the book seemed so raw and sexual as well. I'll admit I may be a bit biased in thinking that as my initial reaction

though. I read this book as part of required reading for Dr. Jesse Zuba's The American Novel class. The first week we began reading this book I was chosen to lead the class in discussion about it. The chapter, Basel, discussed Henry's sex life (or lack thereof) in detail, making for a rather awkward class discussion, to say the least.

The second chapter, Judea amused me and broadened my way of thinking. I found it interesting the way that Henry decided to go to Judea after his surgery to try to recreate himself into an overly zealous Jew, abandoning everything in life just for his religion and for a chance to connect with his born heritage. I liked the arguments about identity and the questions raised. Does our ancestry or heritage really matter? How do we identify ourselves? Is our identity in our blood or is it in our lifestyle? I never really gave this much thought, but Roth makes an interesting point. Yes, I have Irish, Scottish and Germany blood — but is this really part of my identity? I'm proud of my heritage, but I'm not sure I'd say I identify with it. My identity is that of an American. America is all I've ever known. I've never been to Scotland, Ireland, or Germany. I can't begin to tell you anything about it because I've never had any experiences with it.

Gloucestershire served as the climax of the novel and the point where I realized just how much of a gem this novel truly is. In this chapter we learn that everything we were previously set up to believe was all a lie. We were never reading about Henry's life at all, but rather, Nathan's life fictionalized to be Henry's. We were reading the first few chapters of Nathan's novel. Suddenly Nathan didn't seem as innocent or revolutionary to me anymore. I HATED him. How dare he write such things about all of his family members! I was outraged! But then I thought to myself — he is a writer. This is what writers do — they write fiction. They make things up. But was what he was doing ethical? Was it right?

I am a writer, just like Nathan. When I read about the way that Nathan disguised his own life in his writing by pretending these things happened to others in his life, I began to question the ethics of writing. Would I have done the same thing? It's hard to say. Mostly everything I write, whether fiction or non-fiction, has been influenced by people I know in real life. I have written fiction stories with real people doing extreme things. I have written fiction stories based on real life events that were exaggerated just like Nathan did. Although I am outraged and offended by Nathan, I realize there's many times that I've done very similar, if not the same, things as Nathan. Nathan is just the typical writer using his writing as a way to express himself and maybe say things he wasn't to say but doesn't know how to. With writing a person can wear a mask. They can change life and cater it to be exactly as they see it or want to see it. Looking back, although at first I was initially offended by it, maybe this isn't such a problem after all. Writing is creative. It allows us to make ourselves and those around us into anything we want them to be. The danger doesn't lie in writing, but rather, life when it comes to role playing and identity creation. When we try to be or make others into things that they are not in real life, that's a real problem. It's best to just let those things stay in fictional worlds in the written word.

The Counterlife gets a full five star rating from me for raising interesting questions about life and ethics that I have not previously considered, taking me by surprise in ways I never could have imagined, and helping me to re-examine and re-evaluate my own life. Not many books have as much power as this one does, making this one a true stand-out gem.

David Schaafsma says

Once upon a time, when I went to a therapist for marital counseling, the doctor asked me, "Where have you visited that you might like to live? " "Let's say Las Cruces, or Santa Fe, or Boulder," I said. "Fine, what

would Santa Fe might be like for you? How might you be different there?" "Ah, right," I said, "I see your point. I would still be the same person, regardless of wherever I live. I could start a new relationship, and would still have my 'issues' with whomever I was with." But I also thought, why not try to reinvent yourself, from time to time?! (I didn't move to any of those places). The Counterlife, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction (1987), is a pretty postmodern story including several "drafts" about two males—two very different brothers—in mid-life, focused on two things Roth often focuses on, sex and Judaism.

I had never read it but think it is one of his best, a kind of precursor to the American Trilogy in dealing with actual political situations. This one focuses on Israel and Jewish identity. I liked it very much in spite of the fact that the book begins, in part one, with Nathan focusing on his brother Henry's heart condition, that requires medication making him incapable of achieving erections. Ach, I think, this may be why almost no women seem to read/review Roth (on Goodreads, anyway)! Who cares?! Phallo-centrism, was it ever an important literary subject? But if Henry has an operation he can save his heart and his erections! Anyway, we then see this early narrative was written and intended as a eulogy, because Henry has died. Yes, in a way Roth "elevated" the penis to high (comic) literary status! This is great dark comedy, I think.

Part Two assumes Henry has survived the operation and has suddenly, after a lifetime of atheism, with a kind of foxhole confession, committed to Zionism, moving to Israel. When Nathan goes to visit Henry, dialogues about secular and religious Judaism ensue between them, and also between Zuck and other Zionists. The main thrust, such as it is, of this book, is not what people eat or wear, or descriptions of natural settings as a backdrop for the action, but almost entirely of intense talks, dialogue, rants, from a variety of perspectives, usually aggressive, often angry, on whatever subject comes up. It is intellectually challenging to read Roth, it is impressive visceral dialogue, but it is not "pastoral," or in the least bit relaxing. Exactly, Roth would interject! You want relaxing, read someone else or just read me and shut up! This second section, while also a serious exploration of Jewish identity, is also often funny. Even when the people are annoying, or because they are annoying, they can be funny.

