

Softcover: US

Thanatos prevails in 'Indignation'

Philip Roth sets the middle-American values of conformity and religious observance against one man's battle to tell the truth

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The title of Philip Roth's novella *Indignation* is taken from China's national anthem — "Indignation fills the hearts of all of our countrymen," in one translation. They are words muttered by Roth's Jewish-born hero to distract himself from the Christian hymns and sermons as he attends compulsory chapel services in a Midwestern university in 1952. He's no communist, however, and one of his reasons for study is to ensure that at least he's an officer when he's drafted into the Korean War on graduation, and possibly avoid the draft altogether. He fails in both aims, is killed by a Chinese bayonet in that war, and the story (though we only learn this a third of the way through the book) is told by his ghost.

He fails, and dies, because he refuses to conform, and thereby confirms his half-crazed father's warning that in this life the greatest results can come from the smallest causes. Cause and effect is an idea running around in Roth's consciousness, you feel, and in the confrontation between the young student and his college's dean of men, which is the book's centerpiece, the boy quotes Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian* on causes in general. Russell had argued that the religious believe that everything in the universe has a cause except God, who is the First Cause. But if the possibility of a causeless entity is accepted, why shouldn't that entity be the universe itself? Roth's hero may have been born Jewish, but by conviction he's a confirmed atheist.

This all sounds rather intellectual, but this isn't an intellectual book. Indeed, the dominant impressions it leaves are of rather elementary male teenage sex with a first girlfriend and anguish over the pros and cons of being Jewish, neither by any means new concerns for this author. Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* may have been published more than 40 years ago, but some things, it seems, haven't changed.

Great art can contribute to curing the world's ills, if only through giving us an expanded vision of ourselves and our possibilities. Roth rarely aspires to that function, though.

In a nutshell, the middle-American values of conformity, Christian observance and sporting excellence are set against one man's determination to tell the truth as he sees it, get some sexual experience before he dies, and study hard so as to continue the sequence of straight A's he's maintained since childhood. Tradition gets the better of him, however, and he pays the ultimate price. Seen like this, Roth's fable appears disarmingly simple.

Of course, it isn't simple really. There's the boy's relation with his parents, to begin with — confused and potentially emasculating in a way that, for Roth, is par for the course. Father is a kosher butcher, and the boy's experience of drawing the innards out of chickens becomes the would-be model for life — there are some things that you don't like doing, but which have to be done nevertheless. His mother, who visits him in the Midwest after an appendectomy, is — deliberately, you feel — made tall and unfeminine, to form a contrast

PUBLICATION NOTES



BY PHILIP ROTH
233 PAGES
VINTAGE

with the boy's nubile girlfriend, all the more maddening to him for being in a similar relationship with half the college and having tried to cut her wrists during a bout of depression. It's emblematic of the opposing forces playing on him that his mother promises to stay with her problematic husband only on condition the boy abandons the only sexual playmate he has ever known.

As an evocation of the 1950s, as well of downtown Newark, New Jersey (Roth's own birthplace) and a Midwestern education (Roth too attended college in that neck of the woods), this short book reads well enough, and indeed the central confrontation with the quietly anti-Semitic dean of men is very memorable. Nonetheless, the book has its shortcomings. A culminating "White Panty Raid" on the girls' dormitories by the college hearties during a blizzard is gratuitous to say the least, and one wonders quite what fantasies it's meant to stand for. Is Roth an intellectual who feels he must include these things to ensure a mass readership, or does he have deeper interests and symbolisms in mind? It's hard indeed to know with this readable, annoying, yet in the final analysis not interestingly problematic book.

