

THE ROTH & BAILEY SHOW

Blake Bailey. *PHILIP ROTH: the biography*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2021.

Blake Bailey. *The Splendid Things We Planned: A Family Portrait*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014 (paper).

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BLAKE BAILEY'S FIRST biography (of Richard Yates) was titled *A Tragic Honesty*, and it appeared in 2003. His new biography of Philip Roth (1933-2018), published in 2021, is, or has become, certainly tragic, though whether it's honest or not is still up in the air, questioned by many. Yates and Roth are somewhat alpha and omega writers—as men, in success with women, and in artistic and personal legacy. I met, or at least stood next to him—Yates, that is—in 1976, when he was chatting with Kurt Vonnegut at a party held at the Strand Bookstore in New York City. A very pretty young woman wanted to interview me, she said, but I handed her off instead to a couple of famous writers, Yates and Vonnegut. (“You should interview these two fellows, not me.”) They seemed amused at my largesse, presenting them with this eager female, not knowing who I was, and—in the spirit of Bailey's biographies—if I would rate as anyone worth their consideration.

That was back in the mid-Seventies. Other than a brief mention in *The New Yorker*, only I, it appears, have written (in *Politics and the American Language*, 2020) about that particular event at length, unique as it was. Only authors and people in publishing were in attendance, over a hundred souls, with a handful of other celebrity-types, a guild meeting of sorts.

Yates was born in 1926 and his literary career, over time, was a decided downer. His death, in 1992, shortly after teaching in Alabama, was depressing in the extreme. Of course, he was not alone in this turn of fate, especially in his generation, a writer who ascended, and then descended, one of a long list of writers who had ironic, ignominious deaths. They are a dime-a-dozen, unfortunately, writers who were recognized at least once, only to be dropped by the organs of influence. Bailey's third biography, following *Cheever* (2009), was of Charles Jackson (1903-1968), famous for *The Lost Weekend*, and then enduring a slow dissolving of literary notice over time, till his life was rescued posthumously by Bailey in 2013. For all I know, I may have walked by St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village (where I was often wandering about in September of 1968, while attending Colum-

bia University) when Jackson died there, “ruled” a suicide. He was living at the time at the Hotel Chelsea.

This yen in America for the amusement ride on the great incline of success to the downward plunge of anonymity is a staple of the culture, though mainly reserved for authors who have reached, at one time, at least, a lofty pinnacle. The less successful, or marginally successful, just come and go. I recall a sad notice of Seymour Krim’s suicide in 1989. Another writer, he too, a suicide, but one much more famous, Richard Brautigan, though, in recent years, unfortunately on a nonstop slide to nowhere, is another example. I spoke with Brautigan at a subdued student party in 1983 after he gave a reading at Notre Dame. That may well have been the last reading he ever gave. He shot himself in the head in 1984. Our conversation had begun lugubriously and did not lighten up as it went on. He was disconsolate that he wasn’t being taken seriously. I tried to cheer him up by claiming notoriety was a type of seriousness, but that didn’t appease him. Both Krim and Brautigan died in the 1980s, and it is easy to argue that decade was the last one that could be considered literary, before the aural-oral-visual world took over for what passes for the arts. And, nowadays, some writers of accomplishment are not noticed at all—by the larger literary community, that is.

Frances Sherwood (1940-2021) died early this year here in South Bend and no obituary appeared anywhere other than an article (which served as a local notice, though no formal obit ran) in the *South Bend Tribune*, our once-native-owned paper, now part of the Gannett chain, and, now, is locked behind a pay wall. Mid-list writers of yore (’70s, ’80s, creeping into the ’90s) have become no-list writers. Frances didn’t hunger for the posthumous limelight, so her neglect might seem a sour victory, if she had learned of it. She hadn’t published a novel since 2006, though her first novel, *Vindication*, published by WW Norton in 1993, was a national hit.

Speaking of Norton, they (collectively) are (or were; now it is Skyhorse) the publishers of Bailey’s effort on behalf of Philip Roth. It reads, more or less, as dictation, a marathon of man-talk. It “ends” as most bios do, at a deathbed—Roth’s. Bailey lists the folk who assembled there before Roth became a corpse, former lovers, other luminaries, most all named, except for his biographer: Bailey, too, visited him at his hospital bedside, but that is not mentioned. Roth had what these days is called an “assisted death.” As Bailey puts it, “he [Roth] was ready to receive terminal sedation....” There follows an epilogue, which appears to be written by Bailey alone, which begins: “Roth’s impressive *New York Times* obituary was above the fold on the front page, and he got even bigger star treatment in France...” Bailey never

actually detaches himself, or gains whatever necessary distance most biographers achieve with their subjects—all of Bailey's previous subjects were dead from the get-go—and cannot stop himself from heaping praise on Roth. The epilogue runs an unlucky thirteen pages.