Part Three is a manic encounter with Jimmy, a crazy guy who says he has a grenade on the plane in which he and Nathan happen to be flying. The authorities interrogate Nathan as an accomplice, and the fact that the cops never have heard of Nathan anguishes him. 'I'm an emerging, newly famous writer, c'mob!' This is another kind of crazy manic scene.

Part Four posits Nathan as the brother with the heart condition, and who then promptly dies. What would dentist Henry say at estranged brother Nathan's funeral?! We see Henry going through Nathan's notebooks excising entries potentially exposing him to his "foibles" (affairs, always). This is a funny and interesting and insightful turnabout of affairs for Nathan, the arrogant writer, to have his own fiction turned on him!

Part Five focuses on Nathan and his fourth (shiksa) wife, Maria, who resents being written about:

"I began to wonder which was real, the woman in the book or the one I was pretending to be upstairs. Neither of them was particularly 'me.' I was not myself just as much Maria in the book was not myself. Perhaps she was. I began not to know which was true and which was not, like a writer who comes to believe that he's imagined what he hasn't. . . The book began living in me all the time, more than my everyday life."

Roth's novelist Nathan Zuckerman's book Karnovsky {like Roth's own Portnoy's Complaint} is seen by the Jewish reading public as a mocking, self-hating Jewish diatribe, but here, in the last draft of The Counterlife, with Zuck married to British Maria and her anti-Semitic British family, Zuckerman rails against anti-Semitism! And we get the joke, that he is neither self-hating Jew nor devout. Roth here examines subjects

from all angles and attitudes.

I think that this book, while not always fun to read—Zuckerman and his endlessly manic/angry argumentative talkers can be annoying, and a little exhausting—it is still just about on par with his best novels, such as *American Pastoral*. Not quite. For my money the ones dealing more with politics and history as well as identity are the best, and the American trilogy (and *The Plot Against America*) deals with several political issues. Yes, the examination of Judaism and Israel here is a political focus, of course, but at its best *Counterlife* is breathtaking in its examination of—again, after *My Life as a Man*—the uses of fiction in the construction of a life. In this book he speaks of "the construction of a counterlife that is one's own antithesis. . . a species of fabulous utopianism," thus the book's title. Try to reinvent yourself, through fiction, since the self is always a fiction:

"The treacherous imagination is everyone's maker--we are all the invention of each other, everyone a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors."

Here's a longer passage on the subject of the self as performance:

"I'm talking about recognising that one is acutely a performer, rather than swallowing whole the guise of naturalness and pretending that it isn't a performance but you. . . . All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self. It certainly does strike me as a joke about -my- self. What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself -- a troupe of players that I have internalised, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required, an ever-evolving stock of pieces and parts that forms my repertoire. But I certainly have no self independent of my imposturing, artistic efforts to have one. Nor would I want one. I am a theater and nothing more than a theater."

"But it is interesting trying to get a handle on one's own subjectivity--something to think about, to play around with, and what's more fun than that?"

He's talking here about the close relationship between writing fiction and living life. To an extent, all of us are engaged in living counterlives, since we are changing, sometimes engage in departures from the selves we or others think we are. That's what this book is about: Inventing your life as you go, and not as somehow tapping into some "essential" and "natural" self.

Donna says

I can't tell you what this book is about because, for one thing, I don't want to spoil anything and, secondly, because I'm not even sure what I just read. It's one of those books where I had the desire to pinch myself while reading it, hoping it was all a dream. But that doesn't work when I'm wide awake and when the author has purposefully set out to confound me with different levels of reality, making my reading experience unreal. And that isn't a compliment.

I disliked this story. It was full of meanness, anger, and hatred. It was a sorrowful and soulless story, just like the characters populating it. And just to complicate matters more, I'm going to say that, despite all that, I admired the author's writing, his pure skill at forming sentences in a self-assured way that forced his ideas into my brain, forming a thought-provoking story infused with much intelligence. It's a shame there's so much disdain in it for humankind, religion, women, and more. It's a shame it's blatantly anti-Semitic. It's a

shame I didn't care about any of the characters. It's a shame the story bored me by the end when I was captivated in the beginning.

Roth is an award winning author. But he's not my kind of author, not if this one book I've read by him is representative of his work. My kind of author remembers his readers and the fact that he might want to communicate something of use to them instead of presenting pervasive pessimism. I wanted to take Roth's ability to fashion sentences with acute observations about human beings and use it for a wholly different story that enriched me in some way. But I don't think he cares if he pleases his readers or not, especially when droning on for the umpteenth time about things that perhaps should be worked out in therapy. If he wants to crucify mankind, I wish he wouldn't use his readers as nails as he hammers away at them.

