

# books

*Inside: Nabokov's Merciless Short Stories  
Travelers' Reports From China*

**"THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL,"** by Philip Roth (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 382 pp., \$8.95).

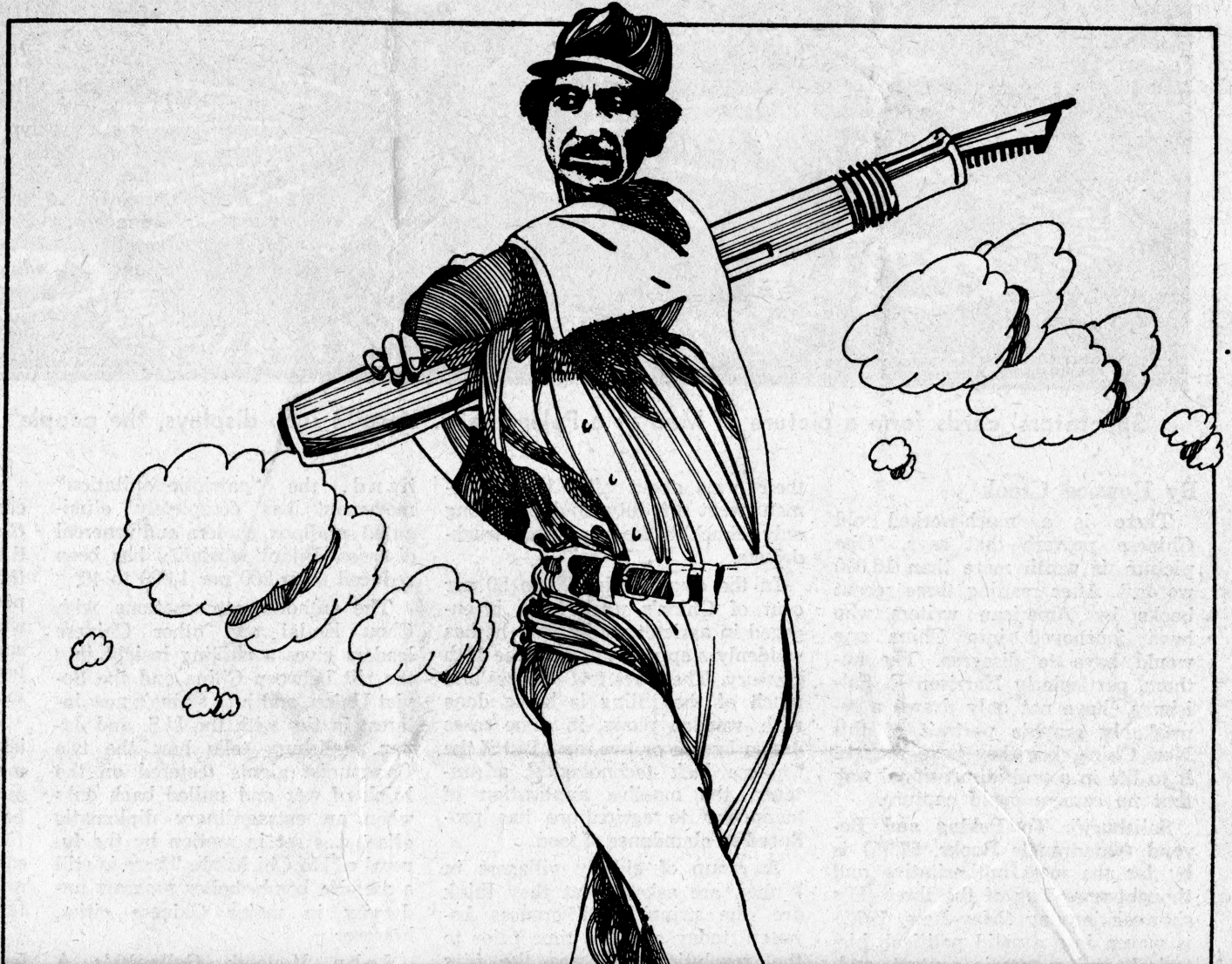
A long, long time ago, when Boston was Brave and St. Louis Brown, when the Yankees won pennants with the inevitability of the harvest, when you knew that Halloween was near because the Brooklyn Dodgers had lost the World Series again, I used to wander the aisles of an Upper West Side branch library, looking for books about the most important thing in the world: baseball.