Bailey certainly became a pariah of sorts after the early joyous publication lead-up of *Roth*. His second biography, the subject John Cheever (born in 1912), was the only one, it appears, that Roth read previous to his bonding with Bailey. Roth should have dipped into the Yates bio, or the Jackson, but, I fear, "Phil" may have shied away from examining losers, and not indulged in mid- and late-life disaster tales. His dictation to Bailey, with the exception of his family's stories, is in the main only concerned with the successful. (The copyright for the volume is in both Bailey's name and the Estate of Philip Roth, a circumstance I've never come upon; for good or ill they are twinned.) Cheever, of course, made the successful cut and caught Roth's attention. (Perhaps not so curiously, the Cheever bio's early pages—and middle and later—spend a lot of sentences on masturbation, Cheever's own and with a handy buddy, doubtless a shared interest of the author of *Portnoy's Complaint*.)



ROTH'S ENTIRE BIOGRAPHY covers his sex life (ditto *Cheever*), from puberty to burial, and eschews discussion of the non-famous throughout. Bailey is partial to this sort of snubbing. On page 545, he writes, "In 1998 an obscure writer named Richard Elman...would admit in his book *Namedropping* that he once met a 'certain well-known screen actress' who, to his surprise had agreed to go home with him and have wild, all-night sex. 'Oh, come on,' she said....'I'd recognize you anywhere, Phil Roth.'" The incident and telling is much funnier in Elman's book, one published posthumously. Elman and I were friends for three decades. Bailey quotes Roth saying, "The idea of a doppelganger leading a life 'that has nothing to do with your life' moved Roth to conceive of the other 'Philip Roth' in *Shylock*...." As Elman's widow remarked to me, "Is Richard laughing his 'obscure writer's' head off or what?" Richard published twenty-five books, novels, memoirs, political nonfiction, the sort of writer who is obscure only to arrivistes like Bailey. Elman was born in 1934 and, unlike Roth (1933), his early fiction and nonfiction concerned dour subjects, not the candy-land topics the young Roth indulged in. They resembled each other physically, but their economic lives certainly, and substantially, diverged. Early on, as Laura Marsh in *The New Republic* took note of, "[Roth] had tried and failed

to write ‘a powerful moral document’ about an American Jew who travels to Germany to kill a Nazi in revenge. He soon realized that his ambitions were misplaced....” Clearly, Richard Elman stuck too long to moral documents. Or, you could say, apropos the Bailey bio, his ambitions were misplaced.

Roth should have perused another volume by a previously obscure author, his future biographer’s own memoir, *The Splendid Things We Planned: A Family Portrait*. This 2014 volume may have given Roth the willies. It did me, after a fashion. It’s about Bailey’s family, primarily his fairly crazy brother, though the upshot of the tale seems to prove Bailey is equally out of his mind, or, at least, a guy with problems, though one saddled with more practical ambition, which saved him, until his intersection with PR.

But, for a moment, back to Roth. He was gifted, blessed, damned, however you look at it, with one thing that often propels a young author onto a fruitful and successful literary career. He won a national prize with his first book of fiction, a hodgepodge actually, consisting of a long story, a novella of sorts, and a handful of other shorter stories. As a caption under a photo of Roth puts it, “the youngest-ever winner at age twenty-six” of the National Book Awards (1960). Love that ever, the gushing redundancy. The photo shows Roth with Robert Lowell and Richard Ellman (the two-L Ellman, the Joyce scholar, who my friend Richard Elman, one L, was most often confused with, though not by starlets apparently), winners of the poetry and nonfiction categories. Three white guys (big surprise). Oddly, they all look about the same age, though both Lowell and Ellman are wearing glasses, which make them seem more, ah, advanced. Of course, neither Lowell or Ellman were first-time-ever authors like Roth.