If you haven't read this book yet and wish to give it a try, proceed with caution. Prepared to be impressed and depressed in equal measure. I read it for my book club. I'm looking forward to the discussion and hopefully some commiseration.

Favorite quote:

"The treacherous imagination is everybody's maker--we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors."

GloriaGloom says

La controvita è un romanzo di commovente bellezza, di rara lucidità, un moltiplicatore di strategie narrative che sembra andare in automatico e a fine lettura non ci sono conclusioni da trarre, certezze da confutare o respingere, ma solo domande che restano sospese e che generano ulteriori interrogativi.

Di cosa parla La controvita? Principalmente d'identità, e a dirlo così sembra la scoperta dell'acqua calda, son due secoli che i romanzi parlano di questo, ma qui l'identità e la sua ricerca sono un virus distruttivo che attacca ogni cellula del romanzo: la forma - quali sono le aspettative che uno scrittore e un lettore hanno di un personaggio letterario? qual è il livello di frustrazione a cui si può arrivare quando una sequenza di fatti viene continuamente rimestata e messa in contraddizione senza mai arrivare a uno sbocco univoco ? Perché ci aspettiamo che un romanzo apparentemente realista debba avanzare da un inizio a una fine attraverso una sequenza ordinata di fatti e di passaggi formativi quando le nostre vite non sono affatto così? - e il contenuto - si può davvero essere laici e sopportare la propria identità religiosa come una imposizione della storia o come un'etichetta che altri ci danno (e vale per l'ebraismo di Roth tanto quanto per "categorie " non necessariamente religiose: uno scrittore nero, una scrittrice femminista ecc..ecc...)? Israele è un fazzoletto di terra abitato da sociopatici o un masso sullo stomaco con cui continuamente confrontarsi come una cena perennemente non digerita? L'unico modo per essere ebrei laici è quello di diventare antisemiti?

L'esuberanza sessuale o la "castità" familiare sono opzioni univoche?

Al di là del mio banalissimo riassuntino va detto che La controvita è anche una imperdibile mappa per tutti gli esegeti del verbo rothiano, è come un tuttociù dei temi e dei personaggi della sua opera. In un eventuale museo a lui dedicato sarebbe il fossile più importante, perché fotografa esattamente le forme transizionali della sua evoluzione. E' l'esatto momento di cesura tra il Roth arrabbiato, esagerato, strabordante di Portnoy e seguenti e il Roth analitico, politico, scrittore, de la Pastorale o de la Macchia Umana. E' il momento di passaggio tra lo Zuckerman che ha una sola cosa in testa allo Zuckerman riflessivo, contemplativo, quasi voyeuristico. E ci dice anche tante cose, finalmente, su perché Roth NON E' Zuckerman e se anche lo fosse sarebbe solo un inganno, un'estrema finzione. E per tutto questo è ancora più colpevole l'Einaudi a ristamparlo a babbo morto, cronologicamente sfasato: quante cose in più avremmo capito e goduto della Pastorale o di Sabbath. Ed in ultimo, ma questa una mia personalissima speculazione non supportata da fatti

o da pezze d'appoggio, è un ottimo libro propedeutico al suo testo maximo, alla Pastorale. La perfetta struttura sbilenco de La controvita, il portare la finzione letteraria alle sue più estreme conseguenze in modo così sfacciato e scoperto ci fa capire meglio quel momento magnifico, il momento chiave, de La Pastorale, quando durante la festa la musica invade la testa di Zuckerman e lui comincia a speculare, a inventare la storia della famiglia dello Svedese (tra parentesi secondo me uno dei pezzi più belli della letteratura americana contemporanea, in una eventuale antologia di stralci presi a cazzo dai romanzi americani del novecento avrebbe un posto d'onore) precipitandoci in un inganno inaspettato, in un omicidio a sangue freddo del realismo e delle nostre apettative di verità ad ogni costo.

Darwin8u says

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

? Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*

Structurally brilliant, with a prose that shoots aggressively off every page. Roth begins his narrative with erectile dysfunction and ends it with a nod to the circumcised erection of the Jewish father. Roth is going to travel and transform. He is going to elect for historical plastic surgery just so he can pick at every wound and irritate every scar of the past. He will use and abuse every bias and position that surrounds him.

This novel feels like Roth is trapped at one end by the extreme faction of Jewish nationalists and at the other end by a loud American Diaspora and everything in-between (including the tweedy, green and quiet anti-Semitism of England). 99 percent of us would probably break or bend when presented with a cage like the one Roth has. How as a Modern Jew do you breath when there is no cool place to put your feet? No safe home? No pastoral homeland? If you are Roth, you fight. You hit everyone. You examine every word, every inflection and you prostrate your life and history. You sacrifice the past, present and future to the narrative of your mare's nest. You realize that pain and conflict is a helluva story. You don't run from the extreme options, you get your passport and visas and visit the extremes and then you write a novel about them. This is life. Isn't life glorious?