Every once in a while a title would leap off the shelf: "Giants in the Earth"; "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court"; "Tiger at the Gates." Alas, as with so much else about the world of grown-ups, they were not what they promised. Books about baseball were all right for the segregated clutter of "Young Readers" shelves; baseball was a fit subject for the works of John R. Tunis ("Keystone Combination," "All-American") and Duane Decker (The "Blue Sox" sagas, e.g., "Good Field, No Hit," "The Catcher From Double-A"), but Real Literature, it seemed, was too serious a business to chronicle a game of children and working men.

How foolish, how blind this European-academic snobbism; what a perfect confirmation of anti-intellectualism. ("Of course those four-eyed fairies don't write about baseball! Y'evah seen one of 'em try an' catch a fly? Haw! haw! haw!") And what a lost opportunity. If great American novels seek to tap the deepest sources of our joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, dreams betrayed and dreams

## **Roth Socks One Over the Literary Fence**

By Jeff Greenfield

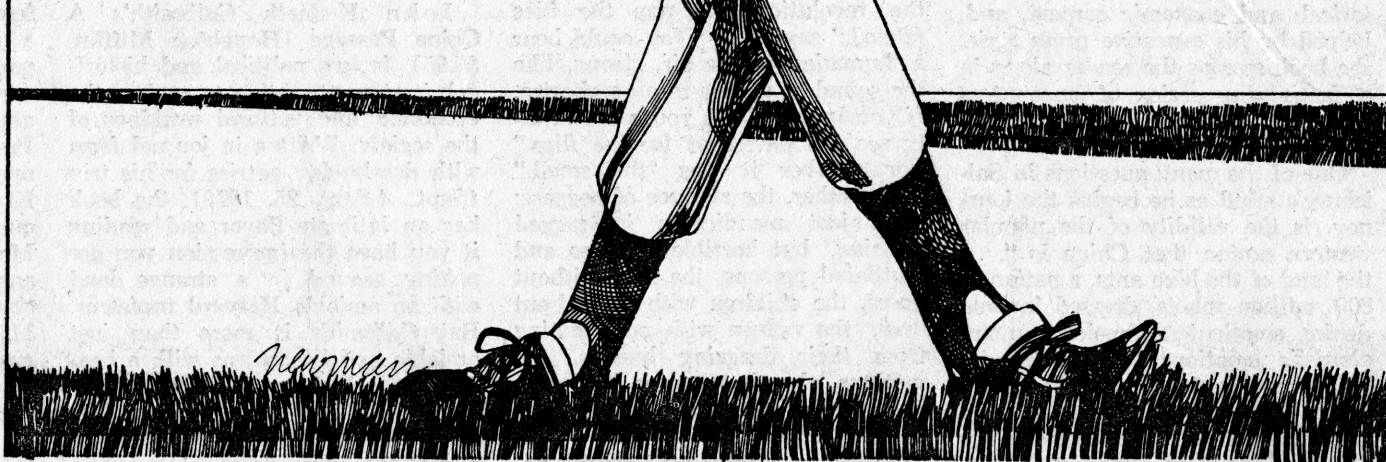


...dreams, betrayed and dreams come true, if they would reach beyond reality to myth and legend, what can we offer a writer that is richer than the national pastime itself? Since V-J Day, only two events have sent New Yorkers into the streets for spontaneous revelry and celebration: Brooklyn's first World Series victory in 1955, and the Mets' conquest of baseball in 1969. Enterprises which can so move this stolid metropolis surely deserve the respect and attention of art. With rare exceptions (Malamud's "The Natural," Mark Harris' "The Southpaw"), it has not happened.

