In this issue:
Message from the Society President
Obituaries for Ben Siegel
Abstracts from recent conference presentations
Philip Roth Tours
Review of The Humbling
Uncollected Roth short stories
Bibliographic update of recent Roth publications

About the Philip Roth Society
Founded in July 2002, the Philip Roth Society is an organization devoted to the study and appreciation of Roth’s writings. The society’s goal is to encourage academic conversation about Roth’s work through discussions, panel presentations at scholarly conferences, and journal publications. It accomplishes this by disseminating information concerning upcoming events, calls for papers, and recent publications on Roth through this newsletter, through a web page at http://orgs.tamu-commerce.edu/rothsoc/society.htm, by maintaining a listserv, and through the publication of Philip Roth Studies, a refereed journal devoted to Roth scholarship. The Philip Roth Society is a non-profit community of readers and scholars, and it has no affiliation with either Philip Roth or his publishers. The society is an affiliated organization of the American Literary Association, and we welcome both academic and non-academic readers alike.
Message from the Society’s President, continued

He passed away just before the appearance of the anticipated Roth book he co-edited with Jay Halio, Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as a Comic Writer.

For me, the book captures as much Roth’s talent as it does Ben’s incredible spirit and his remarkable history of collaboration with Halio. The day I heard the news, I had the book Turning up the Flame (also by Halio and Siegel) on my desk, as I had consulted it for my MLA presentation a week or two before. As Shakespeare and Nabokov tell us, we can find comfort in Ben’s writing, which is timeless; however, I think many of us members will grieve for a long time over the loss of such a great man.

As contemporary literary scholars and citizens of the world, we worry about forgetting; we cling to memories for as long as we can; we archive that which is important to us. Ben Siegel will be a part of the collective memory of the Philip Roth Society, of that I am certain.

Thank you very much for your continued commitment to Philip Roth studies. Once again, I would like to thank Richard Sheehan for his time and diligence in putting together such an impressive newsletter which features, in addition to our own heartfelt obituaries for Ben, an article on the Philip Roth tours, an original review of The Humbling, and the annual bibliographic update. Please feel free to contact me with any questions, concerns, or ideas for the secondary Roth archive. I can be reached at pozorskia@ccsu.edu. I would very much welcome that conversation.

Above: The latest issues of Philip Roth Studies. For further details, see page 19
Upcoming Events

The Philip Roth Society Panel at the 2010 annual ALA conference, to be held at the Hyatt Regency San Francisco in Embarcadero Center, San Francisco, May 27-30: 'Roth and Women' and 'The Kepesh Novels'.

Roth and Women
Organized by the Philip Roth Society
Chair: Aimee Pozorski, Central Connecticut State University

1. "Can you explain to the court why you hate women?": An Overview of Criticism of Philip Roth's Portrayal of Women," David Gooblar, University College London

2. "Matrimony: The Mother in Philip Roth's Life Writings," Tony Fong, University of Toronto


4. "Roth and Mothers," Jessica B. Burstrem, University of Arizona

Philip Roth's The Humbling: A Round Table Discussion
Organized by the Philip Roth Society
Moderator: David Brauner, University of Reading

Participants:
David Brauner, University of Reading
Derek Parker Royal, Texas A&M Commerce
Phillip Day, Central Connecticut State University
Amalia Rechtman, Queensborough Community College
Matthew Shipe, Washington U, St. Louis

Obituary
Ben Siegel 1925-2010
By Gloria Cronin and Jay L. Halio

Author or editor of sixteen books and numerous articles and reviews, Ben Siegel passed away peacefully at the age of 84 on January 7, 2010. He is perhaps best known to colleagues not only for his publications, but for his many stimulating and informative papers delivered at the Modern language Association, the American Literature Association, the symposia on Holocaust and Jewish American literature. Colleagues warmed to him for his ready grasp of the issues, willingness to mentor junior colleagues, countless intellectual contributions, and gracious friendship. Besides distinguishing himself at California Polytechnic University in Pomona, California, he travelled the world over sharing his scholarship from London to New York, to Japan and to Australia. All remember him with great fondness as a gentleman and scholar, especially for his sharp mind, wit, graciousness, generosity, warmth of heart, marvelous humor, consummate storytelling ability, mellifluous presentations, bountiful congeniality, courage of spirit, spellbinding war stories, wonderfully told jokes, humane outlook, and general love of life.

Family and football were among his great passions. Many will recall the way he and his close friend, the late Melvin Friedman, watched National Football League games at the Palmer Hotel in Chicago or wherever the MLA chose to meet that year. But his chief love, apart from the classroom and the serious study of literature, was his beloved wife, Ruth, and their two children, Sharon and Kenneth. When Ruth fell seriously ill, he would hasten from whatever meeting he was attending to be at her side along with his children. When Ruth died in 1988, Ben continued to wear his wedding ring to the end of his own life.

Professionally, Ben loved being in the classroom, which he occupied continuously for 52 years. He served at Cal Poly, Pomona, with distinction as a scholar, teacher, and administrator. During the eight years he served as Chair of the English and Foreign Languages Department, he helped expand and improve its curriculum. Throughout his career he served as a supportive mentor and respected role model to numerous junior faculty, as well as a judicious advisor to countless students. He enhanced the reputation of his department and university through his many presentations and lectures at national and international conferences, and enriched the campus community by inviting notable writers and scholars to speak at student forums and luncheons. Ben taught classes in composition, the Bible as Literature, American Literature, Contemporary Literature, and Jewish American Literature throughout a career studded with awards, honors, and publications. He was greatly respected for his scholarship in American and Jewish American literary studies, specializing increasingly in Saul Bellow and Philip Roth studies.
According to his many books, he is a ground-breaking study of *The Controversial Sholem Asch*, a monograph on Isaac Bashevis Singer, and several volumes of "conversations" with such notable authors as Robert Penn Warren and Saul Bellow, edited with Gloria Cronin. With Melvin Friedman he edited collections of essays on the American novel since 1960, and after his friend's death he collaborated with Jay Halio on two volumes of essays in honor of that distinguished scholar: *American Literary Dimensions and Comparative Literary Dimensions*. Towards the end of his life he continued working with Jay Halio, and together they produced several collections of essays: *Daughters of Valor: Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers, Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels, and Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as a Comic Writer*.

Few may know of Ben's remarkable service in World War II. After he graduated from San Diego High School in February 1943 at the age of 17, he immediately enlisted in the Army’s Officer Training Program offered at several colleges. Initially he wanted to be a paratrooper, but when this training program was disbanded due to heavy casualties in Europe, he found himself in the 94th Infantry Division of the Third Army, sent to Camp McCain, Mississippi, and then to Fort Benning, Georgia. He distinguished himself as an accomplished marksman, winning several awards for his outfit. Once posted overseas, he took part in the heavy action in the Moselle Valley, France, got severe frostbite during the Battle of the Bulge during the Ardennes Offensive, and was sent back from the front for thirty days medical treatment. After that he was posted right back to the front. While leading his platoon across the Rhine River at Frankfurt, his entire unit was killed, and Ben himself was seriously wounded. He was given an immediate battlefield promotion to Staff Sergeant and sent to an army field hospital, where everyone believed it a miracle that he had survived with his faculties intact. In the field hospital he was nicknamed the "baby Staff Sergeant" because he was the youngest staff sergeant in Patton's Third Army. Once more he was sent back into action, only to be wounded again.

Ben came home with three Purple Hearts and immediately entered UCLA. He graduated with his BA in 1948 and entered USC’s graduate English program that same year, graduating with his M.A. in 1949, and Ph.D. in 1951. Thus began his long teaching career and his long devotion to USC’s football team. He married Ruth Fink in 1956 and settled into family life, most of it lived in Claremont, California. Daughter Sharon Anne Siegel was born in 1960, and son Kenneth Daniel Siegel in 1963.

Ben will always be recognized as a pioneer in the study of Jewish-American literature. With his passing a bright light has been extinguished. May the memory of this righteous man be for a blessing. Irreplaceable, he will be sorely missed by colleagues throughout the international community of scholars and teachers.

