



Philip Roth

The American novelist Philip Roth died on 22nd May 2018. He was one of the most celebrated writers of his time and while some regarded him as the greatest writer that the USA had ever produced, others thought him overrated. He was controversial when he was alive and will probably remain so for a long time after his death.

He once said, 'I write fiction and I'm told it's autobiography. I write autobiography and I'm told it's fiction!' In the end, he provocatively maintained, it is up to the critics and readers of his books to decide exactly what he was doing. From his first novella, *Goodbye Columbus*, in 1959, to his last novel, *Nemesis*, in 2010, Roth's ironic style puzzled and often scandalised readers. He was a Jewish writer who did not fit into the mould that many critics thought Jewish writers should. He was an American who, equally, did not fit into the traditional American way of writing. He perceived his country and his faith in very different ways from the accepted norm.

His most famous novel, and probably his most autobiographical, is *Portnoy's Complaint*, which is written as a monologue. It was attacked for its explicit treatment of sex and sexual problems, and for its often vulgar use of language. It also enraged Jewish readers for what they saw as an irreverent portrayal of Jewish life and identity. It was published in 1969, right in the years of student protests and the ascent of the hippie subculture.

Roth's personal life was no less tumultuous than his public one. His second marriage to the British actress Claire Bloom ended in a very acrimonious divorce, with both parties writing vicious books about each other afterwards. He won most major literary awards, but never the Nobel Prize for Literature. He probably was just not politically correct enough for the greatest literary prize of them all.