Shane says

Sexuality and Judaism - Ruth's pet themes

Sexuality, Judaism and role reversals, this book is full with them.

Nathan Zukerman, married to a much younger English woman he supposedly seduced and stole away from her quarrelsome husband, is on the trail of his younger brother Henry, a New Jersey dentist with a loyal wife and three children. Henry is prematurely impotent from a heart medication and undergoes a mind altering operation to fix his ailment so that he can go on banging his dental assistant and salvage his manhood. Henry dies during the procedure and Nathan attends his funeral in New Jersey. Then it is revealed that Harry has

survived the operation, experienced an epiphany, and deserted his family for Israel to take up arms with a pro-settlement renegade named Lippman. Then comes another reversal: we find out that it is Henry who is attending Nathan's funeral, and it is the latter who had the sexual dysfunction and went through the unsuccessful operation to secure the fealty of his younger wife. My head was spinning at this point and I decided to focus on the dialogue and on Roth's commanding narrative style to find out what the heck he was trying to convey through this novel.

I'm inclined to believe that both stories, Nathan's and Henry's death scenarios, are fictitious and that Roth (through his alter ego, Nathan) is suggesting that we are all each others' authors, that it is only through others that our lives get their shapes and their stories. He also uses this novel to go into voluminous discussions on what it is to be Jew in America vs. a Jew in Israel. The former is an assimilated part of the New World, wielding the power levers of finance and culture, while the latter is a colonizer determined to squash the encircling Arabs with a display of raw power. Both types of Jewry are estranged from each other; Henry is trying to be the bridge between the two but he doesn't quite make it in this book. As Nathan summarizes in a letter to Henry (there are a lot of letters in this novel, a bit of a cop-out when Roth is stuck to explain a point): "You've become a Jewish activist, a man of political commitment, driven by ideological conviction, studying the ancient tribal tongue and living sternly apart from your family, your possessions, and your practice on a rocky hillside in biblical Judea. I've become a bourgeois husband, a London homeowner, and at forty five, a father-to-be, married this time to a country-reared, Oxford educated English woman. You have a land, a people, a heritage, a cause, a gun, an enemy, and a mentor. I have none of these things."

The Jew vs. Gentile conflict is also explored, for Nathan finds his wife's (his fourth wife and the first to bear him a child) family to be both overtly and assertively anti-Semitic. He provokes a quarrel with her in order to explore this prejudice further and ends up estranged again. In the process he learns that he doesn't do "pastoral" very well, but needs to be constantly embroiled in conflict in order to thrive. I suspect that this material comes from personal experience, for Roth did live with actress Clair Bloom in England for several years, a relationship that ended in acrimony. He was also the second brother in his family, and in real life lived the inversion of the fictitious Nathan and Henry roles, a form of counterlife.

The other subject that is heavily on the table is male sexuality, a subject deeply associated with Roth's oeuvre. And this subject is bookended with the imagery of impotent men in their forties at the beginning of the book and a tumescent and healthy circumcised penis at the end of the novel. In the middle we see the lengths that men will go to restore their libido, the life force that drives them, according to Roth. Less developed themes were those of sibling rivalry, the soft genocide (a.k.a. Jews marrying Gentiles in America) and the mouth as a sexual organ (imagine the life of a dentist if this were so!)

Apart from the intellectual arguments and the frenetic humour, I was left unfulfilled by this novel. And that could very well be because there was no real conclusion. Who really died and who lived in this book is never answered. Were the disparate chapters merely Nathan's writing experiments for future novels, for surely there were more Nathan Zukerman novels that Roth produced after this one?

One thing I took away from the book was that for a writer like Roth, the fictitious world was part of his real world and that he couldn't function in the real world without his fictitious one. Perhaps with the blending of what could have been a real story (Henry's death, or vice versa) with a fictitious one (Nathan's death, or vice versa) we see this counterlife illustrated. Take your pick, for it is us readers who give these characters (and their author) their interpreted life stories.

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Jeremy says

This pushes much harder against the constraints of the novel form than any of the other Roth I've read. The book is anchored around Nathan Zuckerman and his relationship with his estranged brother Henry, but Roth takes that relationship and rearranges it in each section to delirious, recursive effect. Philip Roth juggles the concerns of death, rebirth and escape that many of his Jewish characters deal with in his fiction, but in this book those evasions actually bleed out of his familiar New Jersey turf and suddenly the characters are in a remote west bank settlement, then back in Jersey, then in the bucolic English countryside, trading off on different levels of psychological and geo-political reality. And all of that globe hopping and time-shifting is reinforced with an incredibly playful meta-fictional sensibility that centers completely around Zuckerman and his own insecurities and observations about the larger world. This is the most nakedly Jewish-centric Roth novel I've read. It's also, especially in terms of its structure, among the most original of his works. Sort of like a Jewish *Pale Fire*.