In Memoriam

Ben Siegel, 1925 – 2010

By Derek Parker Royal

I first met Ben Siegel in May 2002. I was attending my first American Literature Association Conference, that year being held in Long Beach, CA, and during that event I went out of my way to introduce myself. At the time I was just two years out of graduate school, and as many young scholars attempt to do, I was trying to make my mark in the profession. I wanted to do so by establishing a brand new author society, one dedicated to Philip Roth, and I was determined to use the conference to begin spreading the word. In the weeks leading up to the conference, I contacted several representatives from other author-oriented organizations, including those with the Ernest Hemingway Society, the Flannery O'Connor Society, the Don Delillo Society, and the Saul Bellow Society, asking them for recommendations on founding an author society. Some of these individuals wrote back to me, many didn’t. One person who quickly responded was Ben, then president of the
When the story was written, Roth was writing about the threat of the atomic bomb and what it might mean for mankind. However, with the distance that history provides, I think the story becomes even more encompasing than this. Part way through the story, after Ken attempts suicide, Moe goes out into the night and considers the world around him—the Island, the sea, the stars—concluding that it is:

‘The only kind of magic. To wait for miracles was crazy. No, the craziness wasn’t waiting — it was expecting. Better to act like a man who builds a house but knows each night his day’s work will be destroyed by vandals. He doesn’t even pray that the vandals will stay away. He expects them but pours cement anyway.’

Like a creator whose planet is inhabited by vandals, humanity itself appears here to be the vandals. Everyone who went to the island paradise damaged it in some way. As a metaphor for the earth, the island here suffers from increasing amounts of vandalism perpetrated as time goes on.

Note. In 1960 the story was adapted into a film called The Battle of Blood Island, directed and written by Joel Rapp and starring Richard Devon and Ron Kennedy. It can be viewed at: http://www.archive.org/details/TheBattleofBloodIsland

BIBLIOGRAPHIC UPDATE - Compiled by Derek Parker Royal

Below is a listing of secondary critical resources that have appeared since (or not listed in) the last issue of the newsletter. For a complete listing of bibliographical resources in English, go to the Roth Society Web site at http://rothsociety.org. An asterisk * indicates that the scholar is a current member of the Philip Roth Society

**Bibliographies**


Monographs and Edited Collections

Siegel, Iben, and Jay L. Halio. Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as Comic Writer. Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 2010. (Includes both reprinted and new essays. Individual contributions are listed in the “Chapters” section below.)


Special Issues of Journals


- Aarons, Victoria. “Philip Roth’s Comic Realism in Goodbye, Columbus.” Siegel and Halio 35-46.


- Halio, Jay L. “Deadly Farce in the Comedy of Philip Roth.” Siegel and Halio 208-21.


- Halio, Jay L. “Deadly Farce in the Comedy of Philip Roth.” Siegel and Halio 208-21.


Bellow Society. I was particularly interested in his insights because of the connections, literary and otherwise, between Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. At the conference, I attended the panel he was on—a discussion of Bellow’s Ravelstein—and afterwards made a special point of speaking with him. From then on, Ben Siegel became a friend, a mentor, a colleague, a sounding board, and a bottomless source of laughter.

I can’t emphasize enough the laughter. One of the first things that struck me about Ben was his sense of humor. He was a natural and distinctive, with his head of bright white hair, his penchant for storytelling, his keen sense of delivery, his easy smile, and his scratchy high voice—especially that voice, a perfect delivery system for his anecdotes. I used to joke with him that the should take his act on the road, give up the frustrations of academia—annoyances with the profession that he would relate to you at the drop of a hat—and do the stand up circuit. Over the next several years I would hear some of his stories multiple times, such as those surrounding his time in the army or his masquerading as a relative of Bugsy Siegel, but with each telling—mostly for different audiences and always to charm his listeners—I would laugh along with everyone else, and not out of friendly obligation. Like any good humorist, he knew how to entertain by revealing new facets to his yarns. It was no accident that he was a scholar of American humor.

And given his work on both Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, he had apparently learned from the best.

In fact, it was his work on both Bellow and Roth that drew me to him professionally. At the Long Beach conference, he gave me suggestions about organizing a formal society. When I asked him during our first meeting why there wasn’t already a society devoted to Roth—there was one on almost every other American author, as far as I could tell—he responded, “Well, I don’t think anyone has ever tried. Maybe you’re the one to do it.” It was one thing to think of myself as capable of starting a society, but it was something else entirely to hear a more realistic, more seasoned scholar say this. What’s more, after our initial talk, he asked me if I wanted to contribute something to a book he was just starting to work on, a collection of essays devoted to Bellow as a comic writer. His confidence in me was amazing, and his enthusiasm for my work never waned. More than one occasion he would refer to me in front of others as a wunderkind, at times embarrassing me with his candid assessment. Partly because of this, I came to see him as a sort of academic father, someone to look up to and someone I would want to impress with my achievements.

One of those was the founding of Philip Roth Studies. Ben, along with his close friend Gloria Cronin, more or less held my hands as I took the initial steps toward starting the publication. It was largely due to their unwavering support and confidence that I eventually cast aside my doubts about the viability of a new journal and finally took the plunge. I had wanted Ben to be a part of this new endeavor, asking him to be a part of the journal’s editorial board, and later, trying to convince him to become one of our consulting editors. In both instances he politely refused, saying that he had too many irons in the fire and that, besides, he wasn’t sure what kind of help he could really give me. But Ben was much more generous when it came to involving me in his projects, giving me opportunities and fostering my scholarship. There were many times he asked me to be on one of his conference panels or a roundtable discussion he was putting together. More than times than not, I was the youngest (and least experienced) person on that panel, but Ben’s confidence helped to curtail any feelings of intimidation. He also asked me to contribute to several of the book projects he was working on, at times strong-arming me into saying “yes,” despite the demands of my family, my teaching, and my research. And I was by far not the only young scholar whose work he helped to nurture. That was one of Ben’s big strengths: he was a great mentor.
He also became a good friend. He would call me at home to talk about one of the projects he had going on, trying to tap me as a contributor or if not, trying to get my opinion on whom to ask. If I wasn’t home and he happened to call, he would talk with my wife, and demonstrate to her the kind of humor I had always told her made my conference travels worthwhile. Many times, right before a conference we were both attending, usually the Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium in Boca Raton, Ben would call me up to ask when I would be arriving, and then try to convince me to share a car service with him—...not a taxi or a Super Shuttle, but a private car service. Being used to scrounging on expenditures whenever I travelled, I was reluctant at first, but after sharing my first car with Ben—a private occasion when we could both relax, kick back, and joke around—I never refused his offer again.

But that’s not entirely true. The last time I was with him, in fact, I had convinced him to forego the car service and instead, take a public train with me to the airport. I told him it would be fun, an adventure, and something different. It was the 2007 American Literature Association Conference in Boston, and he agreed to go with me on the subway. From the moment we stepped out of the hotel I knew it was a mistake. He had a big suitcase and realized that he would have to lug it down the long steps that lead down into the terminal. When this occurred to him, he gave me a look of good-natured reproach. I insisted on carrying his large suitcase—what did he have in there?—down the subway stairs, along with my own. He may have been feisty and full of good humor, but I wasn’t about to let an 82-year-old navigate those stairs with such a heavy load. The train ride was enjoyable enough, but looking back on this, I realize that I should have agreed to the luxury of private car, especially since this was the last time I ever saw him.

These are just a few of my personal experiences with Ben, little things, perhaps, but moments that occur to me when I think about his recent passing. I could easily go on about his many larger achievements—his service during World War II, his tenure as a department chair at California Polytechnic University in Pomona, his sixteen books and numerous articles, the many awards and honors he garnered as a teacher—but it is my personal relationship with him that I keep coming back to. I am thankful for the brief time I got to know him. Due to his health, I had been seeing a lot less of him over the past couple of years, when he was no longer taking the time to attend the various conferences we used to frequent together. He passed away on January 7 of this year. I miss spending time with him. I miss listening to his stories. I miss sharing a meal with him along with other friends such as Gloria Cronin, Jay Halio, and Elaine Safer…incidentally, others who have helped, much like Ben, in the development of this journal. I miss his wisecracks and his ability to see through a lot of the bullshit that is all too common in our profession. And, of course, I miss the laughter and the ready words of encouragement.