Roth is marked generationally, insofar as a lot of the Korean war cohort, once they reached their majority, had looked and dressed like adults. Still organization men, so to speak. Suits, white shirts, ties, hats, etc. The larger cultural shift (the Sixties!) hadn’t yet occurred. Sartorially, Roth didn’t change much over the decades to come. His facial hair altered over time, mainly because of ethnically taunting reasons—Roth wanting to look more Jewish and hence doing the taunting, in most cases. Complicated and I suppose perverse. When I, too, was 26, I published a first book that drew the attention of a prestigious prize dispenser (the NBA, I assumed) at the time, 1972-73. Murray Kempton, who was one of the contemporary affairs judges, regaled me with this account a few years later at a dinner—we shared a mutual friend who was hosting us. When Kempton brought up my Harrisburg book, which had received a good bit of notice and praise, one female judge kept saying, loudly and persistently, to the committee, “Who’s he? Who’s he?!” I didn’t get a nomination, much less the prize. I’ve never

bothered to track down who the lady was.

Roth did not have a “Who’s he?” problem. His career, such as it was at the time, had been noticed and followed. “Be prepared” could have been the young Roth’s motto. Brendan Gill, one of the judges when Roth won, had been introduced to Roth by an ex-girlfriend (Gill’s, according to Bailey) and they had gone out for drinks and dinner in the late ’50s. Another of the judges that year, William Peden, had reviewed Roth’s collection for the *NY Times Book Review*. That’s how it often goes then and now. Before the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth had been making important literary friends, winning grants and getting around. A map would have been helpful for his early travels, apart from the triangle of New Jersey, Chicago and New York City. Much of the Roth bio, to borrow my friend’s title, is a feast of name dropping. Anyone connected to the literary world the last half-century will be stumbling over people they know or knew, if they got around, or spent much time in NYC, or were assigned to the literary plantations that were created at well-known universities across the land, the much-maligned writing programs.

Roth never had children. He did have, or caused, a number of abortions. A sham abortion prompted his first marriage, a disaster all around, though it provided Roth with the dreaded pearl in the slime—material for his fiction. That entailed Maggie, easily pegged as the ill-fated romance that Roth engaged in, post-Army, when he was in Chicago, studying (in a “doctoral program”) and teaching in its namesake university. He knew her as a waitress and, as Bailey (via Roth) relates: “...he stopped her on the street and insisted he knew all about her...”. Bailey supplies, “...Roth was simply determined to pick up a pretty shiksa.” He closes that paragraph with the ominous (Dum Dee Dum Dum), “...and so it began.”

Yes, indeed. Roth’s Maggie was a handful. It’s hard to explain her allure, and Bailey certainly doesn’t convey it—he makes much over a description of her vagina penned by Roth, an unfetching thatch, gateway to discolored tissue, as described, and this bit has become a, say, bone of contention in many a review of Bailey’s tell-all tome, as told by Phil. Here’s a typical instance of such dictation: “You know what Chekhov said when someone said to him, ‘This too shall pass’? Roth asked his biographer. ‘Nothing passes.’ Put that in the fucking book.” Obviously, Bailey did, and there are many such examples of Bailey’s note-taking. One comes discussing *My Life as a Man*, when Maggie’s physical characteristics are gone over. Bailey adds, “Asked if this was an aspect [withered and discolored] of the real Maggie, Roth wanly nodded....” Asked by Bailey, ever curious, that is.

Roth would be cast as a control freak by any member of a later genera-

tion, equipped with one college course of psychology. But allure Maggie must have had for Roth. It may have been some sort of slumming, Stephen-Crane version, or American version, since the impulse pops up in literatures around the world. Crane gets one mention in the book, when Roth puts on his teacher's hat and tries to convey the merits of *The Red Badge of Courage* to Maggie's growing son from an earlier marriage. Better Roth had chosen *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, which goes unmentioned. Crane, shall we say, missed participating in the Civil War, but he may have known something first-hand about women, nonetheless.

Much has been made of the synergy of author and subject, but most folk dealing with the Roth/Bailey contretemps as it played out post-publication, it appears, haven't read Bailey's memoir. It is a trip, written over an 11-year period and published after Bailey's first three biographies, on the heels of the success of the Cheever book. I can't help but wonder if Roth ever read it. He may have dispatched Bailey if he had. Bailey's life is, as told, more scrambled than even Roth's own Maggie's, which was baroque in a lumpen sort of way, whereas Bailey's development always hung onto the edges of the almost wealthy. In style and manner, if not always cash in the pocket. Bailey's father was/is a successful attorney. It was Bailey's mother, after the divorce, who reveled in a continuous downwardly bohemian trajectory. The irony, one of many, of Roth's selection of Bailey as his authorized biographer, is that Roth picked someone not entirely unfamiliar with the life led by his catastrophic first wife. Wild, youthful impulses and sordid biographies beleaguered both.