Mike says

I don't know if this haunting novel stands up to the very best of Roth (*American Pastoral*, *Sabbath's Theater*, *Patrimony*, *The Ghost Writer*), but I know that it has colonized my brain, that I'm going to have to keep returning to its wisdom and authority for a long time to come.

Lucas Sierra says

Me gustó mucho el juego. He aquí un ejercicio de metaficción sobre la metaficción, y está bien hecho, ejecutado con gracia y capaz de tener al lector interesado en la siguiente curva. El tema de lo judío, que en Roth había leído matizado por un juego biográfico en Los hechos, aparece aquí en múltiples variantes, y es interesante, novedoso para mí en muchas de sus propuestas y dudas. Distante, también, pero capaz de enlazarme con preguntas sobre la tradición y la identidad que son universales.

Lo mejor, sin embargo, es el juego. Los múltiples niveles de ficción. Ese es el Roth que me hizo sonreír. Me convenzo de que tengo que leer más textos tuyos.

John Rudd says

Some consider this to be Roth's "best book"; others have declared it the finest novel of the past twenty-five years. This *is* a brilliant, challenging work of postmodernism. It stretches the genre without breaking it. Yet it is also feels academic - seeking to impress rather than fulfill the reader.

The Counterlife is the fifth book in the Nathan Zuckerman series, and it is about the possibility of alternative lives and the role of fiction in creating those lives. The book begins with Zuckerman's brother, who undergoes surgery to fix his impotency (phallic themes are, after all, Roth's penchant). The brother tragically dies while under the knife. But in the next chapter, he is alive again and has decided to become a militant, though impotent, Jew. Roth then flips the narrative, so that it is Zuckerman who is impotent and wants to undergo surgery. Roth pushes his narrative to the point where the characters are reading the same book we are, *The Counterlife*, and are perturbed at how Zuckerman has portrayed their lives.

All of this is rather heady, and could have been a great deal of fun. But the book felt like a chore to read. In between the postmodern pirouettes are lengthy speeches about Judeophobia and Judaism, which are tiresome to say the least. Furthermore, our hero Nathan Zuckerman is a cold fish. He observes the world and uses it, and fails to draw any sympathy from the (this) reader. Three stars for brilliance.

Fred says

This is not a great story it is four great stories. Roth plays with narrative offering several different resolutions for the same conflict. In the hands of a less skilled writer it might be confusing but it is never that way with Roth. Certain scenes -- many scenes -- are unforgettable.

Oliver Twist & Shout says

Cómo me gustó la primera parte de la novela. Entre todo lo que he leído de Philip Roth, es quizás su propuesta estética más audaz. Conformado por bloques narrativos pertenecientes a capas de realidad diferentes, en cada uno de ellos el destino de los personajes difiere y se pone en duda la realidad abordada por la novela. Imaginativa, irónica, es quizás lo más cercano a un juego posmodernista por parte de un autor que, por lo demás, escribe como si el siglo XX estuviera todavía por llegar.

Esa primera parte me entusiasmó tanto como me disgustó la segunda. Noto cierta complacencia en el juego de espejos. Esa especie de "entrevista del amor" se me hizo incluso indigesta. En fin, ahí el narrador extiende un test de calidad amorosa de él mismo a su pareja, y ella ha de expresar lo muy complacida que está con su experiencia romántica respecto a Nathan Zuckerman, es decir, Philip Roth. O sea que en el fondo estamos leyendo a Philip Roth imaginando a Philip Roth como un gran amante. A ver, por favor. Moderen su egocentrismo, un poco, no demasiado, lo bastante como para no dar arcadas a los no-groupies de Philip Roth.

Quitando eso, sí, es una buena novela.

William2.1 says

A masterpiece. When I reread it again I'll make more extensive notes. A real knock-out of a novel---and funny!

Reese says

GOOD NEWS: I finished this book.

BAD NEWS: Although I've long been a fan of Philip Roth's work, after reading this one, I moved some Roth books on my to-read shelf so far down the list that I may wind up reading them posthumously -- when my solar calendar and Jewish calendar have been replaced by an eternity calendar.

The odds in Vegas were heavily tilted in favor of my liking THE COUNTERLIFE. Hey, the book contains material on subjects of considerable interest to me: anti-Semitism, the non-Jewish world's expectations of Israel, the broad spectrum of ways to experience one's Jewishness, interfaith marriage, siblings who expose and/or distort others' private lives, tough choices created by medical conditions, and more. I should have appreciated this novel, and if I were a fast reader who zipped through it in one or two sittings, I might have. But the often dense prose, the unnecessary reiteration, the challenge of separating Roth's characters from his writer-protagonist's characters, and the absence of a character that generates an "I-feel-your-pain" (or your anything) response were more than enough to make me repeatedly check the number of the last page (as if the re-checking might lower it). I felt like a kid riding across the country in an old car with no air conditioning: "How many more miles?" With a few pages read, I kept giving in to the urge to take a nap.

Despite my feeling relief as I read the last word, I should mention that, during the trip that seemed much longer than it was, I did occasionally come across situations that were funny and remarks that were powerfully phrased -- and just plain true.

