

PHILIP ROTH

(435 words)

As I read reviews of his recent biography, which I've not actually seen, it seems that one theme is that his great successes with publishers, critics, money, classy women, etc. weren't sufficient for him. He felt he deserved yet more. Were the US to have an equivalent about a Novelist Laureate, he'd complain if he wasn't rewarded, though perhaps complain as well about insufficiencies if the laurel were dropped on his head. He was a kvetch, albeit a highly refined kvetch.

That surprised me, who didn't think him as much of a success-hound as, say, J. C. Oates.

Wasn't he impressed by the fact that he was rewarded, perhaps uniquely, with fifty years of beneficence with publishers and reviewers? (Recall that even Upton Sinclair, perhaps a more popular writer, was in his late 70s when he (self?) published *A Cup of Fury* [1956], his

exposé of alcoholism destroying his literary contemporaries, with a small press that did no other books.)

Roth was also the last beneficiary of the concerted effort to make a Jewish Writer important simply because he was Jewish. Perhaps because neither Roth nor his admirers designated an heir, this stream ran dry. This observation raises in turn of who will be the last Black Writer and the last Latino avatar? Or has this inevitable process already happened without anyone noticing.

Both his admirers and Roth himself thought that he deserved the Nobel Prize in Literature, as perhaps he did, given lesser quality in other recipients. However, few noticed that no North American since John Steinbeck in 1962 received the prize solely because American commercial publishing liked him or her (until Louise Glück in 2020). The story behind Saul Bellow was rewarding Jewish-American literature, behind Isaac Singer Yiddish writing,

behind Toni Morrison literature by African-American women, behind Alice Munro the neglected category of Canadian writing, and behind Bob Dylan a path outside the literary-industrial complex while Joseph Brodsky was a Soviet dissident who happened to be living mostly in America. Given the Nobel committee's evident skepticism about the American literary-industrial complex, neither Philip Roth nor Susan Sontag, say, would score the coveted Nobel, notwithstanding their publishers' claims.

Recently admiring James Michener for the quality and quantity of his literary philanthropy as a childless multimillionaire writer, may I judge Roth (and everyone else) deficient?

The other side of his hunger for success in the present was a lack of concern of whether his books will last long. I suspect that they won't, because too limited by current obsessions, but I won't be around long enough to find out if I'm wrong.