"Roth, Margaret" (as she first appears in the bio index), being a woman, had a harder time with all this than Bailey (the biographer), who was born nearly three decades later in 1963 (the year I graduated from high school). Though guys ruled during both their growing ups. They both shared a weird mixture of lower- and upper-class behaviors and milieus. Maggie didn't want for ambition. Bailey, too, was bit by that bug, and that yep put him on a different path than his crazier brother, who was only certain of his superiority, especially as a young man. Ambition is always a burden, since it requires you to do something, but a sense of innate superiority can leave you more feckless, not willing to engage. Here is, early on, Bailey trying to capture some defining essence between himself and his brother: "As a baby I rarely cried or fussed, which delighted my mother, who'd kiss the little button between my legs and watch me chortle and kick. But I think she actually preferred my brother: in my normalcy I was a bit insipid; Scott had a peculiar kind of gravitas." What was his mother kissing? I wondered, reading on. Bailey usually writes clearly, but here I'm left to surmise. Do all

mothers have a genital fixation? Some small percentage, doubtless. Other sexually charged conduct by his mother, as Bailey describes over the memoir's length, shows her a woman of little inhibition.

Bailey, too, lacks boundaries, it is clear from the memoir, though he does know where the lines are drawn and, at times, he observes them. His brother Scott not so much, either knowing or observing. Bailey's Cheever bio is strictly chronological (all chapters are dates), though, as usual, there are a few pages of something arresting to begin with. This tendency follows through in all his bios I've read, from the Yates on. But Cheever just gets under way after the prologue, which isn't called a Prologue, with Cheever and an equally young buddy whacking each other off, an augury of things to come, so to speak. In the *Roth*, Bailey gets right down to it, impatient to get to the much-deplored vagina, assumed to be Maggie's, which many female commentators have already decried.

But, again, if Roth, the man, not the title, had bothered to read Bailey's memoir, none of this would surprise. One thing that is impossible not to think (and there are many things) is how hard a worker Roth was, at least when it came to his own writing, especially his attempts at setting the record straight. He hammered out at least two book-length corrections that went unpublished, one countering the Claire Bloom memoir. Bloom, the famous actress, was Roth's second troublesome wife, though they lived together for over a decade before actually marrying. The second, unpublished, memoir spelled out flaws in earlier bio attempts by discarded authors and were handed over to Bailey, along with everything else, it seems, he could possibly want, by way of info and documentation. And he was given all this print, plus endless interviews or, as they more closely mimic, endless guy "locker room" talk about the gals in his life. It may have been fated that Bailey's book could not escape the odor of as-told-to. There's not that much space between author and authorized. There was planetary space between Roth's two wives, though, except for Roth's capacity for irritation.

Dealing with the dead is both easier and harder, the usual paradox for nonfiction writers. All that research! A living author can just tell you. And Roth does and does. It's hard to locate just when Roth decided his books would be his progeny and Bailey doesn't wrestle with the question, or bring it up, but I have encountered almost no writers who have been so punctilious and protective of their own work and reputations as Roth. This is, as the listener to *Portnoy* and his complaints might term it, transference—the actions of an overprotective father. Roth may have realized this, or not. Children would have interfered with his work. Claire Bloom's teenager was one big headache. Maggie's two kids took some time away from him and

after her early death he shuffled them off without too much trouble. I knew a number of women writers when I lived on the East Coast and my handful of the most celebrated never had children. I wondered back then, and now, if there was a connection. There are counter-examples, prolific and praised women writers with children, but their names don't go tripping off my tongue, lemmings into the sea, as the childless ones do.

It's probably neither here nor there. But Roth is the most extreme example of a writer trying to protect his legacy as one is likely to encounter, certainly of the twentieth-century variety. It is another strange circumstance that all the tsuris Roth was beset by came, or was the result of, his idyllic childhood. His early years, through high school, paralleled World War II, followed by the creation of Israel, and all that trouble seemed not to trouble his life one iota, or even the community's life, as told. WWII gets five citations in the Index. On December 7, 1941, Roth, 8, was playing, as usual. Bailey makes the war years run by in a page or two, life bathed in a bucolic haze of nostalgia, though 57 former students of Roth's highschool, Weequahic High, were eventually killed in the war. But not Philip. Little Philip collected foil, making a ball big enough to drop off at school, put up with other very minor depredations, ensconced in that somewhat magical generation, too young for WWII, and never being shipped off to Korea, Roth joining up too late to be cannon fodder. Bailey writes: "When asked in later years what his son was really like as a kid, Herman Roth accurately replied, 'Philip was an all-American boy who loved baseball.'"

