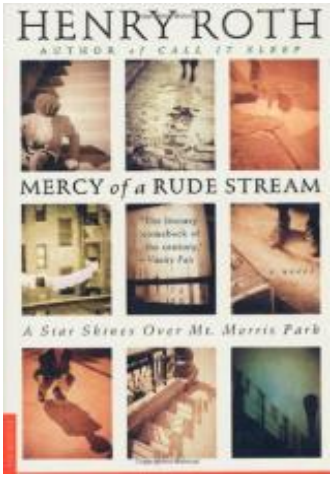
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Mercy of a Rude Stream Series

by Henry Roth



About the Book

The first installment of **Mercy of a Rude Stream**, called **A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park**, concerns the adventures of a boy named Ira Stigman and his extended Jewish immigrant family. In this opening volume, set in 1920's New York, we follow Ira's psychological maturation which is burdened by not only the onset of adolescence, but also by abject poverty, the pain of life in an alien world, and a violent sexual awakening.

A Diving Rock on the Hudson, the second and the most disturbing book of the series, paints a grand panorama of New York City in the Roaring Twenties, as Ira begins his freshman year at CCNY. Yet, this colorful, absorbing world is laced with the black undercurrent of despair and with Ira's unmentionable transgression, a sin so horrible that he is doomed to near madness by the twisted urges that victimize his mind.

Completed in the last year of his life, **From Bondage** is perhaps Roth's most profound book in the series. Narrated partly from the perspective of the old man, Ira Stigman, there is a Tolstoyan aspect to this third volume -- that of the aged writer confronting his imminent passing as he continues to draw sustenance from the eroticized stories of his youth.

This trio of books has been called by critics "one of the most remarkable literary creations of this century."

Discussion Guide

1. The title **Mercy of a Rude Steam** is taken from Cardinal Woolsy's speech in Shakespeare's "Henry VIII" (which serves as the epigraph for the first book in the series). It has been observed that Henry Roth viewed mankind, and particularly himself, as a "rude stream," a metaphor for the flaws and frailties of our mortal lives. Does the elderly Ira Stigman believe or not believe in the possibility of mercy for himself, mankind and the modern Jew?

2. On the opening page of *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park*, Ira laments his upheaval from the all-Jewish

neighborhood of his boyhood to non-Jewish Harlem. "If it had only happened a few years later. Everything else could be the same, the war, the new relatives; if only he could have had, could have lived a few more years on the Lower East Side, say until his Bar Mitzvah. Well . . . " Discuss the effects of dislocation and isolation on Ira's emotional, sexual, and Jewish development. How might Ira's life had been different had he stayed, "just a few more years" on the Lower East Side?

3.*Mercy of a Rude Stream* is narrated by two different and distinct voices; that of the young Ira who is immersed in the events of his life, and that of the elderly writer reflecting on the life he had led. What purpose does this literary device serve for the reader? The author?

4. The pivotal revelation of *A Diving Rock on the Hudson* is Ira's sexual involvement with his sister Minnie. How, if ever, does the old man, Ira come to terms with the unspeakable sin of his past? Is he ever able to explain to himself or Ecclesias "why" the transgression occurred and why for such a long period of time?

5. With the encouragement and support of Edith Welles, Ira finally begins writing his first novel. Discuss the struggle of Ira, the young writer, trying to portray the only world he knows while simultaneously trying to abandon his immigrant past for the "goyish" literary world of Greenwich Village. Discuss the presence of class struggle throughout the three volumes.

6. Why were Edith and Ira attracted to each other? What was their shared sensibility and what do we learn about Edith's past that gives us clues? Critics have often said of Roth that he relied on "strong women" in his novels. How does this observation apply to Edith? To Ira's wife, M.? To Ira's mother, Leah?

7. In *From Bondage*, Ira's grandfather Zaida, observing the behavior of his heedless grandson, laments the fate of America's Jews: "So at the expense of observance, they go unmolested, here in America, the Golden Land. They barter holy living for livelihood." Is this Zaida or Henry Roth himself speaking? As these three installments come to a close, has Ira bartered away his Jewishness in favor of complete assimilation or does he still hold strong to a religious and/or spiritual belief?

8. Of James Joyce, Ira says, "It was language, language that could magically transmogrify the baseness of his days and ways into precious literature -- in the highly touted *Ulysses* itself. It could free him from this depraved exile, from this immutable bondage." From what "bondage" is Roth alluding to in this passage and in the book's tittle? Could there be more than one meaning at wok here? How, if at all, does Ira finally release himself from bondage?

9. How will Roth compare over time with other Jewish American writers including Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud and Isaac Bashevis Singer? Who is he most like? Who is he most apart from?

Author Bio

Henry Roth died on October 13, 1995, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, at the age of eighty-nine. Born in the village of Tysmenitz, in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galitzia, in 1906, it is most likely that Roth landed at Ellis lsland and began his life in New York in 1909. In 1914, the year in which **Mercy of a Rude Stream** opens, the family moved from the Lower East side to Harlem, briefly to the Jewish section on 114th Street and then to non-Jewish 119th Street.

Roth lived there until 1927, when, as a junior at City College of New York, he moved in with Eda Lou Walton, a prominent critic, poet and New York University instructor. His first novel, **Call It Sleep** was published in December 1934, to mixed reviews and did not become the American classic that it today until its paperback printing in 1964. Roth contracted for a second novel with the editor Maxwell Perkins, of Charles Scribner & Sons. But his growing ideological frustration and personal confusion created a profound writer's block, which lasted until 1979, when he began the first drafts of **Mercy of a Rude Stream**.

While still alive, Roth received two honorary doctorates, one from the University of New Mexico and one from the Hebrew Union College -- Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. Posthumously, he was honored in November of 1995 with the Hadassah Harold Ribalow Lifetime Achievement Award and by the Museum of the city of New York in February of 1996. **From Bondage**, Volume III of **Mercy of a Rude Stream** was a finalist in fiction for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Critical Praise

"As provocative as anything in the chapters of St. Augustine or Rousseau. "

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