What does come to mind, though, is an old observation by the English critic John Bayley to the effect that while Europe's literary strength lies in imagination, America's lies in the incisive reporting of reality. As such, a book that has impressed me far more than Roth's this week is Pulitzer Prize-winning Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (Random House, 2003), now out again in a new paperback edition. It's an account of time spent, mostly in Haiti, but also in Peru and Russia, with Paul Farmer, a doctor dedicated to helping their long-suffering populations. A book like this — hard-hitting, scrupulous, vivid, and as meticulous as it's passionate — makes Roth's symbolic fantasy, well-crafted though it is, appear adolescent and even irresponsible by contrast.

Great art can contribute to curing the world's ills, if only through giving us an expanded vision of ourselves and our possibilities. Roth rarely aspires to that function, though. The fact that he's currently considered, even by that most humane of critics, Harold Bloom, to be one of the US' four greatest living novelists, makes you wonder about the state of the American novel in general. By contrast, Kidder's narrative of an attempt to bring health care to the poorest of the poor is positively heroic in its dimensions. Human aspiration doesn't come more elevated, and it's immensely consoling to know that it is matched by very considerable achievements, notably in the fields of multi-drug-resistant TB and AIDS. The greatness is not so much in the writing itself, though that's thorough and everywhere strongly committed, but in the



NEW DSLR CAMERA FROM PENTAX

Pentax continues its focus on compact, affordable DSLR cameras with its new K-x, which sells for US\$650 with a lens kit. The K-x is the cheapest DSLR on the market that can capture HD video as well as offer Live View. In fact, its entry-level competitors, the Canon Rebel T1i and the Nikon D5000, are priced at least US\$150 higher.

The K-x is simply designed and feels solid in your hands, yet weighs only 567g (with battery). It employs a 12.4-megapixel CMOS image sensor (with built-in stabilization).

Although it is intended to be a starter DSLR, the K-x offers plenty of expandability, thanks to its compatibility with Pentax's entire lineup of 26 lenses.

In a nod to the success of the sell-out white K-7, which Pentax says was particularly popular with women, the K-x will be available in a choice of white or black, as well as limited-edition red or navy. The black and white versions will be available next month; the blue and red models will hit the stores a month later.



MEMORY CARDS FOR THE SHUTTERBUG WITH A NEED FOR SPEED

SanDisk has unleashed new CompactFlash memory cards for DSLR cameras that have read-write speeds of 90 megabytes per second — which is at least 50 percent faster than existing technology.

I recently met with Eric Bone, SanDisk's vice president of retail product marketing, for a look at the new Extreme Pro cards.

To compare speeds, he snapped 15 RAW+JPEG frames in burst mode with an Extreme Pro card and an older Ultra II card. It took 11 seconds to shoot 15 frames with the Extreme Pro card; with the Ultra II card, it took 36 seconds.

SanDisk says the Extreme Pro cards are for professional photographers (or very dedicated amateurs) who need the speed for fast-action burst shots and the room for capacity-hogging RAW images. Their speed also makes Extreme Pro a great candidate for DSLR photographers whose cameras can capture high-definition video.

The new Extreme Pro cards will require you to operate in wide-wallet mode, however. The 64-gigabyte card costs a whopping US\$812; the 32- and 16-gigabyte cards are only slightly more affordable at US\$508 and US\$304, respectively.



GROWING CLOSER TO A PIANO EXPERIENCE

The new Privia PX-130 from Casio (available online for US\$500) is a nice model for those who want an inexpensive digital keyboard that has the feel of a real piano. I tested it last week at a musical-instrument store and I liked what I heard and felt. Strike a chord with force, and it's noticeably louder than a softly formed chord. The keys at the lower registers are slightly more stiff than in the higher register, just like an acoustic piano, and notes fade convincingly when using the sustain pedal. The PX-130 even handles quickly repeated notes pretty well.

The Privia PX-130 includes 16 sounds, like harpsichord, bass or organ. (Changing instruments requires that you press a combination of two buttons, however, which is a bit clunky.) The keyboard offers a duet mode for student and teacher that duplicates a particular range on both ends of the keyboard.