To your memory, Ben Siegel, I dedicate this issue of Philip Roth Studies.

Note: Reprinted from the Journal, Philip Roth Studies, with the permission of the author.

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Expect the Vandals

When Expect the Vandals was published in the December 1958 issue of Esquire, it was Roth’s longest story to-date and tackled an issue he was yet to address in any of his fiction: War. Roth’s own experience of the military was limited to a short period in 1955 when he joined the army, but was soon discharged because of an injury sustained during basic training.

The story begins on an unnamed Pacific island with Moe Malamud looking out to sea and contemplating how he’d come to be there. As one of a large group of American soldiers who had been sent to wipe out the remains of a small Japanese camp on an otherwise deserted Island, he and Ken Moyer are the only survivors of the ensuing carnage on the beach. And due to the extent of Ken’s injuries, Moe had to drag him from the beach to safety.

In the days that follow, Moe and Ken hide from the Japanese and survive as best they can, creating a temporary home inside a cave. A week into their isolation, and driven to distraction by the wails of his injured colleague, Moe ventures inland and finds the location of the Japanese camp. Finding time away from Ken to be a relief, he returns on his own to watch the camp every day. Then, on the nineteenth day of Moe’s vigil, all but one of the soldiers at the camp line up and commit mass suicide. The last one remaining, who had been absent from the camp when the rest died, went swimming in the sea before finally committing the same act on the beach.

Moe watches the ocean for over a week, expecting rescuers to arrive at any time from across the sea. At one point, he lights fires on the beach to try to attract attention, but only succeeds in setting part of the Island alight, barely escaping with his life. During the months that follow, Moe and Ken endure a sort of love-hate relationship. Moe passes the time carrying out all the practical work for them, such as building a more permanent shelter, and Ken, who by now is disabled, has to make do with mind-numbing tasks while staying ‘home’ and sorting through the recovered Japanese supplies. It’s during this time that Moe spends time travelling around the Island considering the nature of his imprisonment, an incarceration in what otherwise would have been a beautiful paradise. At the same time, Ken dreams of being back home and misses the people he used to know.

After 11 months on the Island and depressed with his disablement, Ken clumsily attempts to shoot himself but misses his heart, causing a minor injury in his shoulder. Realising that he’d be neglecting his colleague, Moe takes Ken to the beach so he can sit in the sand and look out to sea while Moe goes for a swim. It’s then, while swimming to another part of the Island, that Moe sees ships and aeroplanes in the distance. When he gets back to the beach and tells Ken about what he’s seen, Ken doesn’t believe him, thinking it too good to be true.

That night, while Ken’s asleep, Moe goes down to the beach and digs a hole, fills it with timber and lights another fire, trying his best this time to avoid setting the island alight. He does this each night for the next couple of weeks, but there’s still no sign of rescue, and they seem destined to remain on the Island.

Some time later, the two of them see a goat outside their camp, an animal previously unknown to them on the island. It runs off so Moe picks Ken up piggy-back style, and they give chase—finding yet more goats, leading them to wonder how they got there. The next morning, landing boats that release various animals onto the Island arrive on the beach. The craft are from the ships that Moe saw some time earlier, and as a result of their return, both of them are rescued. It’s then that they discover the true reason behind the Navy’s visit to the island. They’re there to view the testing of a nuclear bomb and to see the effects of the explosion on the wild-life and vegetation on the Island.

This story touches on a number of issues, such as: the nature of imprisonment, paradise, and friendship in adversity. However, the over-riding question I have in response to the story is: Who are the vandals of the title? Initially, I thought the Japanese, but after their self-inflicted demise, Moe causes a fire which destroys a large part of the Island, which is, in effect, an act of vandalism, however accidental it was. Then the American boats arrive and the animals are shuttled to the island—animals that are massacred in a giant act of vandalism with the testing of the bomb. So by the end, are the Americans the vandals?
Uncollected Roth
By Richard Sheehan

These articles, which began in the previous newsletter, are about the works of Philip Roth that, to date, are uncollected and are quite likely to remain so. A bibliography of these works can be found on the Philip Roth Society website at [www.rothsociety.org.]

Heard Melodies are Sweeter

Roth published Heard Melodies are Sweeter in the August 1958 issue of Esquire magazine. In this case, it really was a short story, taking up just a single page. The title is taken from a contraction (as well as a contradiction) of the lines of the Keats’ poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard /are sweeter.”

The piece takes the form of a short play and is set in the production offices of a TV studio where writers plan a new show for singer Timmy Thrush. The writers decide that the show in itself isn’t enough and, as is the case for other singers who have similar shows, that he needs a gimmick. After some discussion, they decide that he should use a wink, and he should sing a song that includes the wink as a motif. They also decide that Timmy should then dance with his co-presenter, Goo-goo St John, and she should make use of the wink as well, extending it as a theme throughout the show. Following this, they decide that Timmy could bring his son on stage and Goo-goo can introduce her daughter, who would, in turn, also use the wink.

Then they imagine a grand finale where Timmy and Goo-goo and the two children are joined on stage by Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Perry Como and Dinah Washington and all their children, who all sing a medley, and, they, too, must wink together in the end... The story ends as the writers imagine the next show where Timmy wins an award for “the best first show on TV in the musical-variety division” and then winks yet again to the TV audience.

The epigraph of the story as published helps the casual reader: “Art or kitsch: only a wink could tell,” suggesting that one implication of the story is that heard melodies are sweeter than those unheard. In this case, the “heard” is paradoxically the visible aspect of the show, while the performance and the artist, while “unheard,” is the art of the song or the voice. Timmy Thrush is a singer, but the writers of his new show can’t contemplate the possibility that his singing could carry the show, nor that the “art” could possibly stand on its own. They feel, almost as a matter of course, that a gimmick is needed to sell the show, and the solution they devise is the wink.

I would imagine that the story would have been relevant to viewers of musical variety shows of the late 1950s, but a similar principle can still be seen today in shows such as Pop Idol (American Idol in the States) or X-Factor, where the exploitation of a contestant’s personal traits or experience is used in an attempt to enhance the “art.” The song is never enough. It’s a further examination of the conflict between art and commerce—one that I also considered in my overview of “The Contest for Aaron Gold” in the last newsletter. It’s also interesting to see Roth’s use of the play as the form for his creative work. It allows the strength of his dialogue to shine through, similar to the way he used dialogue to great effect in his later novel, Deception (1990).

This was Roth’s first published short story in three years, although he’d had non-fiction published in the Chicago Review and the New Republic in 1957. During the period 1956-1958, he’d spent time teaching at the University of Chicago.

Abstracts from Papers Delivered at Recent Conferences

An asterisk * indicates that the scholar is a member of the Philip Roth Society.

Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, Feb. 18-20, 2010

University of Louisville

Kellie Dawson*: DePauw University, Indiana

Becoming Faunia Farley: The Human Stain

As preliminary work on a chapter for my edited collection “What Are YOU Laughing At? Saying BuhBye to Political Correctness: A Trend That Has Collected its Trophy for Participation and Been Sent Home” (in progress), I will, in this paper, examine Philip Roth’s The Human Stain from a post-P.C. perspective. I will argue that Roth characterizes political correctness as an oppression force as destructive as the “isms” it pretends to defend against: which is why we now reject it. Not unlike Faunia Farley, post-P.C. America is too jaded for the prissy and hoity toity pretence of P.C. as a virtue.

