

# Masterpiece of language depicts an author's life

By Scott Kleager

*The Ghost Writer*, a new novel by Philip Roth, may look as though it's a small book and consequently quick reading, but in content it's giant-sized. Due to the introspective nature of the narrative, the novel, complete with all the fears that accompany looking for oneself, seems existential.

## book review

Nathan, the narrator and main character, acts as though he's constantly on trial with himself; always fearing that his prosecution is getting the best of his defense. The question he asks himself is: what will happen to me if I become a great writer? The answer one gets from the novel is appropriately paranoid in that it concludes that literary immensity walks hand-in-hand with alienation from other human beings. Roth leads us to this conclusion in a refreshing and innovative manner.

Nathan is a young short story writer, published in various prestigious literary magazines, and a new face with great promise.

He, like all writers, has an idol, in this case a short story author by the name of E. I. Lonoff. Nathan, we are told, has previously requested an audience with his idol, complete with all his published stories, and to his surprise an invitation has been extended. The entire novel takes place in less than 24 hours and in only the setting of E. I. Lonoff's home. So, by the time he finally meets the "great writer" he thinks to himself, "... I should have been surprised to find that I wasn't down on the hooked rug, supplicating at his feet."

Lonoff is what Nathan desperately wants to be someday and it's precisely this reverence that causes some heavy soul-searching.

FOR, AS IS soon found out, all things are not exactly as Nathan assumes them to be in the life of the man who represents his future. In fact Lonoff's relationships with

people, both loved and unloved, are on the brink of being miserable. It seems that what people expect from the average human being cannot be expected from the great writer, causing bad feelings and frustrating attempts to live normally which become more impossible with each try.

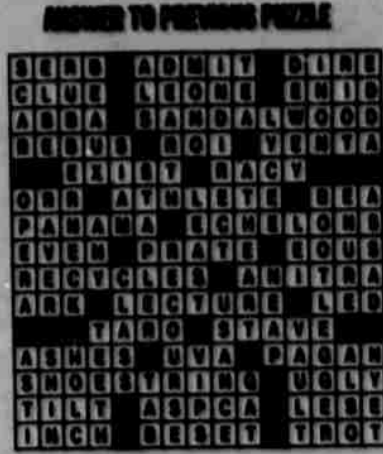
This somewhat shocking discovery comes to Nathan at a time when his parents are outraged at him for writing a certain, somewhat too-honest, story about their family. Just when he needs the positive support of another writer's untroubled life, Nathan finds Lonoff's life in much worse condition than his own. This is just one aspect of the book which is worth analyzing.

Stylistically the novel is a masterpiece in gutsy alterations of the language. For example, his distinctive use of capitalization, "... friends must stay away until four—Three is his religion of art, my younger successor, rejecting life." Or, "... in that moment of capitulation that I thought, But of course last night is not the first time..." It's a good thing he doesn't have writing professors for editors.

ROTH, CONSISTANT with all his works, is again the master of human description. Of all the authors reviewed in this column, Philip Roth is by far the best pure writer. In descriptive narration he appears to have spent the most time working on his paragraphs and should be commended on the beautiful results.

For instance, this section describing one of Lonoff's fictitious characters, "... The tiniest impulse toward amplitude or self-surrender, let alone intrigue or adventure, peremptorily extinguished by the ruling triumvirate of Sanity, Responsibility, and Self-Respect, assisted handily by their devoted underlings: the timetable, the rain-storm, the headache, the busy signal, the traffic jam, and most loyal of all, the last minute doubt. Roth's choice of words throughout the novel is exquisite.

If you are willing to read a novel and find it so well-written and meaningful that you're forced to read it again, and if you appreciate a commanding use of the English language and respect existentialism as a precise method of interpreting reality, then read *The Ghost Writer*.



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