Roth's back problems, the cross he carried as an adult, a real *Via Dolorosa*, came about during his truncated service in the army. Doing KP. It's claimed that a fellow soldier let go of one of the huge pots he and Roth were carrying, causing Roth lifelong pain and problems, when Roth wrenched his spine trying to right it. Unfortunate all around. Bailey's crazier brother spent two years in the Marines, seemingly doing well enough, and was also discharged earlier than expected, and, like Roth, honorably—no public battles for him, just private ones. Mainly in Japan. He was a DJ for the military. (Good Morning Okinawa!) This was in 1992, during a temporary lull in the forever war. Bailey's brother suffered from bad acne in late teenagehood, ending his golden-boy period. There is no mention of whether any actual medical intervention happened when all that began. Bailey's father could certainly have afforded it, but any such treatment goes unmentioned, though little else goes unmentioned.

Roth's back problems are detailed throughout the biography, and the various interventions that took place over time; "back pain" gets a lot of space in the index. There isn't much musing in either account by Bailey

on the question of whether or not people get the afflictions they deserve. A number of writers around Roth's age made careers out of the notion of illness as metaphor. But what moves Bailey the most, it seems, is chronology, one thing after another, since that is his biographical method. All his subjects had debilitating flaws and rather than seeing them as motivators, Bailey renders them more as general hindrances. Yates had his drinking (all Bailey's subjects, save Roth, were aspiring drunks); Cheever, his hardly repressed homosexuality, which flourished in his later years; Jackson's double-barreled queerness and alcoholism; and Roth's back pain and satyriasis. Such traits are usually not considered by Bailey virtues, but vices. The authors whose lives have been chronicled by Bailey were not without virtues, but, like his own family's history, Bailey knows the vices make better copy. It's partly the old public/private split. Why write a biography if you don't cover the unseen, the unknown, about the author, the private, or what used to pass for private? If you look into all of Bailey's biographies you will note his close focus on the subject, on erogenous zones, and the very light touch on the social, political, economic history of the world at large. No David McCullough, he. And, though Cheever, Jackson, and Roth were big travelers, Bailey seems not to have been.

That is, doubtless, because Bailey isn't a historian, a worldly commentator, but a biographer. Different strokes for different folks. The ages of his subjects account for some, most, of that. I, for one, overlap with all of them. I was born in 1945, so these are twentieth-century figures, some limping into the twenty-first. And, I suppose, an author such as Bailey seeks out subjects with whom he shares some affinities. Evidently, he had to woo Susan Cheever to get access to her father's life. The deal with Roth seemed even easier to bring off. Bailey, given his family's dynamics, shared a number of predilections that made for a good match. Yates, poor Yates, also had a daughter Bailey won over. Jackson's wraith was probably easier to corral.

Bailey's current (and only, it appears) wife was the slightly older sister of one of his former students when he taught at an all-girls middle school of sorts, a hothouse, evidently, of pubescent babes. They met when she was visiting her sister, Bailey's student. She "rollerbladed" into his life. The wife-to-be was a sophomore in college. There is a significant age difference, but not one to rival the age span found in Roth's collection of inamoratas.

Tawdry it is, but if one reads Bailey's biographies, he's well versed in the tawdry. As they say, it sells. I have read all sorts of biographies. Check out Kitty Kelley's oeuvre if one wants even more tawdry. Again, if biographies are to supply the unknown, the dark side of lives, private life, so to speak, takes the lead. Bailey definitely favors the sexual underbelly and, given his

own growing up, the milieu of his mother more than his father, it is not surprising. The paradox of a biographer writing a memoir, especially one so used to examining lives not his own, he almost doesn't know how much he reveals about himself just through reporting the "facts", as Bailey does. He is not given much to analysis in his bios and in his own life the facts pile up, but the self-knowledge appears to lag behind, far behind. Autobiography, especially in the far past, can often be as revelatory of one's concupiscence—the kind Grove Press used to publish in the '50s and '60s, libertines of earlier centuries.

Part of the brief these days against Bailey is an alleged rape at Dwight Garner's home. Garner is one of the daily *NY Times*' book reviewers whose beat is contemporary literature. I once knew a daily reviewer for *The New York Times*. She came on after a shakeup there, since the culture beat becomes associated, unfortunately, with figures who take on more weight the longer they hold the job—to the point that it is no longer the *Times*' judgment, but their own. Such is their power, until they lose their perch. The *Times* eventually gave up the rotation of women and the roulette wheel winner turned out to be Michiko Kakutani.