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This was Roth’s first published short story in three years, although he’d had non-fiction published in the Chicago Review and the New Republic in 1957. During the period 1956-1958, he’d spent time teaching at the University of Chicago.
Jeffrey Bennett runs a web-site devoted to Newark and its history and also organises walking tours of the area including an annual ‘Roth Tour’ which includes places notable to Roth’s own life as well as his fiction. Bennett reflects that: “After I had populated my website with lots of features on Newark I decided to offer walking tours, to share Newark with people who wanted to see Newark personally, as opposed to just online. Roth, as Newark's literary giant, makes my tours more interesting. His historical reflections on Newark add weight to opinions. I discuss Roth in a few contexts on my Newark tours. I use Roth's fiction to underline the importance of a random street, factory, or apartment. I use sites from Roth's life as a source of historic sites, and on my Weequahic tours I use Roth’s life in a general sense to illustrate processes in Jewish history. Roth's fiction adds layers of meaning to my tours. For instance, there is a street in the Ironbound called ‘Hamilton Street’ that at first glance is just notable because it's still paved with bricks, but I like pointing out that it's also the street Merry Levov lived on in American Pastoral.”

In addition to making connections among Roth’s fiction, Weequahic, and Newark, Bennett also points out important sites related to the writer’s life. There’s the (Divine) Hotel Riviera where Roth's parents spent their honeymoon and which later became the home of a cult, the Newark Beth Israel hospital (where Roth was born), and the Chancellor Avenue School and Weequahic High School where Roth was educated.

For Bennett: “Roth's own life story illustrates trends in the history of Jewish Newark. Although Philip and his brother Sandy had charmed childhoods in Newark and the city was still middle-class by the time they finished college, neither one of them ever lived in Newark again. I think this illustrates that Jewish Weequahic ended in part because of the upward mobility of its residents as well as various other forces like highways, the riots, high taxes etc.”

There’s plenty of scope for Roth scholars and fans who wish to visit Newark and view sites from his life and works. The links below are for the organisations and people mentioned in this article and contain further details on their respective schedules.

Liz Del Tufo - http://www.newarktours.com
City of Newark Landmarks and Historic Preservation Committee http://www.newarklandmarks.org/tours.htm
Jeffrey Bennett - http://www.newarkhistory.com/

Philip Roth Tours
By Richard Sheehan

Celebrity tours have become popular in recent years highlighting important places and happenings in our cultural lives. The works of Philip Roth, dealing as they often do with the landscapes and people of Newark, NJ, serve as a fine starting point for tours which can help us to discover the inspiration behind these works.

Those who took part in the 50th reunion of the graduates of Weequahic High School on Saturday 17th October 2009 had reason to be doubly delighted: first for the celebration of the reunion, and second because on the bus tour that day, they were joined by one of Weequahic’s most famous sons, Philip Roth. Liz Del Tufo, well-known Newark Historian, as well as Trustee and soon-to-be President of the City of Newark Landmarks and Historic Preservation Committee, has organised four of these tours including this most recent one, of which she explained: “I told them to save room for a ‘mystery guest.' Their reaction to his boarding the bus was priceless.” I can well imagine.

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The urge to mark milestones and anniversaries with celebrations or remembrances is a common human experience. There is some essential component in our humanity that spurs us: perhaps a desire for a sense of togetherness, or a sense of history. It is with this sense of anticipation that I admittedly have approached Philip Roth’s thirtieth novel, The Humbling. Authoring thirty novels is no small milestone, especially for a long-time fan of Roth, and The Humbling is nothing short of disappointing.

The novel is divided into three acts in keeping with its thematic focus on literal and metaphorical drama. The first act, entitled “Into Thin Air,” introduces us to a man who has “lost his magic.” Simon Axler is one of the greatest actors of his time—a man from a disappearing era who was born for the stage. Acting was always instinctual for Axler, and the loss of this instinct, this ability to bring life to characters, ends unceremoniously during an ambitious double bill of playing Prospero and Macbeth at the Kennedy Center. At 65 years old, he resists himself to this loss, and he falls into the depths of a suicidal depression.

Perhaps to illuminate how much of Axler’s existence revolves around acting, Roth devotes just two pages to the dissolution of his marriage to Victoria, who, shortly after Axler’s sudden fall, leaves him to be with her drug-addicted son in California. The reason for Victoria’s sudden departure is left to be debated by the reader; one could imagine that their marriage was an act, or perhaps Axler was incapable of putting his marriage before his acting. With no significant human connections remaining, Axler has nothing to stop him from killing himself with the Remington shotgun in the attic. As Roth powerfully writes, the transition was bleak: “The gun as the sequel to the wife” (10). Within an hour after Victoria’s flight, he musters the willpower to check himself into Hammerton, a local psychiatric hospital. Is Roth looking back at Portnoy’s Complaint? If so, in Axler he has created a character that, unlike Alexander Portnoy, is incapable of psychoanalytic dialogue.

Axler quickly realizes that there is nothing that a psychiatrist or he can do to rekindle his acting instincts, and any effort is worthless. Inexplicably, his suicidal thoughts subside when he finally rests for an entire night, and prior to releasing himself he befriends Sybil Van Buren. Sybil is devastated after seeing her husband sexually molest their young daughter and, unable to confront the situation on any front, she attempts suicide. The parallel of Axler’s inability to act on a stage and Sybil Van Buren’s inability to act to protect her child foreshadow dramatic events.

In the second act, Axler is home and alone again, when a woman, who seems to have appeared from the same “thin air” that has claimed Axler’s talent, arrives just in time to save the despairing Axler. Perhaps tired of the “older man whose sexual virility is awakened by a younger woman” plot device, Roth adds a twist, or better said, a tornado. Pegeen is a most unusual archetypal fatal seductress: a forty year old lesbian with an insatiable sex drive and a trail of ex-lovers that leaves more than just unsettled dust. She is the daughter of Axler’s old theatre friends, and he distinctly remembers the days when Pegeen was “a tiny infant nursing at her mother’s breast” (41). Axler succumbs to his desires, but what exactly is it that he sees in Pegeen? With Pegeen, Axler is able to direct his own play, costuming Pegeen into his leading lady. He almost immediately begins transforming Pegeen from walking and talking like “a sixteen-year-old” boy, financing opulent shopping trips and haircuts in an attempt to erase her stereotypical “butch” look. However, he is acutely aware that there is an inherent danger in doing this. His depression may have subsided with the entry of Pegeen, but what will happen if she leaves?

For much of the third act, The Humbling is dominated by simultaneous soap opera dialogue, disconcerting sex scenes, and a disappointing predictability. This recipe for disaster plays like a broken record: “You’re on a horse,” Axler told her. “Ride it” (91). The harness and strap-on dildo that Pegeen wears makes her look “like a gunslinger” (92). When Axler questions what Pegeen is thinking as she stares at his erection, she replies: “It fills you up,” she said, “the way dildos and fingers don’t. It’s alive. It’s a living thing” (92). Ignoring the kin-iness that can be off-putting, you still are left with the lingering sense of artifice. Nothing about Axler and Pegeen’s relationship seems believable, which could perhaps be an attribute of Roth’s parodic nature, if even he seems to devolve here into a parody of himself. Axler’s need for Pegeen quickly becomes too much to handle, but he is still unable to act in a way to protect himself. He voraciously tries to please Pegeen, since she, much to Axler’s surprise, still sleeps with other women. They role play, but that soon becomes unsatisfying. One night, Axler notices a woman getting drunk at the bar in a restaurant where he and Pegeen are dining. Axler rationalizes that, to keep Pegeen interested, he must feed her sexual appetite: “He thought, I am providing her the way I give her the clothes,” (110) which results in a threesome frenzy that immediately leaves Axler aware that Pegeen is ready to head off.

Fearing Pegeen’s imminent departure, Axler scrambles to convince himself that he can save it all by getting married and having a baby. Axler is so far removed from reality that he actually visits a fertility specialist. On the day that he intends to share with Pegeen this delusion, she announces abruptly, “This is the end” (126). More aware of the realities of their relationship than Axler, she explains: “I can’t be a substitute for your acting anymore” (128). This is the final humbling for Axler.

To carry out his final act, Axler calls upon the memory of Sybil Van Buren, the patient he had encountered at Hammerton. After her release, she kills her abusing husband, and Axler repeats to himself: “If she could do that, I can do this. If she could do that… (139).” He finally realizes that, if he is to kill himself, perhaps he must pretend that he is in a play. He must perform a sort of assisted suicide. He thus proceeds to play the part of Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplez from the play, “The Seagull.” His suicide note is short: “The fact is, Konstantin Gavrilovich has shot himself” (140).

