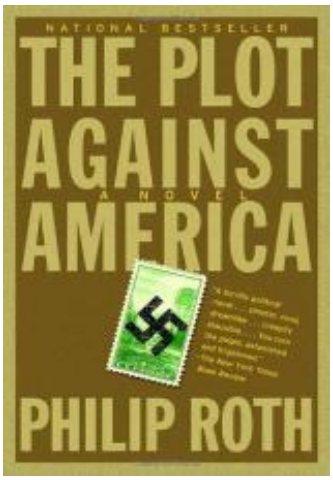
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The Plot Against America

by Philip Roth



About the Book

In an astonishing feat of empathy and narrative invention, our most ambitious novelist imagines an alternate version of American history.

In 1940 Charles A. Lindbergh, heroic aviator and rabid isolationist, is elected President. Shortly thereafter, he negotiates a cordial "understanding" with Adolf Hitler, while the new government embarks on a program of folksy anti-Semitism.

For one boy growing up in Newark, Lindbergh?s election is the first in a series of ruptures that threaten to destroy his small, safe corner of America?and with it, his mother, his father, and his older brother.

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways does **The Plot Against America** differ from conventional historical fiction? What effects does Roth achieve by blending personal history, historical fact, and an alternative history?

2. The novel begins "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear" [p. 1]. With this sentence Roth establishes that his story is being told from an adult point of view by an adult narrator who is remembering what befell his family, over sixty years earlier, when he was a boy between the ages of seven and nine. Why else does Roth open the novel this way? What role does fear play throughout the book?

3. How plausible is the alternative history that Roth imagines? How would the world be different if America had not entered the war, or entered it on the side of Germany?

4. When the Roth family plans to go to Washington, young Philip wants to take his stamp collection with him because he fears that, since he did not remove the ten-cent Lindbergh stamp, "a malignant transformation would occur in my

absence, causing my unguarded Washingtons to turn into Hitlers, and swastikas to be imprinted on my National Parks" [p. 57]. What does this passage suggest about how the Lindbergh election has affected the boy? Where else does this kind of magical thinking occur in the novel?

5. Herman Roth asserts, "History is everything that happens everywhere. Even here in Newark. Even here on Summit Avenue. Even what happens in this house to an ordinary man --- that?ll be history too someday" [p. 180]. How does this conception of history differ from traditional definitions? In what ways does the novel support this claim? How is the history of the Roth family relevant to the history of America?

6. After Mrs. Wishnow is murdered, young Philip thinks, "And now she was inside a casket, and I was the one who put her there" [p. 336]. Is he to some degree responsible for her death? How did his desire to save his own family endanger hers?

7. Observing his mother?s anguished confusion, Philip discovers that "one could do nothing right without also doing something wrong" [p. 340]. Where in the novel does the attempt to do something right also result in doing something wrong? What is Roth suggesting here about the moral complexities of actions and their consequences?

8. When Herman Roth is explaining the deals Hitler has made with Lindbergh, Roth comments, "The pressure of what was happening was accelerating everyone?s education, my own included" [p. 101]. What is Philip learning? In what ways is history robbing him of a normal childhood? Why does he want to run away?

9. What motivates Rabbi Bengelsdorf, Aunt Evelyn, and Sandy to embrace Lindbergh and dismiss Herman Roth?s fears as paranoia? Are they right to do so? In what ways do their personal aspirations affect their perceptions of what is happening?

10. In what ways are Bess and Herman Roth heroic? How do they respond to the crises that befall them? How are they able to hold their family together?

11. Roth observes that violence, when it?s in a house, is heartbreaking: "like seeing the clothes in a tree after an explosion. You may be prepared to see death but not the clothes in a tree" [p. 296]. What causes Herman Roth and Alvin to fight each other so viciously? What is it that brings the violence swirling around them off the streets and into the house? Why is violence in a home so much more disturbing than on the street or the battlefield?

12. Much is at stake in **The Plot Against America** --- the fate of America?s Jews, the larger fate of Europe and indeed of Western civilization, but also how America will define itself. What does the novel suggest about what it means to be an American, and to be a Jewish American? How are the Roths a thoroughly American family?

13. What does the postscript, particularly "A True Chronology of the Major Figures," add to the novel?

Author Bio

In 1997 Philip Roth won the Pulitzer Prize for AMERICAN PASTORAL. In 1998 he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House and in 2002 the highest award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Gold Medal in

Fiction. He twice won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He won the PEN/Faulkner Award three times. In 2005 THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA received the Society of American Historians? Prize for ?the outstanding historical novel on an American theme for 2003?2004.? Roth received PEN?s two most prestigious awards: in 2006 the PEN/Nabokov Award and in 2007 the PEN/Bellow Award for achievement in American fiction. In 2011 he received the National Humanities Medal at the White House, and was later named the fourth recipient of the Man Booker International Prize. He died in 2018.

Critical Praise

"Huge, inflammatory, painfully moving. . . . Far and away the most outward-looking, expansive . . . book Roth has written."

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