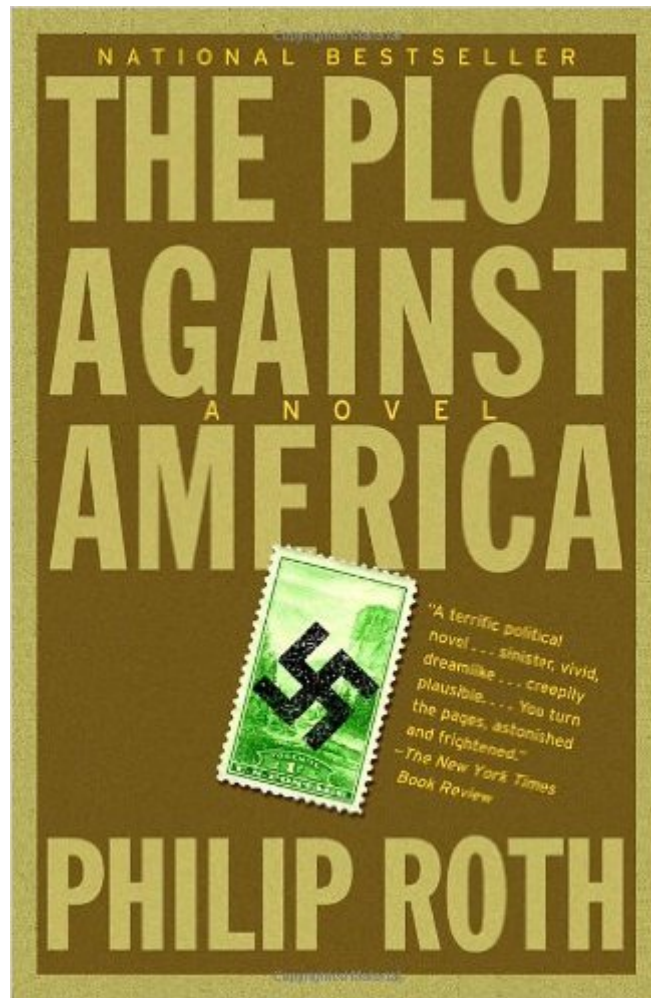


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The Plot Against America



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is an oft-stated cliché that many families are but one or two paychecks away from poverty. Philip Roth's "The Plot Against America" suggests that perhaps U.S. society was, in 1940, one election surprise away from fascism. The Plot Against America also suggests that many families are but one step away from falling into dysfunctionality and despair. Although such a topic is susceptible of trite, formulaic prose, in the hands of Philip Roth it works remarkably well. The story line is rather simple. Taking on the genre of alternate history (with which he shares with no small amount of irony at least some creative DNA with Newt Gingrich), Roth imagines a United States in which Charles Lindbergh storms the deadlocked 1940 Republican Convention, upsets Wendell Wilkie for the nomination, then barnstorms the nation in a novel election campaign that ousts FDR from the White House. Vote for Lindbergh or Vote for War serves as the victorious campaign slogan. Slowly, but inexorably, U.S. isolationist policy grows stronger after it signs a non aggression pact with Germany and Japan. Britain grows weaker, and Lindbergh's cabinet and the Republican congress enact a series of laws