This keyboard seems to be popular among shoppers: While I toyed with it, several customers interrupted to ask about its price and features. I can assure you it wasn't my playing that spurred their interest.

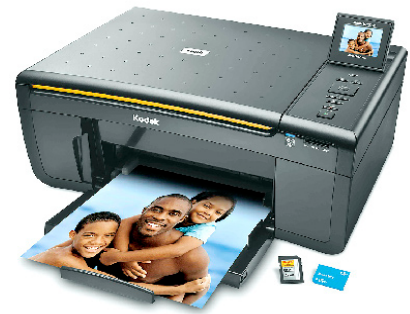


PHOTO PRINTERS THAT GO EASY ON THE INK

Kodak has introduced two all-in-one inkjet printers that it says can yield lab-quality photos and sip, rather than gulp, ink. In fact, Kodak says the new models can save an average of US\$110 a year on ink when compared with similar inkjets, although there is no way to verify this claim.

The ESP 3250 (US\$130) has a 1.5-inch color LCD for image previews and navigation, as well as the usual memory card slots for computerless printing. The ESP 5250 (US\$170) adds built-in Wi-Fi connectivity and a larger 2.4-inch color LCD. Both include software to improve facial skin tones and an optical character-recognition app to translate text images into editable text; they also offer manual double-sided printing (a paper-saving move).

The Kodak printers employ two cartridges, one black, for \$10, and the other a five-color combo, for US\$15. While it's impossible to gauge consumables without hands-on testing (and lots of math), the cartridges do seem to be reasonably priced when compared with those from other vendors.



A MOUSE ON THE MOVE

Mobile Air Mouse is an application that turns an iPhone into a remote trackpad or mouse. This may require some explaining.

The Air Mouse, which costs US\$2.99, lets users control an on-screen cursor using the iPhone's accelerometers to sense movement. Those accelerometers, however, don't sense the sliding motion of a traditional mouse very well, so you move the phone more like a laser pointer, tilting it to navigate the screen. Detailed work, like highlighting a line in a document, requires a bit more expertise. Too much work? Use the trackpad mode instead.

Many fans of the app also use it as a remote for a computer running video or to control a presentation while roaming a room.

The app will work with both Apple and Windows computers. Mobile Air Mouse is useful, though not always easy to use. Like the trackpads it aims to replace, you are likely to love it or hate it. — NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Softcover: US

From prodigal son to 'the lion of the Senate'

Edward Kennedy's posthumous memoir gives insight into the political dynasty, but glaring gaps remain

BY ROBERT MCCRUM
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

Edward Kennedy's career comes as a stunning riposte to F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous dictum that "there are no second acts in American lives." Not even the author of *The Great Gatsby* would have dared to invent the extraordinary life of Rose and Joe Kennedy's ninth child, the naughty boy who grew up to be the elder statesman of the Democratic party. As all the family photographs show, Teddy was the baby of the family, partly raised by his more celebrated older brothers, Jack and Bobby. By some miracle, possibly the luck of the Irish, Teddy outlived them both, suffered spectacular failures in public life and was rescued by the love of a good woman.

Even his passing was marked by the kind of solemnity accorded heads of state and his reputation redeemed in extravagant public obsequies. Now, a month after his funeral, out comes this memoir, part autobiography, part apologetics. You could hardly make it up.

True Compass has the narrative drive of a book written in the shadow of the grim reaper. When, in May of last year, Kennedy was diagnosed with brain cancer, his collaboration with Ron Powers took on a new purpose.

The senator would supply his version; Powers would give the book shape, style and coherence.

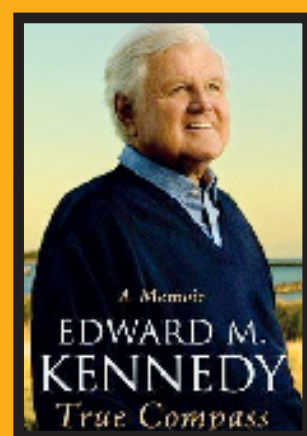
Cleverly, the ghost has also given his subject a certain salty charm. Kennedy is writing for posterity, spinning from the grave, but not much is left out. Only a dedicated Kennedy-hater could take issue with it. For anyone who has grown up with the fables of Jack and Jackie, this is an absorbing tour of the Kennedy back lot.