Roger Brunyate says

The Question before *Finkler*

Entertaining, thought-provoking, technically brilliant, and timely. Timely too in its relationship to another much-lauded book, Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*, the most recent Man Booker winner. By coincidence, a friend gave me her copy of the Roth on the same day that I bought the Jacobson; neither of us connected the two. But now, having enjoyed both books immensely, I am amazed at how closely Roth anticipates Jacobson 34 years earlier. Both authors treat the same subjects (male libido and Jewish identity, though not necessarily in that order), in the same context (Roth's book is set partly in England, Jacobson's entirely so), and with the same sardonic humor (except that Jacobson would spell it "humour"). As far as contemporary events go, the three-and-a-half-decade time gap seems as nothing: Roth alludes to Western condemnation of Israel's actions in the Yom Kippur War; Jacobson's characters agonize similarly over Gaza. Both writers invade the no-man's land between antisemitism and paranoia; Roth is the more neurotic of the two, but he has more bite to his satire, and is to my mind the greater author.

Roth has had two abiding subjects in his oeuvre: Judaism and sex. *The Counterlife* explores both, though from an oblique perspective, in that his characters are neither committed Jews nor always sexually potent. The book opens with Henry Zuckerman, a successful Newark dentist, not yet forty, suffering from impotence caused as the side-effect of his heart medication; sex is what he used to enjoy (with both a mistress and a wife) but can now no longer have. He takes the extreme step of having a risky bypass operation, in order to make a radical change in his life. In the next section, Roth offers a different outcome to Henry's story, in which he abandons his comfortable American secularism and moves to Israel as a fervent Zionist, living in a militant West Bank settlement and studying Hebrew and Torah. In each of these scenarios, Henry is visited by his elder brother, the successful novelist Nathan Zuckerman, who appears in several other Roth novels and is clearly the author's *alter ego*. Roth (or Nathan) has several other variants in store, but each involves an attempt at radical life change, moving into the heart of an issue from its fringes. He calls it "the construction of a counterlife that is one's own antimyth [...] a species of fabulous utopianism," thus explaining the book's title.

Writing through an *alter ego* who is one of the characters in the book enables the author to play narrative tricks that used to be called Pirandellian but are now labeled post-modern. One, as I mentioned, is the ability to change the story at will. The five sections of the book—labeled respectively Basel, Judea, Aloft, Gloucestershire, and Christendom, although these are not in every case their settings—contradict one another in several significant ways, as though emphasizing the author's ability to manipulate a story at will. The Gloucestershire section (a skeleton key to the whole) even changes tack three times in eighty pages; it begins with the author writing about his own funeral and ends with a preview of the final Christendom section, discussed by two of the characters who are to appear in it. While more literal readers may find this confusing, I found it remarkably easy to buy into the parameters of each section, as though they for the time were the only realities. The switches not only added intellectual excitement, they also deepened the perspective and the seriousness of the issues being addressed, albeit in Roth's characteristically flippant voice.

While Judaism and sex continue to battle for the spotlight, the sexual aspects will in the end be secondary. It is more a matter of midlife crisis and the eternal question: Is this really all I am? The answer may be sought in adultery or divorce, but conversely by the former playboy settling down and starting a family; both are found in this novel. The common factor is a radical and often rash life change, the Counterlife. What makes the book so much more than soap opera is that Roth also poses the who-am-I question as a matter of ethnic and religious identity: What does it mean to be a secular Jew in a largely assimilated society? Is it the role of Israel to serve as what he calls the American-Jewish Australia, taking misfits attempting to find themselves as a people? His Judea section is brilliant in its portrayal of many different views of that extraordinary society, many of them extreme, few of them compatible, but all in essence true. When Nathan affects to find similar battlegrounds in the dining-rooms of Mayfair and the meadows of Gloucestershire, he exaggerates hugely—but he speaks strongly to the need of so many of us, Gentile as well as Jewish, to define ourselves in opposition to the world around us, rather than settling for the quiet beauty of the ordinary.

Ned says

Coming from a very white, American world, I know few Jewish people. But because of Roth's fiction I feel like an expert - he covers his Jewishness from all angles, assuming the role of antagonist and victim and casual observer (shredding and reconstructing with abandon). The "plot" of this book is, on the surface, infuriatingly complex, although Roth pulls it together and eventually one realizes the first story is indeed just one of a handful of stories. The famous Zuckerman, as best I can tell, actually dies in this one but, alas, is