Unlike Ira Ringold in I Married a Communist, we do not witness the rise of Axler, but only the fall. Perhaps this is why it is so difficult to feel attached to The Humbling. The initial hook, this man who has “lost his magic” grabs your attention, but Roth’s postmodern artifice fails to keep the pages turning. However, The Humbling does feature the alluring themes that Roth has so eloquently explored in his previous works: the realities of aging, the fine lines between fakery and truth, the attachments to our vocational identity and the loss we must negotiate when it is gone, and of course, the self as a performance. And he even, it could be argued, considers anew the frailties of the modern American woman in the figure of Sybil Van Buren, and perhaps even in the character of Pegeen herself. As we have come to expect, Roth’s buoyant prose promotes a sense of impending doom, and the ending, while expected, is fantastic. Roth’s resolution to The Humbling is the most creative and noteworthy moment of the novel. And while it cannot wholly redeem what comes before it, this final section does remind us that Roth remains the most important living American writer we have come to respect.
A Review of Philip Roth’s The Humbling by Phillip Day
Publisher: Houghton Mifflin (2009)
ISBN: 9780547239699; $22.00 Hardcover; 160 pages

The urge to mark milestones and anniversaries with celebrations or remembrances is a common human experience. There is some essential component in our humanity on that spurs us: perhaps a desire for a sense of togetherness, or a sense of history. It is with this sense of anticipation that I admittedly have approached Philip Roth’s thirtieth novel, The Humbling. Authoring thirty novels is no small milestone, and it is especially worth noting considering the immensity of great literature Roth has produced. Unfortunately, however, expectancy can deepen the swell of disappointment, especially for a long-time fan of Roth, and The Humbling is nothing short of disappointing.

The novel is divided into three acts in keeping with its thematic focus on literal and metaphorical drama. The first act, entitled “Into Thin Air,” introduces us to a man who has “lost his magic.” Simon Axler is one of the greatest actors of his time—a man from a disappearing era who was born for the stage. Acting was always instinctual for Axler, and the loss of this instinct, this ability to bring life to characters, ends unceremoniously during an ambitious double bill of playing Prospero and Macbeth at the Kennedy Center. At 65 years old, he resigns himself to this loss, and he falls into the depths of a suicidal depression.

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Phasey Phillips is currently a senior attending Central Connecticut State University, which is located in New Britain, CT. He will be graduating in Dec. 2010 with a Bachelor’s Degree in Secondary English Education.
**Reading the Reviews:**

**Roth in decline or merely a pause for breath?**

Reviews of *The Humbling* are as divided as they have been for most of his work since *The Plot against America*. However, there seemed to be more disappointment in this work than of late. Many recognised moments of ‘perfect’ Roth but a lot of reviewers saw the decline of Simon Axler as a mirror of what they saw as a decline in Roth’s own work.

Roth is now showing touches of Late Style — the final phase of development that some great artists go through, when their work becomes oblique, self-referential and less accessible. *The Humbling* is the most entertaining depressing book you will read this year — the language is vibrant, the sex is smutty, there are some lovely surprises in the narrative — yet, like *Everyman*, it lacks the wider social engagement that made *American Pastoral* or *I Married a Communist* so memorable. Like *Everyman*, it is a voluble essay on extinction masquerading as a novel.

_Aravind Adiga, The Times (London)_

“The Humbling,” Philip Roth’s latest novella — an overstuffed short story, really — is a slight, disposable work about an aging man’s efforts to grapple with time and loss and mortality, and the frustrations of getting old.

_MICHIKO KAKUTANI, New York Times_

There is no contradiction in saying that *The Humbling* is, at one and the same time, a masterpiece and a piece of fiction that, unless it did admit to being by Philip Roth, would stand no chance of being published.

_Toby Litt, Financial Times (London)_

In *The Humbling*, as in *Exit Ghost*, Roth does not indulge his hero’s dreams of being young and potent again: as Philip Larkin wrote, we all know what “the only end of age” must be. It is only this remorselessness that rescues *The Humbling* from its undoubted limitations; that, and the fascination of watching a writer who has written so well, for so long, negotiate with a certain dignity the equally remorseless humbling of his own gifts.

_Adam Kirsch, Tablet Magazine_

In recent years Roth has written and published novels at a clip that even the prolific Oates might admire. Yet there is a nagging sense in his most recent work of ideas left incomplete, of characters and themes that haven't been fully developed. You almost wish these novels would come out every other year, so that their author might have time to work things through. That Roth chooses not to do so, or that he feels it’s a luxury he can ill afford is, of course, his prerogative.

_John Davidson, The Statesman_

Here is Roth doing what he still does better than anyone: making a dark joke about mortality. It’s a subject he’s always had a knack for, but that knack has gotten more urgent, more affecting the older he grows and the older his audience has grown with him.

_JOEL YANOFSKY, Montreal Gazette_

Ideally, *The Humbling* should be read as a kind of Mortality Trilogy with *The Dying Animal* and *Everyman*, two other autumnal works from this great writer. Short, bitter and bracing, they lend the courage to see and endure what is.

_Chris Tucker, Dallas News_

The Humbling takes his hero down to a naked place where self and skill evaporate: the word “nobody” tolls like a Beckettian bell. But the show for Simon, for Roth, for fiction must go on. Happy they are not, but Roth's senior endings won't quite rise to tragedy.

_Boyd Tonkin, The Independent (London)_

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Above: Philip Roth’s boyhood home at 81 Summit Avenue

What begins as a meditation on the source of artistic power and the artist’s apparent helplessness to maintain it ends, [then], as a lament for the loss of sexual power. This is clearly deliberate and not, in itself, completely spurious: few, surely, would argue that there is no connection between the two. But Roth’s perplexing determination to vulgarise his narrative strips The Humbling of its own power: where he seeks to be nuanced, he too frequently appears trite; where he attempts to be brazen, he comes across as pointlessly crude. Sentences that are dismayingly free of Roth’s characteristic humour and mischief pile up in a shakily fabulur framework but never manage to animate the story's characters nor foreground its larger intentions. In spite of a final twist that delivers a much-needed emotional jolt, The Humbling falls into a trap that one cannot believe its author wished for it, nor that he hadn’t the skill to avoid: it fails to give us enough to think about.

Alex Clark, The Guardian (London)

There is no moral in the novel — and no hope, no solace, no consolation. All there is, is Roth’s unquenchable interest in placing a protagonist — some variant or other of “a very twisted man” — in a desperate situation and then seeing, with grim curiosity, how he manages, or fails to manage, to work his way out of it.

Philip Marchand, National Post

The Humbling is written with an almost off-hand ease; no matter how absurd things get — and, once or twice, they get very absurd indeed — Roth smoothly draws the reader along. Its brevity (and, ultimately, lack of sufficient depth) makes The Humbling feel like an exercise-piece — but still one by a master. There's enough richness here — some well-executed scenes, a confident narrative flow — that makes it worth reading. But it is a very odd story, and a very odd take on aging and the losses that aging brings with it.

M.A.Orthofer, The Complete Review

Being past one's best has been a staple predicament in Roth's work over the last decade, a predicament which Indignation (2008) worked up further into a nightmarish vision of being post-oneself, but this latest novella sees Roth continuing to draw a perverse energy from aftermaths and obsolescence; at once stern and slight, unlovely and oddly compelling, The Humbling's 140 pages compose a series of awkward variations on authenticity and its discontents.

Bharat Tandon, Times Literary Supplement (London)

I would argue that it is only recently that we have seen Roth’s genuine late style. In three of his last four books — Everyman (2006), Indignation (2008) and this one, The Humbling — there has been a shift towards winter in his writing. Those are short works, lacking the manic humour that energised Roth’s earlier fiction. Gone is the narrative scope of books such as Sabbath’s Theater (1995), and instead we have just one lonely character and his quiet tragedy; the mood is plangent and wanly nostalgic: these books speak of what is lost and what, inevitably, awaits us.