To be born a Kennedy was to be born fighting. Teddy's father, Joseph Sr, instilled a family culture of remorseless competition, derived from his own insecurity. "What the hell do I have to do to be called an American?" he roared when, yet again, the press disparaged his Irish roots.

Teddy was lucky. He sat at a small table apart from his parents and brothers and grew up surrounded by sisters, averring a special love for Jean, closest in age. The pressure to succeed was remorseless. Although he followed Jack into Harvard, Teddy ruined his record by cheating in a Spanish exam. It was the first of many "screw-ups."

Worries about his prospects were soon swamped by the presidential campaign of 1960. Jack's run for the White House, as epic as Obama's in 2008, was the culmination of Rose and Joe Kennedy's extraordinary parental ambition and always a family affair. Teddy was his elder brother's campaign manager, backed up by a team of college professors and political hacks, the

PUBLICATION NOTES



BY EDWARD M. KENNEDY
532 PAGES
LITTLE, BROWN

"eggheads and hardheads."

This, for my money, is the meat of this memoir. Kennedy's recollections of his first exposure to national politics are fresh, vivid and surprising. Powers, too, relishes the tales from the campaign trail, the Democratic convention in Los Angeles, the televised debates with Nixon, and finally the snowy magic of inauguration day, 1961.

JFK made Bobby attorney general. There was no place for

Teddy in Camelot. Instead, the 1960s became a progressively more brutal test of his resilience. A lesser man might have buckled, but now the famous Kennedy upbringing, almost Roman in its stoicism, came into its own.

In December 1961, his father, Joe, to whom he was exceptionally close, suffered a disabling stroke. In 1962, Teddy fought, and narrowly won, a vicious Senate campaign for Massachusetts. In November 1963, JFK was assassinated. Six months after this trauma, in June 1964, Teddy was nearly killed in a light-plane crash, an accident in which he broke his back and had to endure months of rehab.

When Bobby was assassinated in 1968, the baby of the Kennedy family suddenly became father to a brood of orphans. "I became," he writes, "the family uncle." This terrible decade must have left many inner wounds. Kennedy style, he hardly examines these.

If Teddy had stuck to this role, all could have been well, but the flipside of his resilience was his appetite for women and parties. Just as he was coming through the worst of the 1960s, his political ambitions were drowned in the midnight waters of Chappaquiddick.

Kennedy's account of this scandal still smacks of special pleading and leaves important questions unanswered. There's no doubt that he suffered deeply

for his dreadful behavior that night. As a politician, he was finished; his campaign against sitting US President Jimmy Carter, whom he plainly loathed, never achieved liftoff.

Slowly he remade himself, becoming the custodian of his brothers' memory, the keeper of the flame and, when he married Vicki Reggie, he put his "hellraising" behind him. In the 40 years between Chappaquiddick and his death, he became "the lion of the Senate."

Like its author, *True Compass* tries to do several things simultaneously. More than a memoir, it is also a manifesto. Seeded through the narrative of a remarkable life are many references to Kennedy's support for the burning issue of 2009, US healthcare reform.

If his death has deprived Obama of the majority he needs to steamroll the Republican diehards in the Senate, Kennedy's ghostly appeals for a universal health policy will keep his name in the public eye and secure his memoir a place on Beltway bedsides. Insiders will also relish some delicious gossip, a hilarious portrait of Reagan's White House, vignettes of the British newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook, Brezhnev and Clinton and, finally, a full-throated declaration of support for Obama. There, at last, the senator manages to get on the right side of history, at least for now.