Now Philip Roth seeks to rectify the omission with one sultan's swat. In "The Great American Novel," the 1959 Rookie of the Year in the Literary League, now a grizzled veteran of 14 seasons, uses the baseball diamond to cut a groove through a quarter-century of American life, a half-century of literary pretension, and a hundred pounds of baloney. Like hundreds of thousands of super-bright Jewish children, Roth knows that his intellectual successes cannot make up for what he really wanted to be: a gentile Adonis with a .370 batting average. Roth told the world in "Portnoy's Complaint" that a 98 on a Regents test does not compensate

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*Jeff Greenfield, author of "No Peace, No Place," a look back at the 1950s, spent much of that decade hanging out in the upper deck of Yankee Stadium.*



for not having a polymorphous playmate. Now he admits in "The Great American Novel" that greatness is a three-hit shutout, not a 4.0 college transcript. We invest our sports heroes with the stuff of which dreams are made—and, more than anything else, this novel is a distorted, marvelously funny, acerbic nightmare-dream of American life.

In a home for the aged in Valhalla (which is New York, but Roth juggles symbols the way W. C. Fields used to play with cigar boxes), a 90-year-old ex-sportswriter named Word Smith battles a fatal sickness of body and mind as he works to set down the forgotten, suppressed history of the Patriot League, which flourished in the '20s and '30s, staggered through World War II, and died at the hands of a fiendish con-

spiracy so pervasive that the cities which housed the league changed their names to avoid disgrace (which is why, of course, you never heard of Tri-City, Terra Incognita, Kakoola, Port Ruppert, and the other towns of the Patriot League, much less teams like the Reapers, the Mundys, the Rustlers, the Butchers).

It was a great league, governed by General Oakhart, who believed so deeply in Rules and Regulations that "If the distance between the bases were to be shortened by as little as one inch, you just might as well change the name of the game"; peopled by such as Luke Gofannon, of the 63 home runs in 1928, and Gil Gamesh, a rookie pitcher so brilliant as to stand beyond good, evil and umpires.

With the coming of the Second

World War, and with the growing greed of owners unsteeped in the traditions and values of the Patriot League, strange things began to happen. Owners sold off their great players for cold cash, leaving the fans of Port Ruppert as betrayed as those of Brooklyn when their Dodgers hitched up the wagons and went west. The Stadium itself at Port Ruppert was turned into a barracks for soldiers in transit, forcing the Mundys to play every game on the road, wanderers without surcease. Only later do we learn that these heartbreaks are not accidental; they stem from a Moscow-based attempt to undermine our way of life through the soft underbelly of our hopes and fears ("when baseball goes, you can kiss America goodbye . . . once the Communists

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# Roth Socks One Over the Fence

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have made a joke of the majors, the rest will fall like so many dominos").

To say that "The Great American Novel" is about baseball, of course, is about as helpful as telling you that "Catch-22" is about bomber pilots in World War II. For one thing, the comic richness that has been Roth's most consistent asset is working overtime here. He has peopled his league with the most astonishing assortment of rogues, degenerates, incompetents, cowards, heroes, spies, patriots and cripples imaginable. His 1943 Ruppert Mundys, certainly the worst team ever to play baseball (and borrowed from the St. Louis Browns of World War II and postwar vintage), include a 14-year-old rookie who wants nothing more than a nickname (and who is nicknamed "Nickname"), a one-armed outfielder a la Pete Gray, a pitcher so sore-armed that his whimpers of pain silence a stadium out of pity and terror, the son of the notorious "Spit" Baal, who threw pitches coated with every conceivable human excretion, and Manager Ulysses Fair-smith, whose campaign to bring baseball to every corner of the world ends in unimaginable barbarism in Africa.

