

The Ghost Writer

Roth's latest explores the fiction and reality involved in the creation of literature

By LAURA ELLIOTT

Because I knew this book was about the emotional puberty of a young writer and since I harbor the notion of someday trying to write, I picked up Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*. I admit that I did it only to appease this zealous interest of mine. Roth's reputation for writing "dirty Jewish novels" had discouraged me from reading him in the past.

Of course, this book—as is all Roth's writing—is speckled with yiddish philosophies and personalities. But the perspective of *The Ghost Writer* is a bit different. If anything, its scope is limited to the sympathies of writers or would-be authors.

Nathan Zucherman, a 23-year-old author of four published short stories, comes to the house of E.I. Lonoff, an older established author whose protegee, Zucherman, hopes to become. Also at the house is a former student and possible lover of Lonoff, Amy Bellette, a mysterious young woman of Jewish ancestry who survived Nazi Europe. Hope, Lonoff's Christian and selfless wife, also is at the house carefully

catching toast as it pops from the toaster to avoid disturbing Lonoff's concentration.

Boasting an uncharacteristically subtle narrative, *The Ghost Writer's* plot is nothing overly dramatic. What gives the skeleton drama its flesh is the overwrought imagination of Zucherman. During the nights, after overhearing Amy make a sexual overture to Lonoff, Zucherman fantasizes about her

explored the delicate difference between what an author knows to be fact and what he imagines. Zucherman himself says, "What do I know myself other than what I can imagine." His romantic profile of Amy and her sacrifice for the sake of literature is his own naive, idealized fluff.

The "reality" of the novel presents quite a different picture. Lonoff's writing is not noble but tedious and painstaking—a selfish routine. He writes 27 drafts of one passage. He "pushes sentences" until they drive him mad—all the while completely ignoring the needs of his devoted and frustrated wife. "I got fondled more by strangers on the rush hour subway during two months in 1935 than I have here in the last 20 years," she finally says in desperation.

The difference between the dramas of life and fiction is explored. After hearing the proposition and refusal exchanged between Amy and Lonoff, Zucherman exclaims, "Oh, if only I could have imagined the scene I'd overheard. If only I could invent as presumptuously as real life. If one day I could just approach the

originality and excitement of what actually goes on."

On the other hand, Lonoff cannot leave the boredom and security of his wife and reclusive home the colorful lifestyle promised by the sultry Amy—even though he can create characters who profit in their reckless abandon.

The ultimate responsibility of the writer also is questioned. Zucherman is under great pressure from his Jewish community and experiences estrangement from his before-doting father because of his short-story presentation of a family squabble. Lonoff counsels him to forget it, but Zucherman remains troubled by the question of validity and fairness in his treatment of the story's situation and personalities.

On the surface, *The Ghost Writer* doesn't seem to have much pith. But beneath the seemingly direct narration of a thin plot are displayed the multiple philosophic problems and ironies involved in the creation of literature.

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Books

heritage. He imagines her to be Anne Frank (whose diary was popular during the '50s setting of the novel). Because dead, she makes a forceful statement about the illogical cruelty of Nazi anti-semiticism, Amy (supposedly the murdered Anne Frank of Zucherman's fantasy) decides to retain the secrecy of identity even from her father, Otto Frank, who still lives. She is the "ghost writer" who endures agonizing loneliness to help the world.

The novel raises several questions about writing. Here is

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