Simon Baker, The Spectator

Roth is a master, and relentless. Now in his mid-70s, he may be waiting for some new “American Pastoral” or “The Human Stain,” another big, sweeping masterwork, to take hold in his mind and carry him away. Meanwhile, he never stops working. His next book, another short one in this cycle that considers the proximity of death, is already written and is called — a title that will again draw a wincing smile — “Nemesis.” Don’t expect a happy ending.

Richard Rayner, Los Angeles Times

Above: Philip Roth’s boyhood home at 81 Summit Avenue

Above: The plaque on the wall at 81 Summit Avenue
Uncollected Roth

By Richard Sheehan

These articles, which began in the previous newsletter, are about the works of Philip Roth that, to date, are uncollected and are quite likely to remain so. A bibliography of these works can be found on the Philip Roth Society website at [www.rothsociety.org.]

Heard Melodies are Sweeter

Roth published Heard Melodies are Sweeter in the August 1958 issue of Esquire magazine. In this case, it really was a short story, taking up just a single page. The title is taken from a contraction (as well as a contradiction) of the lines of the Keats’ poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / are sweeter.”

The piece takes the form of a short play and is set in the production offices of a TV studio where writers plan a new show for singer Timmy Thrush. The writers decide that the show in itself isn’t enough and, as is the case for other singers who have similar shows, that he needs a gimmick. After some discussion, they decide that he should use a wink, and he should sing a song that includes the wink as a motif. They also decide that Timmy should then dance with his co-presenter, Goo-goo St John, and she should make use of the wink as well, extending it as a theme throughout the show. Following this, they decide that Timmy could bring his son on stage and Goo-goo can introduce her daughter, who would, in turn, also use the wink.

Then they imagine a grand finale where Timmy and Goo-goo and the two children are joined on stage. The writers decide that the show in itself isn’t enough and, as is the case for other singers who have similar shows, that he needs a gimmick. After some discussion, they decide that he should use a wink, and he should sing a song that includes the wink as a motif. They also decide that Timmy should then dance with his co-presenter, Goo-goo St John, and she should make use of the wink as well, extending it as a theme throughout the show. Following this, they decide that Timmy could bring his son on stage and Goo-goo can introduce her daughter, who would, in turn, also use the wink.

I would imagine that the story would have been relevant to viewers of musical variety shows of the late 1950s, but a similar principle can still be seen today in shows such as Pop Idol (American Idol in the States) or X-Factor, where the exploitation of a contestant’s personal traits or experience is used in an attempt to enhance the “art.” The song is never enough. It’s a further examination of the conflict between art and commerce—one that I also considered in my overview of “The Contest for Aaron Gold” in the last newsletter. It’s also interesting to see Roth’s use of the play as the form for his creative work. It allows the strength of his dialogue to shine through, similar to the way he used dialogue to great effect in his later novel, Deception (1990).

This was Roth’s first published short story in three years, although he’d had non-fiction published in the Chicago Review and the New Republic in 1957. During the period 1956-1958, he’d spent time teaching at the University of Chicago.

Abstracts from Papers Delivered at Recent Conferences

An asterisk * indicates that the scholar is a member of the Philip Roth Society

Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, Feb. 18-20, 2010
University of Louisville

Kellee Dawson*: DePauw University, Indiana

Becoming Faunia Farley: The Human Stain and the Death of P.C.

As preliminary work on a chapter for my edited collection “What Are YOU Laughing At? Saying Buh-Bye to Political Correctness: A Trend That Has Collected its Trophy for Participation and Been Sent Home” (in progress), I will, in this paper, examine Philip Roth’s The Human Stain from a post-P.C. perspective. I will argue that Roth characterizes political correctness as an oppression force as destructive as the “isms” it pretends to defend against; which is why we now reject it. Not unlike Faunia Farley, post-P.C. America is too jaded for the prissy and hoity toity pretence of P.C. Not unlike Faunia Farley, post-P.C. America is too jaded for the prissy and hoity toity pretence of P.C.

Taking note of the fact that Delphine Roux had no trouble ousting Coleman Silk as a racist (which he wasn’t), I will focus on her less successful campaign to further label him a sexist, classist, etc. (all that he arguably was in his relationship with Faunia Farley). As a matter of fact, I will demonstrate that it may be the very fact that Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley enjoy (without apparent complication—Les notwithstanding) an affair that transcends age, class, race, “sexism,” etc. that is most irritating to those upon whom it should have no effect whatsoever.

Guiding Questions: What was/were the difference(s) between Roux’s two attacks—in tone and content and forum? Which factor(s) (if any?) account for the success of one over the other—and why are Silk’s persecutors so eager to reclaim their battered hero once he is well and truly fallen?

Matthew Shipe*: Washington University, St. Louis
Louisville Proposal 9/14/09

So You Say You Wanna Revolution?: Sexual Liberation in Philip Roth’s Indignation

In Indignation (2008), Philip Roth reconsiders the sexual and political repression of the Eisenhower years, a period that he had explored in his first novella, Goodbye Columbus (1959). On first reading, Indignation feels all too familiar as Roth once again presents a “good” Jewish boy, Marcus Messner, who is both infatuated with and confounded by the sexual desire of an unstable gentle girl, Olivia. Not surprisingly, Marcus’s downfall at Winesburg College, a downfall that leads him to being sent to Korea, comes from his inability to comprehend a blowjob that Olivia gives him on a date. However, by presenting Marcus as voice frozen in time—indeed the narrative consists of Marcus’s reminiscences as he is dying from wounds inflicted on the battlefields of Korea—Roth presents a voice uncontaminated by the historical knowledge of the political, social, and sexual revolutions that will unfold during the 1960s, a point that Roth emphasizes in the “Historical Note” that concludes the novel. That brief epilogue underscores how quickly the forces that ultimately destroyed Marcus’s life will dissolve within the next decade. By focusing on the implications Marcus’s out-of-time narrative, my paper will examine how Indignation revisits the upheaval of the late sixties—a subject that Roth has mined in American Pastoral (1997) and The Dying Animal (2001)—by presenting a perspective in which those now inevitable seeming changes are unimaginable.
He also became a good friend. He would call me at home to talk about one of the projects he had going on, trying to tap me as a contributor or if not, trying to get my opinion on whom to ask. If I wasn’t home and he happened to call, he would talk with my wife, and demonstrate to her the kind of humor I had always told her made my conference travels worthwhile. Many times, right before a conference we were both attending, usually the Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium in Boca Raton, Ben would call me up to ask when I would be arriving, and then try to convince me to share a car service with him…not a taxi or a Super Shuttle, but a private car service. Being used to scrimping on expenditures whenever I travelled, I was reluctant at first, but after sharing my first car with Ben—a private occasion when we could both relax, kick back, and joke around—I never refused his offer again.

But that’s not entirely true. The last time I was with him, in fact, I had convinced him to forego the car service and instead, take a public train with me to the airport. I told him it would be fun, an adventure, and something different. It was the 2007 American Literature Association Conference in Boston, and he agreed to go with me on the subway. From the moment we stepped out of the hotel I knew it was a mistake. He had a big suitcase and realized that he would have to lug it down the long steps that lead down into the terminal. When this occurred to him, he gave me a look of good-natured reproach. I insisted on carrying his large suitcase—what did he have in there?—down the subway stairs, along with my own. He may have been feisty and full of good humor, but I wasn’t about to let an 82-year-old navigate those stairs with such a heavy load. The train ride was enjoyable enough, but looking back on it, I realize that I should have agreed to the luxury of private car, especially since this was the last time I ever saw him.

These are just a few of my personal experiences with Ben, little things, perhaps, but moments that occur to me when I think about his recent passing. I could easily go on about his many larger achievements—his service during World War II, his tenure as a department chair at California Polytechnic University in Pomona, his sixteen books and numerous articles, the many awards and honors he garnered as a teacher—but it is my personal relationship with him that I keep coming back to. I am thankful for the brief time I got to know him. Due to his health, I had been seeing a lot less of him over the past couple of years, when he was no longer taking the time to attend the various conferences we used to frequent together. He passed away on January 7 of this year. I miss spending time with him. I miss listening to his stories. I miss sharing a meal with him along with other friends such as Gloria Cronin, Jay Halio, and Elaine Safer… incidentally, others who have helped, much like Ben, in the development of this journal. I miss his wiserack and his ability to see through a lot of the bullshit that is all too common in our profession. And, of course, I miss the laughter and the ready words of encouragement.