The account of the fraught violation is, or has been, always thin, though reported by the presumed victim. An older woman of sorts, or at least a contemporary, more or less, of Bailey, especially when compared to his other supposed sexual sins, "grooming" 12-year-olds and consummating all that wooing when they reach their majority. But what has been in print is scarcely a description. All of the characters involved are literary figures, but that seems to matter not a whit. Here is one account, from the online *Vox*: "Rice says after everyone had retired for the evening, Bailey entered the guest room where she was sleeping and raped her." Another online source, *thecut.com* (love that come-on name), reports that she, a "publishing executive," "cried out 'No' and 'Stop.'" How big a house does Dwight have? What kind of fuss would it have taken to stir the household?

The young middle school (named "Lusher"—you can't make this stuff up, even if you are of a literary bent) women who were groomed (as a teacher, Bailey was evidently, like Obama, too cool for school) are equally non-descriptive, though one, Eve Peyton, did turn into a writer and though her article in *Slate* contains a similar "just holding me down while I cried 'no' and 'stop' repeatedly...". (This in 2000, it seems.) She followed up that event, nonetheless, with writing Bailey a nomination for a "Teacher of the Year" award in Louisiana. That's the trouble with Louisiana, apparently. Later in the *Slate* article she does describe the event in more length, though it is still sketchy. And she and Bailey continued their sketchy friendship for

years, until the Brett Kavanaugh hearings. And, being motivated by Brett the bro in all his white privilege glory, in 2020 she pulled the plug. And became a member of the outing chorus crooning Bailey's doom. Doesn't seem any of his former crowd, male or female, read his 2014 memoir. That would have been eye-opening. The difficulty is life. And most people who age realize theirs may or may not have been perfect.

There's an odd theme of nudity that runs apace in the life and work of Blake Bailey. It shows up in his memoir—naked boys jumping into the Bailey's swimming pool, John Cheever running about nude as often as possible, especially anywhere near a swimming pool. And it continues outside the bios. In the coverage of the Sins of Bailey it reappears when he was a faculty member at Old Dominion, in Virginia. As related by *The Virginian-Pilot* at some sort of academic creative writing faculty and student retreat (ut, oh, I thought, trouble ahead) a number of nude English Department faculty were in a hot tub, when Bailey plopped in and, according to the only woman prof in the tub, “‘Out of the blue, with no warning whatsoever, he [Bailey] grabbed right on my vagina, in one fluid motion,’ she said. ‘I screamed.’” Given all the charges against Bailey, this might be making a molehill out of a mountain, but being immersed in Baileywood for a month, it seems relevant. Nudity, public version, I thought, in the past, was mainly mainstreamed by hippies, my generation more or less, not by post-feminist, respectable, ah, university professors. But I have been at a Catholic university for over three decades, so I may have missed out. Casual nudity litters Bailey's life and work. He himself seemingly gets away with pulling off a lot of women's pants, without, it appears, much difficulty. It seems to be, as I said, a theme.

I sympathize with them all—especially the women. Bailey's accusers (and the accused, himself) don't seem to be budding novelists, where all this experience is often turned into the highly desired “material”—see Cheever, Roth, Yates, or Jackson, as told by Bailey. Bailey is far from a novelist. None of his biographies read like “novels”, often a lame trope some reviewers use when dealing with biographies. Bailey's indulgences, are more or less interwoven with his own psyche, formed from the dynamics of his early years, his wild mother and becrazed, smart, overbearing brother, the remote, substantial, but always useful, father. Bailey escaped some of his past, but not all of it, though the irony of Philip Roth bringing all this down on his head is hard to ignore, or escape.

Since I read three of his biographies in a row (I had read the Yates a decade ago), it is obvious that Bailey makes use of a template. All are similarly formatted and composed, deviating only a bit in the Roth, since it is half-

dictated. One could argue that all Bailey's subjects are father figures. And Bailey seems trapped in the role of biographer as manservant. Curiously, it mimics his childhood, being second fiddle to a dominating personage, or, as his memoir's jacket copy put it, growing up "in the shadow of an erratic and increasingly dangerous brother," the haunted Scott. Philip Roth became a surrogate for the brother (dead at 43), though one entirely successful and famous. A powerful mixture there, Roth being some sort of combustible combination of brother and father.

