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## [Philip Roth](#) AMERICA'S LION

**As he turns 79, author reflects on his life, his writing and his Jersey roots**

By [Amy Ellis Nutt](#)  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

[Philip Roth](#) laughs. It's not a belly-shaking guffaw -- the lanky novelist couldn't do that even if he wanted to -- rather, it's a head-thrown-back chuckle, the kind of mirth that comes at the end of a good punch line. In this case, though, the joke is actually about him.

On the eve of his birthday, [Roth](#) has spent considerable time over the past few months fielding calls about a public celebration. The party, however, isn't tomorrow, he explains to a puzzled reporter. It's a year from tomorrow -- when he turns 80.

"I just got a call about the catering," he says, with a bemused smile.

The call, in fact, was from Liz Del Tufo, president of the Newark Landmarks and Historic Preservation Committee, who is spearheading the 2013 two-day birthday bash for Newark's hometown hero, now just 366 days away.

"We did want to start well in advance," Del Tufo says. "He's so funny. Every time I call him, he picks up the phone and says, 'Am I 80 yet?'"

Not quite, of course, but Del Tufo, along with the [Philip Roth](#) Society, which is co-sponsoring next year's mini-fest, is not wasting any time prepping for the big party.

It's all a little bit embarrassing for the man many critics regard as America's most important living literary treasure, but he appears to be taking it in stride.

Last Wednesday, still five days short of 79, the author leaned back in an armchair in his sun-swept Manhattan apartment and reflected on his past. He is as trim and fit as he was at 17 when he was a lanky summer camp counselor in the Poconos. (In a photo, reprinted in a German magazine sitting on [Roth's](#) coffee table, he is, in fact, a tanned, preternaturally suave teenager in tennis shorts, white socks and loafers.) Thirty-one novels and more than six decades removed from that

youthful summer, [Roth](#) summons his memories, especially those of his Weequahic neighborhood, with Proustian ease.

"Well, if it was the summer, there was no air conditioning. I'm hot. All the windows are wide open. The radios are on. You hear Walter Winchell, Fred Allen, Jack Benny. You hear people talking in the alley ways. They'd have beach chairs in the driveway, so you'd hear laughter and radios. I'd put the ball game on, the Dodgers. "¡ Red Barber was the voice of the Dodgers."

#### **'PHILIP ROTH HOME'**

[Roth](#) shared a bedroom on the second floor of the small clapboard house at 81 Summit Ave. with his beloved older brother, Sandy, who died in 2009. Today, the house bears a plaque inscribed "Historic Site: [Philip Roth](#) Home" and the corner of Summit and Keer avenues bears a third street sign, "[Philip Roth](#) Plaza." But for the man whose novels often draw on New Jersey, the past is not only present, it's palpable.

"It was delicious," he says of summer vacations at Bradley Beach, which [Roth](#) spent with family and friends from Newark. "We played a game called "Buzz," and the object was to tear the limbs off your opponent. "¡ It was a great game. There was always a little blood. Then we'd run into the water screaming."

And when they came out, they'd run across the scorching sand to buy hot dogs at Mike and Lou's on Ocean Ave.

"We'd run on the hot boardwalk, buy half a dozen hot dogs, then run back to the beach."

On weekends in Newark there were baseball, softball or stickball games to play on the field behind the Chancellor Avenue Elementary School -- "I still have a bad arm from throwing a Spaldeen against the brick wall," [Roth](#) says. On Saturday nights, he and "the boys" would take their dates to a movie, drop them home, then meet up again at the Weequahic Diner for hot pastrami sandwiches. And if it was too crowded at the diner, they'd duck across the street for burgers at the White Castle.

"We liked to have fun," says one of [Roth's](#) childhood friends, Howard Silver, a retired dentist now living in Florida. "We wanted to be with girls all the time. Sports was very important. It was a very close-knit group."

Many of his friends ended up in his fiction, but [Roth](#) says he didn't even think about becoming a writer until he was an upperclassman at Bucknell University. But first, he was inspired by the novels of Thomas Wolfe, especially "Look Homeward, Angel," which he read during his junior year in high school.

"I was exhilarated. It was the greatest explosion of my young life," [Roth](#) says, referring to Wolfe's "gushing prose" and the "feverishness

of his imagination. "You can't get enough gush at 16. He's so full of appetite. He was a great teacher to me."

[Roth](#) credits Weequahic High School with instilling his love of language, and he can still rattle off the names of the poems he was required to memorize: Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" Shelley's "To a Skylark," "Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

"People say it's just memorizing, but we got the language in our heads," [Roth](#) says.

By way of proof, he recites, in lilting Middle English, the first few lines of the General Prologue to Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales":

*Whan that aprill with his shoures soote*

*The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,*

*And bathed every veyne in swich licour*

*Of which vertu engendred is the flour ...*

#### **HELLO, FAME**

[Roth's](#) first fiction book, "Goodbye, Columbus," appeared in 1959, a month after he turned 26, but in 1969 it was his relentlessly salacious comic novel "Portnoy's Complaint" that catapulted him into public consciousness -- and public controversy.

[Roth](#) weathered both the outrage and the acclaim, spinning out best-sellers at an astonishing clip. In the process, he won a slew of literary accolades, from the 1960 National Book Award for his first major work, "Goodbye, Columbus," to a 1995 National Book Award for "Sabbath's Theater," three PEN/Faulkner awards and the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for "American Pastoral."

He is only the third writer to have the Library of America publish a special edition of his life's work while he was still alive. (The others were Eudora Welty and Saul Bellow.) The only major honor missing from his literary résumé is a Nobel Prize.

Novelist, poet and journalist Michael Bourne wanted to remedy that when he wrote an open letter to the Swedish Academy last September: "Can we please stop the nonsense and give [Philip Roth](#) a Nobel Prize for Literature before he dies?" Bourne's entreaty went unheeded, at least for the time being.

"[Roth](#) can stand the test of time," says Aimee Pozorski, who teaches English at Central Connecticut State University and is a member of the [Philip Roth](#) Society.

"What is so great is he creates a whole world in his novels in which you can lose yourself, and yet the books are also highly relevant to

today "the idea that America was founded on freedom and individualism, and the value of hard work."

[Roth](#) is both storyteller and intellect, according to Pozorski, and "he appeals because he just writes beautiful sentences. I think this is why he earns the title greatest living American novelist."

Despite his success, [Roth](#) remains oddly ambivalent about his chosen profession.

"I find writing is largely an ordeal I have to face every day," he says. "It's a strange occupation. You are on your own. There is no rule book, no casebook. Nothing. "I guess that's what I wanted."

In "American Pastoral," Nathan Zuckerman, one of [Roth's](#) many alter egos, talks about the double life of a novelist as both object and observer - roles that leave man and author open to error, but the reader open to understanding.

(G)etting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong.

Maybe the best thing would be to forget about being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that -- well, lucky you.

No, lucky us.