resurrected at the end. This novel was prescient in that the decision of Trump to "give" Jerusalem to Israel is in the news, and the whole Zionist thing was played out exquisitely as the protagonist attempts to extricate his brother from his zeal and an outpost of true believers in Judea. Of course, this book is about the submission of goyim women ("Shiksas" in Yiddish slang) by Jewish men, Roth's familiar Trope, but this book was much more than that. Roth explores subtle English anti-Semitism and "Christendom" in a full frontal attack. No matter how secular, the Jewish American cannot escape the past, no matter the effort, because it is imprinted on his personhood, history and a very long cultural history. Roth covers this territory with biting prose, brilliantly understanding both sides of every argument, voiced cleverly in this ingenious plot line (which is a delight in and of itself). This was written in 1986, but Roth knew then, as is more evident today, that racism (relabelled as tribalism) is alive and well and never really leaves, no matter how egalitarian our politics seem to be. These enormous themes, and the absolutely brilliant dialogue and prose, make this a 5 star for me – though the structure is unconventional and somewhat disconcerting – my favorite of his since I read my first (American Pastoral) so many years ago. Sequence-wise, I'm catching up with that, and I suspect this is Roth's strongest period. Once again, the author seems to pervade the characters of his protagonists and bit players, to an extreme extent. Surely this is his most autobiographical to date for me.

On the inter-marriage of Jews and others, according to a fervent Zionist (p. 103): "What Hitler couldn't achieve with Auschwitz, American Jews are doing to themselves in the bedroom.... First there was the Hard extermination, now there is the soft extermination...where Jews are committing spiritual suicide."

The purity of the Israeli settler life, as told in song (p. 120): "...Ronit looked as contended with her lot as any woman could be, her eyes shining with love for a life free of Jewish cringing, deference, diplomacy, apprehension, alienation, self-pity, self-satire, self-mistrust, depression, clowning, bitterness, nervousness, inwardness, hypercriticalness, hypertouchiness, social anxiety, social assimilation – a way of life absolved, in short, of all the Jewish 'abnormalities,'".

The lack of passivity required of the Zionist cause, as told by its patriarch hero (p. 124): "not like your handsome, heroic, young President ...I was born there, Mr. Nathan Zuckerman, born and educated among all the sane, precise, reasonable, logical, un-paranoid German Jews who are now a mountain of ashes."

On the worldview of the Jewish homeland (p. 147) and an allusion to the title of the book: "The construction of a counterlife that is one's own anti-myth was at its very core. It was a species of fabulous utopianism, a manifesto for human transformation as extreme – and, at the outset, as implausible- as any ever conceived. A Jew could be a new person if he wanted to. In the early days of the state the idea appealed to almost everyone except the Arabs. All over the world people were rooting for the Jews to go ahead and un-Jew themselves in their own little homeland. I think that's why the place was once universally so popular- no more Jewy Jews, great!"

Zuckerman, upon finding self in midst of traditional Anglican Christmas special (p. 258/259): "The assemblage sang with tremendous zest, an eruption of good clean vehemence....this crowd of disparate Londoners had turned into a battalion of Christmas-savoring Christians.... When I heard them singing about that Disneyland Bethlehem, in whose dark streets shineth the everlasting light, ...".

Poor Nathan, beleaguered by history of men in his new wife's past (p. 260/261): "First you (men) devote lots of hours to the humiliation of your wife, with her best friends ideally, and then with the obliging neighbors, until having exhausted every possibility for betrayal in the immediate hundred square miles, you vanish, and there's an acrimonious divorce, and after there's never enough money, and your little girls are forever susceptible to dark men with beautiful manners....A solo followed, sung by a slender boy of about eleven whose untainted charm reminded me of a doctor with too much bedside manner. After he concluded his part

and the entire choir had seraphically joined in, he brazenly focused a coquettish smile upon the choirmaster, who in turn acknowledged how remarkable a boy the beautiful soloist was with a half-suppressed but lingering smile of his own. Still not about to be taken in by all this Christian heartiness, I was relieved to think that I'd caught a little whiff of homoerotic pedophilia."

And the vindictive, bitter sister in law lashes out against pearls (p. 287): "Pearls are a tremendous emblem of a conventional, privileged, uneducated, unthinking, complacent, unaesthetic, unfashionable, middle-class woman. They're absolutely death."

Contemplation on the perils of marriage (p. 310): "...our first fight hadn't even been ours. But then the battle initially rocking most marriages is usually just that- fought by surrogates for real antagonists whose conflict is never rooted in the here and now but sometimes originates so far back that all that remains of the grandparents' values are the newlyweds' ugly words. Virginal they may wish to be, but the worm in the dream is always the past, that impediment to all renewal."

Finally, on arguments with Jews, seemingly confessional for Roth himself (p. 314): "You know what it's like being with a Jew when the subject of Jews arises? It's like when you're with people who are on the verge of insanity. Half the time you're with them they're absolutely fine, and some of the time they're completely barking. But there are curious moments when they're hovering, you can see them tipping over the edge. Actually what they are saying is no less reasonable than what they were saying five minutes before, but you know that they have just stepped over that little magic line".

Karenina says

Sono sufficienti 5 anni di decantazione e una rilettura per passare da una valutazione tiepida al massimo dell'apprezzamento? Probabilmente tanti libri sono passati sotto i miei ponti nel periodo intercorso e anch'io sono maturata come lettrice, ma sono certa che una grossa parte di merito vada alla nuova e più brillante traduzione.

