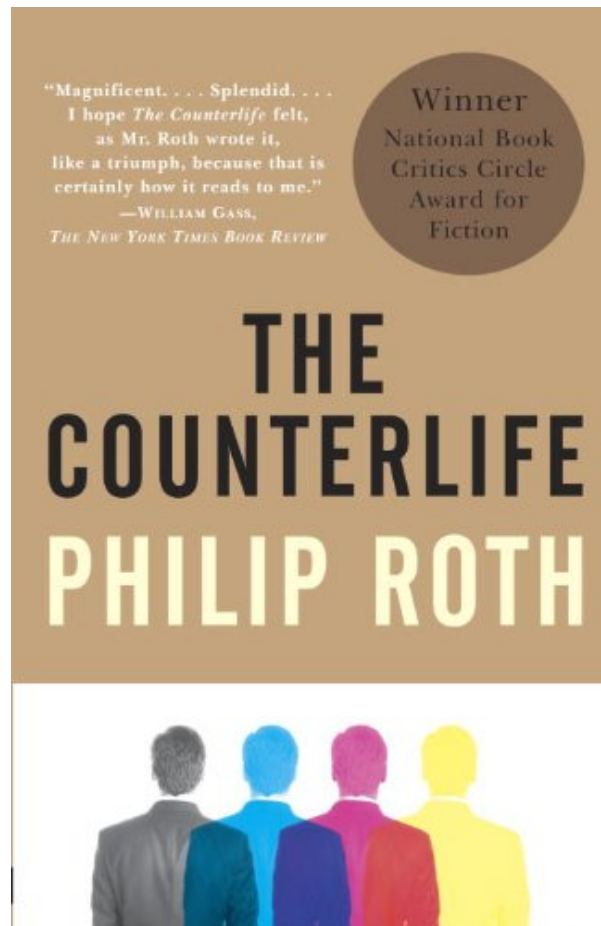


# THE COUNTERLIFE BY PHILIP ROTH



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"Magnificent. . . . Splendid. . . .  
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—WILLIAM GASS,  
*THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

Winner  
National Book  
Critics Circle  
Award for  
Fiction

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The saga of Henry and Nathan Zuckerman continues, 13 years after novelist Nathan Zuckerman first appeared in Roth's 1974 effort, *My Life as a Man*. In *The Counterlife*, the dentist Henry suffers an unsettling--and for Roth, a predictable--side effect to his heart medication: impotence, which leads him to undergo an ill-fated operation. The multi-layered plot line travels from New York to London to Israel, while the characters undergo a series of surprising transformations. In the words of Nathan, a change in one's life causes "a counterlife that is one's own anti-myth." It's vintage 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, or in a tradition-bound English Village in Gloucestershire, or in a church in London's West End, or in a tiny desert settlement in Israel's occupied West Bank.

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—John Updike, *The New Yorker*

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Roth in transition

By jonsj

The Counterlife is one of Roth's most unusual and experimental novels, and finds Roth in transition from the spare, elegant books of the Zuckerman Bound trilogy to the more expansive Zuckerman novels of his recent, acclaimed "America" trilogy (*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*).

In *The Counterlife* we get the full range of Roth--from the moving but wickedly funny first part Basel, where Nathan Zuckerman narrates the events leading to his brother Henry's death and subsequent funeral, to the second section Judea, where Nathan goes to Israel to try to lure Henry (restored to life and now part of a militant Zionist group) back home to the States, to a later section where Nathan has died, and an estranged Henry attends his funeral, to the final sections with Nathan in England, dealing with anti-Semitism and his wife's family in a brilliant bit of social comedy.

Plot sounds confusing, right? Yet *The Counterlife* is not a wildly post-modern novel, but a fairly straightforward read. Not all parts of the book work as effectively as the others, and the book is less finished than some of Roth's other work, but there are stretches here that contain some of the best writing Roth has ever done. This is a book deeply concerned with questions of identity and free will--more specifically about the many lives we create for ourselves and the way we often form these lives by reacting with or against other people's conceptions of us.

It's a remarkably thought-provoking and absorbing novel; if I would withhold it from the very top tier of Roth's achievements it's only because it lacks the cohesion and concentration of his best work. Still, a deeply rewarding book, and a must-read for Roth fans.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

So so

By Gerald

Evocative of something. Not sure what happened. Not my favorite of Roth's

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Roth's "Variations On a Theme"

By William J. Fickling

This is the best novel I have read by Philip Roth (so far). It is unlike anything I have read by him before, or by many others, for that matter. When I finished it, I was reminded of a number of musical compositions called "Variations On a Theme By xxxxx), in which a composer takes a theme by another composer and then composes several variations on that theme. Here, however, the original theme is by Roth himself, so that Roth is writing variations on his own theme.

I don't like people who write reviews with spoilers, so I won't do that here, in that I won't reveal any crucial plot elements. However, I don't believe it would ruin any prospective reader's enjoyment to reveal the book's

basic structure. The book is divided into 5 sections. In the first, a major event occurs to one of the characters. In the second, the tape is rewound and that same character's life takes another course. In the third and, in my opinion, the most expendable part of the book, which follows directly from the second section, an unsettling event happens to one of the other main characters. In the fourth, the tape is rewound once again and the same thing that happened to one of the characters in the first section happens to one of the other characters. The fifth section follows directly from the second without the events in the third section having happened. Moreover, in this section one of the characters becomes aware that she is a character in a novel and begins talking back to the author.

Confused? I wouldn't blame you if you were. However, the book does come together with remarkable coherence at the end because it deals with several universal human themes. I think all human beings have "what ifs?" in their lives. Haven't all of us wondered at time what our lives would have been like if such and such hadn't happened. Roth shows us several different scenarios as to how things might have turned out for his characters. Another major theme is Jewish identity: how does a Jew fit into a society where he is a minority and perhaps an outsider? Or, does he reject that society and go to Israel, where Jews run the show? How does a gentile who is in no way anti-Semitic manage a relationship with a Jew she loves but who is also full of anger at the history of anti-Semitism? Finally, what is real and what isn't? What is the difference between fiction and reality? This is not an original theme, to be sure, but rather handles it with exceptional skill and finesse.

Finally, I must comment on Roth's prose style. Roth writes the clearest and most lucid prose of any modern American writer, with the possible exception of John Updike. Reading Roth is nearly effortless. What may be difficult and may cause the reader to pause are the ideas he discusses, but never the prose style. I cannot recommend this book highly enough as a riveting and talented read.

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