I don't know all the folk who had a hand in editing Bailey's book on Roth, but one mistake stands out so rudely one wonders if it isn't Freudian: late in discussing the somewhat overexposed Mia Farrow, Bailey lists her famous media son's original name—*Seamus*. Seamus! Instead of Satchel, the one bestowed by Woody Allen. At least Bailey doesn't go into the Frank Sinatra paternity business. Mia, in Bailey's telling, does not come off as the pious and suffering woman she projects in the recent *Allen v. Farrow* multi-part documentary. Live by the sword, die by the sword. I once saw her and Woody in Elaine's when they stopped by our table, knowing a couple of the occupants. Mia glowed. Literally. I couldn't tell if it was the lighting, and I didn't want to know.

It's an identity problem all around. Nomen est omen. Blake? What a name for an Oklahoma boy. From the ruler and owner of all knowledge (Google): Meaning: black; pale, white. Originally a surname, Blake started as a nickname for individuals with hair or skin that was extremely light or dark. Today Blake is a truly unisex first name, given to both boys and girls. It took Blake some eleven years to write his memoir—the actual writing that is, various starts and stops adding up. I have read plenty of biographies over the decades and it surprises me how little thought I've given the biographer's life. There are all kinds—mostly academics of one sort or another, or independent historians who have been successful enough not to have to plant him or herself at a university. Then there are others, primarily those who are also journalists of one sort or another. Often these are celebrity biographers. They do a lot of the living. Kitty Kelley, once again, comes to mind. A former poker-playing friend has done a number of musicians' lives. Takes all kinds. But Bailey is the only one of the brood that I know who has published a mid-list memoir which reveals what might be unintentionally too illuminating, revealing the more or less psychic connection an author has to his or her subject. Memoirs are private, though, biographies ("The Biography" proclaims the *Philip Roth* book) are public. A reader usually assumes some sort of affinity between author and subject in such volumes. Perhaps not as much as in the "as told to" variety. But Blake is positively giddy when

describing his audition with Roth. “Bailey, Blake” doesn’t have an entry in the book’s index. He should, since he is there, often cheering Roth on, or complimenting remarks Roth contemporaneously made to him. His earlier biographies dealt with dead men, though the Roth, in its way, merely exaggerates a tendency found in those previous volumes. Bailey’s Cheever biography, as mentioned, is the one that enticed Roth. It should, since it is mainly a recitation of Cheever’s skirmishes with the English language and the creation of his stories and his parallel battles with his homosexual longings and his sporadic, truncated, or imagined, heterosexual experiences. Bailey’s follow-up, the bio of Charles Jackson, also a homosexual alcoholic, should have given Roth pause.

In *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, Yeats quotes, I think I recall, his father (it may have been his grandfather) saying the only two things worth thinking about were “sex and death.” Well, that might be, but Bailey focuses on sex and writing. As any nonfiction (or fiction, for that matter) writer knows, what is most taxing is making interesting the long periods of life’s usual tasks and banalities. Bailey deletes all this—his bios in the main are just sex and writing. I can see why that appealed to Roth. Given Bailey’s childhood, I can see why; he, too, was fixated by both impulses. The life event that is given the least attention in his memoir, hardly any attention at all, is Bailey’s acquisition of a wife, as mentioned earlier, the sister of a student at the middle-school for girls he taught at in New Orleans. (She was a sophomore in college, Bailey the older experienced man.) The locus of his problems—the middle school and the rest—is what caused such a storm of overreaction at Norton, his publisher. I have often wondered about the literary acumen of publishers, but in Bailey’s case I question whether anyone at the publishing house read his memoir (*The Splendid Things We Planned*) that it published. I know people move on in that profession, but if anyone with literary competence had read it, Bailey himself would be an open book, just as he tried to make his most successful subject, Philip Roth, an open book. It’s hard to write a memoir which, good or bad, isn’t revealing.

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OBVIOUSLY, I LIKE to digress, but the utter surrender to the current cultural climate, the #MeToo world of political correctness, does not become publishers one little bit. Another thing about the Roth book is that Bailey, the surrogate author of Roth’s life, became the surrogate victim of Roth backlash from those who were, say, more than hesitant to attack the memory of Roth directly. Roth was a smart guy, accomplished, prolific, seri-

ous, good to his parents, a citizen of the world, more or less.

The world, especially England, does not fare well in Bailey's telling. He doesn't do other countries well. Not enough time, I suppose, or experience of them on his part, to catch their flavor and allure. He may not, for all I know, have ever been abroad. Bailey does manage to handle conquering young women (he knows many a broad) and not-so-young ladies who spin in the orbit of literary men. And gay guys, too. He seems comfortable with both. As his memoir reveals. And sufficiently explains. Bailey's bios make it seem that their times ('40s, '50s, '60s) were more libertine than the revered late-'60s, '70s, and onward. That may well be true. The late twentieth century went from the specific to the general in sexual matters, which, oddly, diluted the demimonde of earlier decades to the commonplace bourgeoisie, post-'60s. What once stood out in the crowd became lost in the general. Growing up in Oklahoma in the '80s may have been the exception, I'm willing to admit.