To your memory, Ben Siegel, I dedicate this issue of Philip Roth Studies.

Note: Reprinted from the Journal, Philip Roth Studies, with the permission of the author.

Expect the Vandals

When Expect the Vandals was published in the December 1958 issue of Esquire, it was Roth’s longest story to-date and tackled an issue he was yet to address in any of his fiction: War. Roth’s own experience of the military was limited to a short period in 1955 when he joined the army, but was soon discharged because of an injury sustained during basic training.

The story begins on an unnamed Pacific island with Moe Malamud looking out to sea and contemplating how he’d come to be there. As one of a large group of American soldiers who had been sent to wipe out the remains of a small Japanese camp on an otherwise deserted island, he and Ken Moyer are the only survivors of the ensuing carnage on the beach. And due to the extent of Ken’s injuries, Moe had to drag him from the beach to safety.

In the days that follow, Moe and Ken hide from the Japanese and survive as best they can, creating a temporary home inside a cave. A week into their isolation, and driven to distraction by the wails of his injured colleague, Moe ventures inland and finds the location of the Japanese camp. Finding time away from Ken to be a relief, he returns on his own to watch the camp every day. Then, on the nineteenth day of Moe’s vigil, all but one of the soldiers at the camp line up and commit mass suicide. The last one remaining, who had been absent from the camp when the rest died, went swimming in the sea before finally committing the same act on the beach.

Moe watches the ocean for over a week, expecting rescuers to arrive at any time from across the sea. At one point, he lights fires on the beach to try to attract attention, but only succeeds in blowing his life. During the months that follow, Moe and Ken endure a sort of love-hate relationship. Moe passes the time carrying out all the practical work for them, such as building a more permanent shelter, and Ken, who by now is disabled, has to make do with mind-numbing tasks while staying ‘home’ and sorting through the recovered Japanese supplies. It’s during this time that Moe spends time travelling around the island considering the nature of his imprisonment, an incarceration in which he would have been a beautiful paradise. At the same time, Ken dreams of being back home and misses the people he used to know.

After 11 months on the Island and depressed with his disablement, Ken clumsily attempts to shoot himself but misses his heart, causing a minor injury in his shoulder. Realising that he’d been neglecting his colleague, Moe takes Ken to the beach so he can sit in the sand and look out to sea while Moe goes for a swim. It’s then, while swimming to another part of the Island, that Moe sees ships and aeroplanes in the distance. When he gets back to the beach and tells Ken about what he’s seen, Ken doesn’t believe him, thinking it too good to be true.

That night, while Ken’s asleep, Moe goes down to the beach and digs a hole, fills it with timber and lights another fire, trying his best this time to avoid setting the island alight. He does this each night for the next couple of weeks, but there’s still no sign of rescue, and they seem destined to remain on the Island.

Some time later, the two of them see a goat outside their camp, an animal previously unknown to them on the island. It runs off so Moe picks Ken up piggy-back style, and they give chase—finding yet more goats, leading them to wonder how they got there. The next morning, landing boats that release various animals onto the Island arrive on the beach. The craft are from the ships that Moe saw some time earlier, and as a result of their return, both of them are rescued. It’s then that they discover the true reason behind the Navy’s visit to the island. They’re there to view the testing of a nuclear bomb and to see the effects of the explosion on the wildlife and vegetation on the Island.

This story touches on a number of issues, such as: the nature of imprisonment, paradise, and friendship in adversity. However, the overriding question I have in response to the story is: Who are the vandals of the title? Initially, I thought the Japanese, but after their self-inflicted demise, Moe causes a fire which destroys a large part of the Island, which is, in effect, an act of vandalism, however accidental it was. Then the American boats arrive and the animals are shuttled to the island—animals that are massacred in a giant act of vandalism with the testing of the bomb. So by the end, are the Americans the vandals?
When the story was written, Roth was writing about the threat of the atomic bomb and what it might mean for mankind. However, with the distance that history provides, I think the story, becomes even more encompassing than this. Part way through the story, after Ken attempts suicide, Moe goes out into the night and considers the world around him— the Island, the sea, the stars— concluding that it is:

‘The only kind of magic. To wait for miracles was crazy. No, the craziness wasn’t waiting — it was expecting. Better to act like a man who builds a house but knows each night his day’s work will be destroyed by vandals. He doesn’t even pray that the vandals will stay away. He expects them but pours cement anyway.’

Like a creator whose planet is inhabited by vandals, humanity itself appears here to be the vandals. Everyone who went to the island paradise damaged it in some way. As a metaphor for the earth, the island here suffers from increasing amounts of vandalism perpetuated as time goes on.

Note. In 1960 the story was adapted into a film called The Battle of Blood Island, directed and written by Joel Rapp and starring Richard Devon and Ron Kennedy. It can be viewed at: http://www.archive.org/details/BattleofBloodIsland.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC UPDATE - Compiled by Derek Parker Royal

Below is a listing of secondary critical resources that have appeared since (or not listed in) the last issue of the newsletter. For a complete listing of bibliographical resources in English, go to the Roth Society Web site at http://rothsociety.org. An asterisk * indicates that the scholar is a current member of the Philip Roth Society.

Bibliographies


Monographs and Edited Collections

Siegel, Iben, and Jay L. Halio. Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as Comic Writer. Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 2010. (Includes both reprinted and new essays. Individual contributions are listed in the “Chapters” section below.)


Special Issues of Journals


Chapters from Books


* Brauner, David. Masturbation and Its Discontents; or, Serious Relief: Freudian Comedy in Portnoy’s Complaint. Siegel and Halio 47-67.

* Cooper, Alan. “Indignation: The Opiates of the Occident.” Siegel and Halio 255-68.


Halio, Jay L. “Deadly Farce in the Comedy of Philip Roth.” Siegel and Halio 208-21.

Among his many books are his ground-breaking study, The Controversial Sholem Asch, a monograph on Isaac Bashevis Singer, and several volumes of "conversations" with such notable authors as Robert Penn Warren and Saul Bellow, edited with Gloria Cronin. With Melvin Friedman he edited collections of essays on the American novel since 1960, and after his friend’s death he collaborated with Jay Halio on two volumes of essays in honor of that distinguished scholar: *American Literary Dimensions and Comparative Literary Dimensions*. Towards the end of his life he continued working with Jay Halio, and together they produced several collections of essays: *Daughters of Valor: Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers, Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth’s Later Novels, and Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as a Comic Writer.*

Few may know of Ben’s remarkable service in World War II. After he graduated from San Diego High School in 1943 at the age of 17, he immediately enlisted in the Army’s Officer Training Program offered at several colleges. Initially he wanted to be a paratrooper, but when this training program was disbanded due to heavy casualties in Europe, he found himself in the 94th Infantry Division of the Third Army, sent to Camp McCain, Mississippi, and then to Fort Benning, Georgia. Here he distinguished himself as an accomplished marksman, winning several awards for his outfit. Once posted overseas, he took part in the heavy action in the Moselle Valley, France, got severe frostbite during the Battle of the Bulge during the Ardennes Offensive, and was sent back from the front for thirty days medical treatment. After that he was posted right back to the front. While leading his platoon across the Rhine River at Frankfurt, his entire unit was killed, and Ben himself was seriously wounded. He was given an immediate battlefield promotion to Staff Sergeant and sent to an army field hospital, where everyone believed it a miracle that he had survived with his faculties intact. In the field hospital he was nicknamed the “baby Staff Sergeant” because he was the youngest staff sergeant in Patton’s Third Army. Once more he was sent back into action, only to be wounded again.

