"The cry 'watch out for the goyim,'" Philip Roth wrote 45 years ago, "at times seems more the expression of an unconscious wish than of a warning. Oh that they were out there so that we could be together here. A rumor of persecution, a taste of exile, might even bring with it the old world of feelings and habits - something to replace the new world of social accessibility and moral indifference, the world which tempts all our promiscuous instincts, and where one cannot always figure out what a Jew is that a Christian is not."

In Indignation, Roth's 29th book, he plays variations on this theme, as wishes and warnings, conscious and unconscious, converge and collide. The novel is profoundly - and perversely - dark, offering no exits. Indignation is not as richly textured as, say, Roth's great works, American Pastoral (1997) and The Human Stain (2000), perhaps because it relies more on types than fully realized characters. But in his exploration of a quintessential Jewish-American dilemma - to assimilate or stand apart - Roth, at 75, remains a powerful and provocative writer.

Set in 1951, amid "the agonies of the Korean War," and the substitution of supermarkets for mom-and-pop shops, Indignation follows 19-year-old Marcus Messner of Newark, New Jersey, during his sophomore year at Winesburg College in Ohio. Marcus is a decent and delightful young man, a straight-A student, who dates only "nice" girls and works long hours in his family's butcher store. He lives "happily enough within the adolescent norms" of his community until his father, a 50-something catcher in the rye, becomes "crazy with worry" about relinquishing control over his cherished only child in a world fraught with danger. Taking full flight, in pleated gray flannel trousers, a checkered sport shirt, maroon V-neck sweater and white buckskin shoes, Marcus transfers from Robert Treat College to the heartland of America.

Indignation is, in essence, an ode to paranoia. Mr. Messner turns out to be right. But he can't wish out of existence Marcus's promiscuous instincts, or save his son from the "terrible, the incomprehensible" consequences of "his most banal, incidental and even comical choices." And anti-Semitism, imagined and real, does not - and cannot - bring back the old world of shared experiences, expectations and enemies.

Marcus finds anti-Semitism everywhere he turns. In Ohio, Jews can run but they can't hide. Marcus
may imagine that the fraternity brothers of his roommate, Elwyn Ayers, "called him something that sounded suspiciously like 'Jew'" when they demanded another round of beer at the inn at which he worked. But Marcus makes no mistake about the prejudices of Hawes Caudwell, the dean of men at Winesburg. Their meeting, ostensibly to discuss Marcus's frequent changes of residence, constitutes the moral center of *Indignation*.

After congratulating Marcus on his stellar academic record, Caudwell asks why he identified his dad as a butcher and not a "kosher butcher." Why, under religious preference, did he not write "Jewish"? Why he has abandoned the three Jewish roommates to whom he was assigned? And why he has rejected "the long-standing Winesburg tradition" of compulsory attendance at chapel?

Insisting, unconvincingly, that he was not trying to hide the religion into which he was born, Marcus acknowledges that he does not believe in God, prayer or organized religion, and quotes at length from Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not A Christian*. With rising indignation, Marcus objects to the invasion of his privacy, to sermons from "professional moralists" about "rationalist blasphemies" and, most of all, to Caudwell's suggestion that "toleration" is something of a "problem" for him. When the dean blathers on about his personal and professional responsibilities to his students, Marcus can't stand any more. "Sir... I feel as though I'm going to vomit."

With the exception of Bertram Flusser, the homosexual, the Jewish students at Winesburg are supine or smarmy. Unlike Marcus, they have fully internalized the go-along-to-get-along butcher-shop lesson: It's nauseating to stick your hand up the ass of a chicken, grab hold of the viscera and pull them out - but it has to be done. That's how "Sonny" Cottler, son of an insurance man and an heiress to a Cleveland department store fortune, glib, cocky and morally indifferent, "with long dark lashes and a cleft in his chin," two letters in basketball and president of Interfraternity Council, has become "the perfectly exemplary external young man" at Winesburg.

Marcus defers to Cottler, "the natural born leader" - and is undone. But in *Indignation*, it seems, no choice is a good choice, no character, other than the Messners, has a good character. To be kosher, Roth suggests, is to drain your body of blood. To challenge is to court calamity. And to accommodate is to give away something essential about yourself. Marcus can't even return to "hard-working, coarse-grained, bribe-ridden, semi-xenophobic" Newark, which was itself disappearing in the 1950s.

Given "Our Folly, which art in Heaven," Roth concludes, with resignation and anger, Marcus should have gone out not with a whimper, but "like the Messner that he was, like the student of Bertrand Russell that he was," banging down his fist on the dean's desk and deleting no expletives.

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