that cause no small bit of consternation in America's Jewish community. So far, there is nothing about the story line that is at all unusual in the alternate history genre. However, Roth writes his story through the eyes of one Phil Roth, youngest child of the Roth family of the Wequahic section of Newark. This alone sets *The Plot* apart from what is typically found in this genre. Roth's examination of the lives of big events through the eyes of a 'little' man creates a subcontext that is rife with meaning for anyone who has experienced the joys and despairs of a family in crisis. The Roth family, generally enjoying the rising working class/middle class fruits of life in mid-20th century America suddenly sees its internal world ripped asunder by these big events. The Roth family is, as is most of their Jewish neighbors, horrified at Lindbergh's election and justifiably fearful of what lies ahead. Unfortunately, their fears are well founded. Roth's *Plot* is as much, if not more, the story of the reaction of one family to this alternate history as the story of a nation at war with itself. If Roth can be faulted for painting his alternate history with a broad and perhaps overly simplistic brush he cannot be faulted for the depth and insight into the life of a family tempest-tossed by a society gone mad. It is nuanced and meaningful. Roth's writing can be, and often is, stunning. As has always been his habit when he is on form, Roth is capable of crafting beautiful sentences and paragraphs. By looking at world-shattering events through the prism of a young man's eyes those events take on additional meaning because they can be understood on a familial rather than on a societal level. Roth does have some fun with the historical figures that appear throughout the book. Walter Winchell, once the country's most famous radio reporters (and also the voice over narrator of the old *Untouchables* television series) leads the post-election campaign against Lindbergh and his cronies, most notably the viciously anti-Semitic Henry Ford. FDR and Fiorello LaGuardia also play important roles in Roth's alternate universe. There are, no doubt, many readers that will resent what seems to be an attack on a person with the heroic stature of Lindbergh. That may be so, yet Roth does not go over the top in my opinion and by book's end does evoke more than a bit of sympathy for Lucky Lindy. Similarly, many have asserted that Roth's approach to the 1940 election, and the quasi-fascist oppression that followed, contains a rather blunt allegory to the 2004 election campaign. To that extent, no one should doubt Roth's probably political point of view. Again, that may be so. However, as is clear from the book's ultimate resolution (which should be left undisclosed in a review) that this society can sustain and repel challenges to the type of authoritarian regime imposed in Roth's alternate history is a far more optimistic world view than some of Roth's critics may credit him with. Possible allegories aside, this is one of Roth's best efforts in recent years and I think that there is much to be gained by reading the book, no matter where one's current political sensibilities find their home. His prose is more concise than it has been for

some time. For the first time in a long time, Roth seems more interested in telling a story in comprehensible declarative sentences than in creating sentences that do little more than establish his credentials as a 'serious' writer. *The Plot Against America* can be enjoyed on any number of levels. It is not simply a parable of contemporary society and can be enjoyed simply for the quality of the writing.

I was not drawn to this book. I feared that like the character in Roth's early story "The Conversion of the Jews," whose view of history divided events into those that were good for the Jews and those that were bad for the Jews, the author intended to imagine a litany of fictional events that were bad for the Jews and somehow endemic to America. That didn't sound to me like fun reading. However, I wanted to see if Roth could meet the challenge he set for himself of blending fact with some whopping historical fiction and resolving his plot in a way that harmonizes with our present. The verdict: he failed. The surprise: the book was well worth reading anyway. The story is told in a pseudo-autobiographical style through the eyes of young Philip Roth growing up in Newark, New Jersey during the time of the second world war. However, as the author points out early on, the fact that we know our history does not mean that our history is inevitable. In this story, pre-war isolationism finds an active political candidate in popular hero Charles Lindbergh, who wins the 1940 Republican presidential nomination and defeats Franklin Roosevelt in the general election. The new administration embarks on an isolationist foreign policy that culminates in secret accords with Germany and Japan that allow America to sidestep involvement in the war. The administration also begins a series of domestic policies that target the Jewish population for what is benignly called cultural absorption but may in fact be the harbinger of a domestic genocide. We see these things through the eyes of young Philip and his family, who try to separate suspicion and fear from paranoia as they sense their country turning against them. The advancing menace and its impact on the family is well-portrayed. However, neither the plot nor the dramatic pace hold up. The author seems to run out of energy at a critical point, and has to telescope the events of the rising action and dramatic climax through a rather trite device, making these important story elements a precis rather than an exposition. And to redeem the flawed Lindbergh from a thorough demonization more harsh than he probably deserves, Roth relies on a plot twist that lacks all credibility. Why is the book worth reading? For two reasons: first, for its portrayal of young Philip and his family, which is tender and insightful. Second, for the quality of the prose, which is flowing and evocative. And the secondary message of the story remains intriguing: that one is unlikely to fully recognize a turning point in history until it is too late to change its course; the avoidance of historical tragedy too often

hinges on fortuitous events. I would not recommend rushing out to buy this book, but if it somehow turns up on your reading table, neither would I consign it to the bottom of the stack.

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