No complaints
By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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A full-throated defense of Philip Roth's iconic novel

Published in 1969, *Portnoy's Complaint* was an instant sensation.

A satiric, often hilarious monologue consisting of the confessions of Alexander Portnoy, a “lust-ridden, mother addicted young Jewish bachelor” to Dr. Spielvogel, his psychoanalyst, Philip Roth’s novel sold nearly half a million hardback copies and three and a half million paperbacks in the US by 1975, has been translated into dozens of languages, and is often ranked among the 20th century’s best American novels.

Portnoy – and Roth – have been subjected to withering criticism as well. Many readers found the graphic treatment of sexuality (including an account of masturbation with a hunk of liver as a prop) disgusting. Others agreed with Hebrew University historian Gershom Scholem: “this is the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying.”

In Promiscuous, Bernard Avishai, a journalist, adjunct professor of business at Hebrew University, teacher of writing, and author of three books on Israel, provides an engaging and erudite reexamination of Portnoy’s Complaint.

“Readers like books about books,” Avishai acknowledges, “about as much as they like a cousin’s snapshots of Prague.”

He believes, however, that the novel “presents us with unfinished business”: explaining how it came to carry such a heavy emotional weight, the ethics and values it actually endorses, and “why it bugs us.”

Avishai is an unabashed, and at times over-the-top, admirer of (his friend) Philip Roth and Portnoy’s Complaint. The novel builds, he claims, like a Bruckner symphony.

“I dare say, and will be mocked for saying,” he indicates, that future generations will read Roth’s “great book” as a philosophical text, “a gloss on ‘emancipation,’” which “burrowed under bourgeois liberty,” reassessing its foundations “in an epistemological way,” comparable to what Samuel Beckett did with Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting For Godot.

“I shall be pitied for saying,” he adds, that Portnoy’s Complaint may well have been “the real culmination” of the civil rights movement in the 1960s in the US, an “awakening” to the most profound implications of liberalism: that ethical decisions are inherently subjective, limited by “the senses, by lust, by experience, by vanity and trauma, time and place,” and therefore “the principle of tolerance must be absolute.”
Avishai's full-throated defense of Portnoy's Complaint against all critics rests on the entirely relevant but not always dispositive observation that Alexander Portnoy should not be equated with Philip Roth. Noting that feminists have “found something repellent in every punctuation mark,” he protests, unpersuasively, that male writers inevitably adopt the vantage point of male sexuality and then asserts, without elaboration, that young Portnoy does not “objectify women until he has objectified himself; that original sin means ubiquitous desire; that misanthropy is not misogyny, except by implication,” and that “a great many women read the novel with the same sense of liberation that men did.”

Avishai uses the same approach, with mixed success, to fend off the charge that Portnoy’s Complaint aids and comforts anti-Semites. He admits that Alexander’s response to Naomi’s suggestion that he is a self-hating Jew – “maybe that’s the best kind” – was offensive to many Jews.

Nonetheless, he suggests, the response was a shot across the bow of Zionism.

Made at a time in which the “saga of suffering Jews” began to seem “pathetic” and some Jews were “distancing themselves from the sacred,” it reestablished the sense of irony, skepticism and humanism that made space for and legitimized Jewish life in the Diaspora.

Roth’s real target, Avishai insists, was bourgeois constraint, for which American Jews had become “something like the poster children.” He even claims that by exposing a Jew “in all his naked hunger and repressed aggression,” Portnoy’s Complaint “gave us the just the right stand-in for, of all people, an American Everyman.”

According to Avishai, Roth was actually mocking Portnoy for “flying in the face of his own normalizing passion” and becoming “an object of his own spite.”

And, for all its celebration of cockiness, “every page of Portnoy’s Complaint” also provides evidence of Alexander’s deep and abiding affection for his mother, father, and Hannah, his sister (who “shed her tears for six million,” Alexander tells Dr. Spielvogel, “while I shed mine only for myself. Or so I think.”) Roth’s power as a writer, Avishai concludes, and here, it seems to me, he is spot-on, is in the “off-handed, deeply uncynical ways” in which he has implied that family ties and the myriad occasions in which “our loves come into contradiction” constitute “the meaning of our lives.” These themes dominate Patrimony, of course, and Roth’s master works, American Pastoral and The Human Stain.

They are there as well, in Portnoy’s Complaint.

This fine and flawed novel does, indeed, merit another look even though and maybe because, as Avishai reminds us, what seemed daring to a twenty-something in 1969 may well seem touching when he is 60.

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