The epidemiology of loss
By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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Philip Roth’s evocative new novel is a meditation on bereavement and the protagonist’s struggle to find meaning in life and death.

After 12-year-old Alan Michaels, “the best boy you could want,” wakes up with a stiff neck and a high fever and dies, his parents, who sent their two eldest sons to Europe to fight the Nazis, are inconsolable. Staring at Alan’s clothes, schoolbooks, sports equipment and tropical fish, Mr. Michaels tells Eugene “Bucky” Cantor, Alan’s gym teacher and playground director, “You do only the right thing, the right thing and the right thing and the right thing, going back all the way. You try to be a thoughtful person, a reasonable person, an accommodating person, and then this happens.”

What sense can he make of it, Mr. Michaels asks. “Where are the scales of justice... Why not me instead of him?” Bucky doesn’t have an answer. He can only shrug and nod his head.

Set in the stifling heat of Newark, New Jersey, and a children’s camp in the Pocono Mountains in the summer of 1944, “when the greatest menaces on earth were the war, the atomic bomb and polio,” Nemesis, Philip Roth’s evocative and emotional novel, is a meditation on personal loss and Cantor’s struggle to find meaning in life and death.

Raised by his grandparents after his mother dies in childbirth and his father goes to prison, Bucky learns to stand up for himself as a man and as a Jew. His battles will never end, Sam Cantor, an immigrant grocer from Polish Galicia, tells him: In the ceaseless skirmish called life, “when you have to pay the price, you pay it.”

Rejected by the army because of his poor eyesight, the aptly named Cantor takes this liturgy of responsibility to the playground, where he teaches his kids to be physically fit, play by the rules and never allow themselves “to be defamed as Jewish weaklings and sissies.” A thoroughly decent young man, he’s a sort of Franklin D. Roosevelt of Weequahic, the Jewish section of Newark, emphasizing that “fostering less fear — that’s your job and mine.”

Nonetheless, in Nemesis, Philip Roth, as is his wont, is committed to a brutal honesty about his characters. Through his narrator, Arnie Mesnikoff, himself a victim of polio, Roth declares that it was futile for Bucky to attempt to find a “reason” for the epidemic, preposterous for him to blame himself for failing to stop it and an exercise in “the hubris of fantastical, childish religious interpretation” for him to rage and rebel against a malevolent, omnipotent God for designing and delivering it.

Arnie’s critique is, at times, on target. Bucky does stand guilty of the sin of pride. He doesn’t know where his responsibility ends. And his goodness does prevent him from guiltlessly acknowledging his limits.

Coming at the end of the novel, however, Arnie’s assessment of Cantor’s character seems too harsh. Bucky’s argument with God doesn’t really have an impact on his behavior. It seems unkind — and unfair — for Arnie to dismiss his new friend as “articulate enough but with barely a trace of wit, who never in his life had
spoken satirically or with irony," and was "endowed with little force of mind." And Arnie's paean to Bucky as a "glorious figure" who really knew how to throw a javelin seems, well, patronizing.

Unsatisfying as philosophy, Nemesis comes alive as Roth re-creates the sights, smells and sensibilities of wartime Weequahic. As the boys play a pick-up game of baseball, he writes, the girls set up shop at the far edge of the playground, to jump rope and chant ("A my name is Alice/And my husband's name is Alphonse"), "improvising their way from A to Z and back again, alliterating the nouns at the end of the line, sometimes preposterously, each time around."

Roth can also be, by turns, tender and tough about young love in the 1940s. Marcia Steinberg, Bucky's girlfriend, writes a note to him "in perfect Palmer method cursive on a small sheet of pale green stationery," which reads "My man," repeated 218 times. But when, at long last, the couple is alone in the woods of the Poconos, talking about birds and birch-bark canoes, Marcia whispers beseechingly, "Oh, Bucky, must we really go on like this? Undress me, please. Undress me now."

And then again, as is his wont, Roth won't let you linger very long with nostalgia. As the epidemic takes hold, the Jews of Weequahic panic.

"Why is it attacking our beautiful Jewish children?" they ask. Some blame Italians who invade their neighborhoods to spit on the sidewalk. Others think it's Horace, the "retard," who frequents the playgrounds and doesn't know how to clean himself after he goes to the bathroom. They demand that the Board of Health, the milk inspectors, the street cleaners and the mayor do something -- anything.

Bucky Cantor, then, may have had it about right. His liturgy is both timely and timeless. Panic can arise in a moment. Scapegoating often follows in its wake. There's an alternative, however, even when the dangers are real: "The less fear the better. Fear unmans us. Fear degrades us."

*The writer is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*