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Ben Siegel and Jay L. Halio (eds.), *Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as a Comic Writer* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2010, $56.00). Pp. 276. ISBN 978 0 87413 094 2.

Philip Roth has been enjoying an "Indian summer," if many critics are to be believed, for the past two decades. With the demise of such contemporaries as Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow and John Updike, it is no surprise that Roth, never more prolific than now, in his seventies, is becoming a more treasured literary icon with each passing year. This has not always been the case. Having begun publishing fiction in the 1950s, Roth has attracted criticism from several quarters. Feminists have expressed disgust at the apparent misogyny of his protagonists and narrating voices. Jewish commentators have condemned Roth for representations of his own people that could incite anti-Semitism. An occasional, more courageous, reviewer has even questioned the literary merit of Roth's fiction and sought to define what is "good" or "bad" Roth.

Roth's recent status, however, has caused many critics to back away from challenging him. Instead of actually criticizing or finding fault with the author's work, it seems that the standard approach is to discuss the fiction in the most positive light possible and simply elucidate what the author's intentions are. The misogyny, the flawed representations and flat characters, the disorganized satire and irreverence are now, we are told, beside the point. Taking Roth's self-assessments as gospel, many critics focus on, for instance, Roth as a "comic voice" (Judith Yaross Lee, 69).

Almost all of the essays in this collection follow the trend. One can only imagine Roth himself laughing irascibly should he ever read James Mellard's essay, in which he is argued to exemplify theories of comedy and castration by Lacan, Frye and Zupančič in *Exit Ghost*. I was pleasantly surprised, however, to discover one essay that does not respect Roth's total authority over his texts. Certainly, Elaine Safer's essay, which suggests that as a Jewish writer Roth writes under certain compulsions as well as with measured intentions, is the stand-out piece of the collection.

Safer's arguments concerning the divided selfhood of Jewish American writers and the notion that Roth gets a "kick" out of assuming fictional identities sit at the cusp of an area of criticism that is far from exhausted (156). Indeed, one could apply a volume of theory concerning Jewish identity and trauma (as David Brauner has elsewhere, but not in his essay in this collection) as the driving forces behind Roth's grotesque and politically incorrect creations. Rather than focussing on Roth's control and mastery as he "discusses" or "explores" such clashes as "comedy vs. psychoanalysis" or "humour vs. satire," it is high time that critics sought to evaluate his fiction alongside a variety of Jewish artists from Jerzy Kosinski and Paul Auster, to Peter Sellers and Sacha Baron Cohen. It is in the work of these artists that one sees what effects can be achieved when an artist is withdrawn and reticent as "himself" but extrovert, comic and sadistic in various guises. The roots of these compulsions should receive at least equal attention to any artistic attempts to rein them in. In summary, Safer's essay aside, the only positive of this collection is that it

will one day provide scholars with a good example of the prevailing motifs of Roth criticism in 2010.

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