I happened to have read the novel one of the last of Roth's young mistresses. It is half the Roth experience, the other half foreign intrigue. I skipped the foreign intrigue part. The novel got a lot of attention and some praise. Lisa Halliday, the author, evidently, was/is well connected; the novel is *Asymmetry*, certainly an honest and revealing title in a number of ways. There is usually asymmetry between subject and author in biographies. Here, though, in *Roth*, thanks to the times we live in, they have intertwined, become knitted together, leaving a monstrous combination. Like the 1986 version of *The Fly*.

I was somewhat surprised at how many people Bailey writes about in his bios that I know, or knew. Bailey/Roth is somewhat hard on Francine du Plessix Gray (1930-2019) in *Roth*. Francine sat next to me for three months—well, not every day for three months—during the Harrisburg 7 trial. She was a busy woman and often, I assumed, had many more entertaining things to do. It had penetrated way back then (1972), when I was twenty-six, that she lived near Philip Roth. Garry Wills, who was on the other side of me in the courtroom, punched the clock more regularly, as did my friend Ed Zuckerman and the late Paul Cowan. In the index listing for "Gray, Francine du Plessix," "animosity" (six) on Roth's part outnumbers the "friendship with" entries (one). Francine could be a pain, but I certainly enjoyed her company, which continued, for a bit, after the trial. One memorable evening included dinner at the Lion's Head, she attired in a full-length mink coat, me not so glamorously outfitted, jeans and an old Goodwill jacket.

Others whose company I enjoyed for many years who turn up in Bai-

ley's books (mostly *Cheever*) are Roger Skillings and Joan Silber. God knows if anyone will do biographies of them. Joan stands a chance, I think, but Roger (who died in 2020) will be stuck with reminiscences, alas. I have long thought that the age of literary biographies has passed. Who reads them? Academics? Folk like me? Fans, I suppose. Roth had fans. Any author who is rich and famous at the end is a celebrity. Roth qualified. We long ago left the literary age (where even the lightly known were not unheard of) and documentaries are a better bet these days than a labor-intensive biography—for even the over-praised. (I got this notice on my “phone” recently: “In the mood for a good biography? STREAM THESE FILMS. Click here...”) Bailey does seem to have worked hard on all of his, which I applaud him for. Consciously, or unconsciously, he might have concluded that sex would sell if he emphasized that aspect of his subjects—especially post-Yates. Clearly, Bailey didn't necessarily realize that sex would come back to bite him in the ass, as it has, his own, not his subjects'.

Bailey's book on Roth is an exception for him, and, in that way, a mistake. A disastrous one, it appears. Bailey became an Icarus, flying too close to the sun. All his other subjects led semi-disastrous lives, Cheever not being an exception. Bailey's bio resurrected him temporarily. Bailey was/is an expert on drunks, homosexuals, poly-sexuals and otherwise, failures, and brief shooting stars of success. But Roth, Roth, given his loving parents, his helpful family, his continuous, unabated success, starting with the NBA for his first book, the devotion of friends, women, etc., was far, far from the stuff of Bailey's previous subjects. His previous bios chart the rise and fall of the twentieth century's place as—its claim to being—the Literary Age. Needless to say, the twenty-first century has thoroughly become the Electronic Age. Literature is just one of the entertainments and not that high on the list. Roth, though, was a planet, before the sun set. Bailey, apparently, was tired of playing second-fiddle. He saw what his earlier subjects had gone through and didn't envy their lives. Bailey identified with his earlier subjects, their weaknesses and failures and scattered triumphs, and played down criticisms. Roth, though, for Bailey, tapped a reservoir of delusions. With Roth as his sidekick, an imaginary older brother who, unlike his own, wasn't entirely batshit crazy. Bailey has paid the price. It's called hubris.

I'll give the last words to the biographer. He deserves them for the lickin' he's taken. The remark comes from the first page of the acknowledgments in his *Cheever* book, the volume that seduced Roth and caused him to meld so disastrously his life with Bailey's. After Bailey thanks Cheever's children and widow, he adds: “The four of them made this project such a pleasure that I have to worry: surely it's downhill from here, at least with

regard to writing biographies.”

I will intrude once more: Ain't that the truth? Downhill from there.