There is also, for good measure, John Kennedy's assassination, the HUAC hearings into Hollywood politics, the conflict between Jewish immigrants and their sons ("If de goyim say bunt,

let dem bunt!" says Green-back owner Ellis to his son Ike. "For a Jewish pois'n dis is de greatest country dat ever was . . ." "Sure it is, Dad," says the genius child. "As long as he plays the game their way"), the conflict between the old WASP New England America and the new wild West money-hungry America . . . oh, the hell with it. Roth has compressed what happened to our country into what happened to the Patriot League, and it works most of the time.

Finally, Roth has struck a blow for every literature student bored to death by the pomposity of teachers, graduate students, and Modern Language Association dissertations. There is at work here not just a story of another time and a defunct baseball league, but Word Smith's efforts to write "the great American novel." "Call me Smitty," the book begins with a tip of the cap to Melville, and Smitty consciously points out the way this book fits in with such candidates for GAN as "Moby Dick," "Huckleberry Finn" and "The Scarlet Letter."

Roth has chucked in enough symbols to keep a flock of graduate students gainlessly employed for years. Virtually every member of the Ruppert Mundys bears the name of a god: Ptah, Baal, Rama, Demeter, Pollux, Kronos, and of course Roland Agni. There are Faustian bargains, allusions (or is it illusions?) to T. S. Eliot, and playful use of the

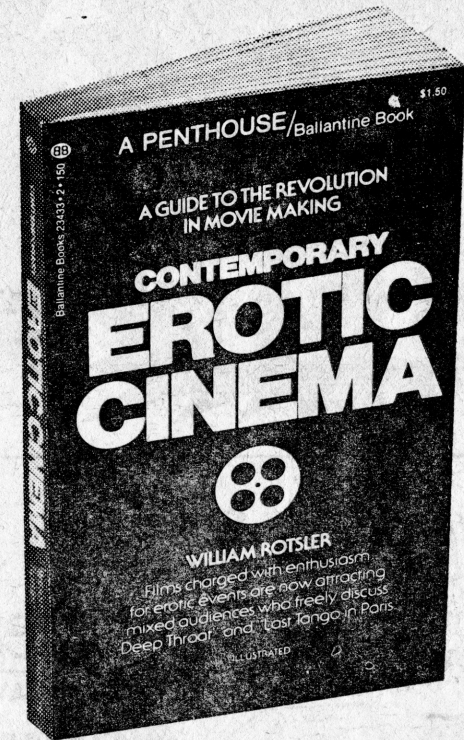
classic American myths: the rootless wanderers, living on the road, trying to find a home that no longer exists.

But the last laugh is with Roth and those of us who used to read the New York Post sports pages when homework was due. Lionel Trilling himself would not recognize the parody of Jimmy Cannon's "Nobody Asked Me, But . . ." columns thrown into a conversation between our narrator and Hemingway, and Edmund Wilson might not have recognized "Ike Ellis" as a bow to the Post's sports editor, Ike Gellis. "Take that, you bores," Roth seems to be saying. "You want symbols, baby, I'll give you symbols. You want mythic legend, all right, fellah, you'll be digging through these till you're sick to your *kishkes*."

What hath Roth wrought? A very funny book. A disjointed book, packed full if carelessly. A massive send-up of literary scholarship. Mostly, it is a work filled with great affection for a pastime which may have seen its best days, and filled with great anger at the people who have done this to baseball and to our country.

Roth has stared long and hard at our national myths—those that surround the ball field, the battlefield, our politics and academies. And from these games of Roth has come a burlesque nightmare that laughs its way through a hundred shattered dreams of our recent past. A White Owl wallop.

## Today's great movie X-plosion! (An Insider's up-to-the-minute report)



*Last Tango in Paris . . . Deep Throat . . .* and now the book that brings you the whole fascinating *inside* story of contemporary erotic films. William Rotsler, writer-producer-director of 26 erotic features, takes you behind the cameras to illuminate every aspect of sex films: how they're made and why their quality will be improving . . . what the actors and actresses say about their work . . . ratings of the films . . . and much, much more. A must for everyone really into the current movie scene!

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