Ben came home with three Purple Hearts and immediately entered UCLA. He graduated with his BA in 1948 and entered USC’s graduate English program that same year, graduating with his M.A. in 1949, and Ph.D. in 1951. Thus began his long teaching career and his long devotion to USC’s football team. He married Ruth Fink in 1956 and settled into family life, most of it lived in Claremont, California. Daughter Sharon Anne Siegel was born in 1960, and son Kenneth Daniel Siegel in 1963.

Ben will always be recognized as a pioneer in the study of Jewish-American literature. With his passing a bright light has been extinguished. May the memory of this righteous man be for a blessing. Irreplaceable, he will be sorely missed by colleagues throughout the international community of scholars and teachers.

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**In Memoriam**

**Ben Siegel, 1925 – 2010**

*By Derek Parker Royal*

I first met Ben Siegel in May 2002. I was attending my first American Literature Association Conference, that year being held in Long Beach, CA, and during that time I went out of my way to introduce myself. At the time I was just two years out of graduate school, and as many young scholars attempt to do, I was trying to make my mark in the profession. I wanted to do so by establishing a brand new author society, one dedicated to Philip Roth, and I was determined to use the conference to begin spreading the word. In the weeks leading up to the conference, I had contacted several representatives from other author-oriented organizations, including those with the Ernest Hemingway Society, the Flannery O’Connor Society, the Don DeLillo Society, and the Saul Bellow Society, asking them for recommendations on founding an author society. Some of these individuals wrote back to me, many didn’t. One person who quickly responded was Ben, then president of the Philip Roth Society. It was a great way to begin. I had heard of his remarkable work and his years of service to the profession, and it was an honor for me to meet him. I would later go on to attend and present at several of his annual conferences, and I would often seek him out to discuss Philip Roth’s work and the importance of literary studies. Ben was a true scholar and a true friend, and his legacy will live on through the work he has done and the work that he has inspired. He will be sorely missed by colleagues throughout the international community of scholars and teachers.
**Upcoming Events**

The Philip Roth Society Panel at the 2010 annual ALA conference, to be held at the Hyatt Regency San Francisco in Embarcadero Center, San Francisco, May 27-30: 'Roth and Women' and 'The Kepesh Novels'.

Roth and Women
Organized by the Philip Roth Society
Chair: Aimee Pozorski, Central Connecticut State University

1. "Can you explain to the court why you hate women?: An Overview of Criticism of Philip Roth's Portrayal of Women," David Gooblar, University College London

2. "Matrimony: The Mother in Philip Roth's Life Writings," Tony Fong, University of Toronto


4. "Roth and Mothers," Jessica B. Burstrem, University of Arizona

Philip Roth's The Humbling: A Round Table Discussion
Organized by the Philip Roth Society
Moderator: David Brauner, University of Reading

Participants:
- David Brauner, University of Reading
- Derek Parker Royal, Texas A&M Commerce
- Philip Day, Central Connecticut State University
- Amalia Rechtman, Queensborough Community College
- Matthew Shipe, Washington U, St. Louis

**Obituary**

Ben Siegel 1925-2010

By Gloria Cronin and Jay L. Halio

Author or editor of sixteen books and numerous articles and reviews, Ben Siegel passed away peacefully at the age of 84 on January 7, 2010. He is perhaps best known to colleagues not only for his publications, but for his many stimulating and informative papers delivered at the Modern Language Association, the American Literature Association, the symposia on Holocaust and Jewish American literature. Colleagues warned him to his ready grasp of the issues, willingness to mentor junior colleagues, countless intellectual contributions, and gracious friendship. Besides distinguishing himself at California Polytechnic University in Pomona, California, he travelled the world over sharing his scholarship from London to New York, to Japan and to Australia. All remember him with great fondness as a gentleman and scholar, especially for his sharp mind, wit, graciousness, generosity, warmth of heart, marvelous humor, consummate storytelling ability, mellifluous presentations, bountiful congeniality, courage of spirit, spellbinding war stories, wonderfully told jokes, humane outlook, and general love of life.

Family and football were among his great passions. Many will recall the way he and his close friend, the late Melvin Friedman, watched National Football League games at the Palmer Hotel in Chicago or wherever the MLA chose to meet that year. But his chief love, apart from the classroom and the serious study of literature, was his beloved wife, Ruth, and their two children, Sharon and Kenneth. When Ruth fell seriously ill, he would hasten from whatever meeting he was attending to be at her side along with his children. When Ruth died in 1988, Ben continued to wear his wedding ring to the end of his own life.

Professionally, Ben loved being in the classroom, which he occupied continuously for 52 years. He served at Cal Poly, Pomona, with distinction as a scholar, teacher, and administrator. During the eight years he served as Chair of the English and Foreign Languages Department, he helped expand and improve its curriculum. Throughout his career he served as a supportive mentor and respected role model to numerous junior faculty, as well as a judicious advisor to countless students. He enhanced the reputation of his department and university through his many presentations and lectures at national and international conferences, and enriched the campus community by inviting notable writers and scholars to speak at student forums and luncheons. Ben taught classes in composition, the Bible as Literature, American Literature, Contemporary Literature, and Jewish American Literature throughout a career studded with awards, honors, and publications. He was greatly respected for his scholarship in American and Jewish American literary studies, specializing increasingly in Saul Bellow and Philip Roth studies.
Message from the Society’s President, continued

For me, the book captures as much Roth’s talent as it does Ben’s incredible spirit and his remarkable history of collaboration with Halio. The day I heard the news, I had the book Turning up the Flame (also by Halio and Siegel) on my desk, as I had consulted it for my MLA presentation a week or two before. As Shakespeare and Nabokov tell us, we can find comfort in Ben’s writing, which is timeless; however, I think many of us members will grieve for a long time over the loss of such a great man. As contemporary literary scholars and citizens of the world, we worry about forgetting; we cling to memories for as long as we can; we archive that which is important to us. Ben Siegel will be a part of the collective memory of the Philip Roth Society, of that I am certain.

Thank you very much for your continued commitment to Philip Roth studies.

Once again, I would like to thank Richard Sheehan for his time and diligence in putting together such an impressive newsletter. Please feel free to contact me with any questions, concerns, or ideas for the secondary Roth archive. I can be reached at pozorskia@ccsu.edu. I would very much welcome that conversation.

Fondly, as ever, Aimee Pozorski
In this issue:
Message from the Society President
Obituary for Ben Siegel
Abstracts from recent conference presentations
Philip Roth Tours
Review of The Humbling
Uncollected Roth short stories
Bibliographic update of recent Roth publications

Message from the Society’s President
Aimee Pozorski

On Memory and Forgetting
The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge, a token of the future.

Dear All,
I write this letter, perhaps rather inappropriately, with the words and thoughts of Jacques Derrida on my mind. On the one hand, such a connection between Roth and Derrida would perhaps result in a rather condescending eye roll from Roth himself, and maybe even Derrida, too. On the other hand, I believe in my heart of hearts, that Roth might even applaud the chutzpah that drives such an impulse.

I have been thinking about Derrida as I’ve worked with Ewa Badowska, the curator of special collections in the library of Central Connecticut State University where I teach. As a result of our conversations, she has granted the Philip Roth Society dedicated space for a secondary collection of Roth materials and mem-entos. The idea was presented by a great supporter of the Society, Ira Nadel, during the Modern Language Association Conference in Philadelphia this year. I would like to thank him here for sharing his imagination and visions for the Society during that meeting in a crowded hotel lobby. The idea is, of course, not to compete with the incredible Library of Congress archive, which houses Roth’s collected papers, but to gather, in one place, off-prints, interviews, watercolor portraits, and any other items of interest that a Roth scholar might find of use in their research. The risk, of course, in archiving, as Derrida so poignantly points up in Archive Fever, is that, while it satisfies the command, the impulse, to remember, for always, documents that are precious to us, it is also an act that risks forgetting. For, if we tuck something away in an archive, then command to remember must complete with the impulse toward complacency that comes with protecting something under lock and key.

I write this letter also with a heavy heart, as we lost in January a beloved Roth scholar, Ben Siegel. He passed away just before the appearance of the anticipated Roth book he co-edited with Jay Halio, Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as a Comic Writer.