E' un libro complesso, un progetto ambizioso che, benché godibile, richiede una lettura attenta che consenta di apprezzare anche la costruzione, rendendo il giusto merito al risultato.

Non c'è una trama, anzi ce ne sono molte, un gioco di incastri tra finzioni: il romanziere che immagina una storia e vive nella realtà immaginata dallo scrittore, i personaggi di questa storia che intervengono per mescolare le carte, finzione finta o vera, realtà immaginata o vissuta?

Vale la pena spendere due parole sull'estrema acutezza delle riflessioni: l'identità ebraica, la morte, il caso, il sesso, il solito dilemma fra vita spericolata o ordinaria esistenza. Per chi conosce l'Autore niente di nuovo ma, tanto per ribadire, non capita spesso di trovare libri che coniughino il piacere dell'intelletto con la vera goduria della costruzione letteraria e questo è, a mio avviso, uno di quegli eventi fortunati.

Jessica says

One thing writing all these book reports has done is help me figure out why I read. *Our Lady of the Flowers* really clarified some key reasons for it in an unavoidably brash, ballsy, obvious way even I could understand: I read because my adult mind is worn out, is tired, it's limp and lazy, my mind's become frustratingly ineffectual and can't always get going. It wants to love the world, but it's become increasingly difficult for it to muster the necessary excitement. I'll be out walking around struggling to experience the glory of life, and my mind just hangs there, cold and unengaged, kind of flopping around.

So the books I love are like drugs that artificially rouse my brain into intercourse with the world. I do apologize for this dreadful analogy, but to me that's how it works. Genet's my Cialis, which my exhausted aging mind needs more and more to perform.

And conversely, the reason I just can't finish this book, is that to me Philip Roth is the anti-Genet. *The Counterlife*, rather than curing this troubling dysfunction, mimicked the beta-blockers' side effects that featured centrally in this book's plot. In other words, for me, Roth's a real boner-killer.

The books I love convince me that the world's not what I fear: that life's not just a drag, that people aren't deadly dull and essentially unappealing. Roth's a fine writer, and his world view is powerful. But his world view's the very one I'm trying to escape by reading! Running around town on the days I read this book, I saw everything and everyone through the lens of this horror: that the crushingly boring, banal reality I've always suspected is actually accurate. That there's no romance or beauty in the world at all, that people are as disappointing at heart as I've always suspected. That, most unbearably, being intelligent doesn't make people interesting, and that a book being well-written doesn't mean I'll like reading it.

I hated, hated, *hated* this book. I made it up to the part where he was writing the letter to his brother about his becoming a Zionist, and at that point I just couldn't go on. I've spent a lot of my life trying to avoid reading books just like this, and I tried (okay, maybe not as hard as I should've) to overcome my prejudice, but it just made me remember why I stayed away in the first place. I could actually write an extremely long, overly personal essay about what exactly I hate so much about this book, but it wouldn't be about the book at all, it'd be about my life, and as my sainted mother has recently pointed out to me, one doesn't need to air all the details of one's private life and thoughts, just because the technology exists that allows one to do so.

I guess this all means Roth must be pretty good, because his book definitely affected me strongly, almost physically. I do still think, based admittedly on a very small sampling, that Roth's the literary equivalent of shopping at Macy's. He's highly competent, accessible, and probably meets many many people's tastes. But there's no romance here. It's not exciting. To me it was a confirmation of sinisterly familiar things that I'd already known, and at the end of the day, I'm like the romance readers: I read to escape. I need books to plump and firm my imagination so I can muster an enthusiasm for life that I don't naturally feel. Reading Roth just creates late night bedroom scenes between me and the world, lots of tears and blaming, and everybody feels bad. Who needs that? I don't! My relationship with the world's troubled enough as it is. The last thing I need's problems in that area.

Ffiamma says

libro complesso e funambolico in cui i temi fondamentali dell'universo rothiano (la sessualità, il mestiere di scrivere, la malattia, i rapporti interpersonali) sono dominati dal tema predominante e fagocitante dell'ebraismo. questo metaromanzo si parla di identità, di ricerca di identità: è possibile essere ebrei laici? che importanza ha l'antisemitismo? e israele? che limiti e doveri ha uno scrittore? come ci si pone tra castità e sessualità? grandi domande- da cui roth (attraverso il suo protagonista nathan zuckerman) si districava egregiamente, con un sarcasmo feroce, che a volte sfiora la crudeltà, una scrittura limpida e avvincente e dialoghi perfetti. mi sarebbe piaciuto leggere questo romanzo prima dei grandi libri rothiani- visto che è una perfetta mappa della poetica dell'autore, delle sue ossessioni e mi avrebbe aiutato a capire meglio altro di lui. (con la solita sciatteria che contraddistingue gli editori italiani, einaudi invece continua a buttare sul mercato libri di roth un tanto al chilo, senza alcun ordine- sia logico che cronologico).
