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Review: *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth

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***The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth**  
**391 pp / Jonathan Cape (2004) / £16.99**  
**Review by David Gooblar**

Since *Portnoy's Complaint*, and even before that, some commentators have accused Roth of wanting to escape his Jewishness, of being a self-hating Jew, even of doing outright harm to the Jewish people. A fairer assessment is that Roth is an American Jew who has always insisted upon his right to be an American first. *The Plot Against America*, Roth's twenty-fourth book, spends nearly four hundred pages convincing the reader that this assumption — that American Jews need not be defined as Jews and only Jews — depends upon a surprisingly fragile accident of history, one that could easily not have occurred.

*The Plot Against America* is an alternative history of America from 1940 to 1942, in which one crucial fact has been altered: instead of Franklin Delano Roosevelt comfortably winning a third term as president, he is defeated by the aviation hero — and anti-Semitic isolationist — Charles Lindbergh. The ensuing events are seen, ominously, through the eyes of Philip Roth, age seven, and his family, living in the Jewish Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey.

For young Philip, the Hasidic Jew collecting money for the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine 'seemed unable to get it through his head that we'd already had a homeland for three generations. [...] Our homeland was America. Then the Republicans nominated Lindbergh and everything changed'. As Lindbergh sets up a national relocation program for Jews called 'Just Folks', placing Jewish children in 'American' homes throughout the heartland, and then signs 'The Iceland Understanding', a non-aggression pact with Hitler, the Roths' place as Jews in America becomes precarious and filled with dread.

'Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear'. This line opens the book, and indeed, given the subject matter, it is not surprising that Roth works hard at portraying the fear of these American Jews in the face of the unthinkable. But I found myself more taken by the softer side of Roth that writing about his family and his upbringing brings out of him — a touching, affectionate, nostalgic tone that never swerves from Roth's fierce commitment to exactitude into mere sentimentality. Forcing himself to imagine these scenes through the eyes of his seven-year-old self but retrospectively imposing meaning with the clarity of a mature writer, he manages to evoke the innocence and bewilderment of a small boy with astonishing effectiveness.

Although the novel falters when Roth has to steer the ship back to dry land (the story rather abruptly rejoins history as we know it with the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor in December of 1942, a year later than in reality), for the most part this is a strange and wonderful book. Roth has spoken in the past of how difficult it is for a Jewish writer to deal with the Holocaust in fiction. In some way, this is Roth's

Holocaust novel: a depiction of the very real, personal terror of a family facing 'the relentless unforeseen'. 'Turned wrong way round', Roth writes, 'the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as "History," harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic'.