



Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories / Letting Go

Philip Roth, Ross Miller (Editor)

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"The title novella, Goodbye, Columbus, the story of a summer romance between a poor young man from Newark and a rich Radcliffe co-ed, is both a tightly wrought tale of youthful desire and a satiric gem that takes aim at the comfortable affluence of the postwar boom. Here and in the stories that accompany it, including "The Conversion of the Jews" and "Defender of the Faith," Roth depicts Jewish lives in 1950s America with an unflinching sharpness of observation." In Letting Go, a sprawling novel set largely against the backdrop of Chicago in the 1950s, Roth portrays the moral dilemmas of young people cast precipitously into adulthood, and in the process describes a skein of social and family responsibilities as they are brought into focus by issues of marriage, abortion, adoption, friendship, and career. The novel's expansiveness provides a wide scope for Roth's gift for vivid characterization, and in his protagonist Gabe Wallach he creates a nuanced portrait of a responsive young academic whose sense of morality draws him into the ordeals of others with unforeseen consequences.

Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories / Letting Go Details

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Victoria Patterson says

Goodbye, Columbus was the the best piece of literature that I've read in a long time. I read some of the other stories, and nothing compared. I'll probably re-read Goodbye, Columbus to try and decipher how he accomplished. It's a first love story but more.

jennifer says

Goodbye, Columbus--I went to school with this guy. I went to school with six of this guy.

(Oh, well, Roth was U of C.)

Tom Crehore says

Every time I read Philip Roth one of my first thoughts is, "it's not fair." It's not fair that someone can have this much insight to the human spirit. Wonderful books. Am looking forward to reading some more.

David says

goodbye, columbus. this is a beautiful novella. in 109 pages you find yourself recalling your own poignant moments of love and loss and leaving. how single blades of grass moved over university lawns as you laid in them after graduation. after everyone you spent the last four years with have departed and gone home or to jobs and internships in foreign cities. how the light bent through old oak trees and somehow it was sadder illuminating a lawn where two weeks ago your friends sat indian style and talked about philosophy and how when your girlfriend came walking over the lawn all old jeans and rock concert shirt carrying a novel your heart fluttered. sometime later she closed your bronx apartment door and you looked out the window and watched her climb into her old red car and speed away to connecticut. you knew you would never see her again. and now. older. you see all those moments in cracks in concrete and while pumping gas or browsing old bookstores for modern library editions. and finding one brings you back again to hooting and hollering at some show with your arms up over your head and next to you the best thing that ever happened to you looking at you and mouthing the word yes!

Kathleen O'Nan says

Having recently read Roth's "Indignation" and remembering how much I like his work, I decided to go back to his early writing and this is his first. What a great story of family life and young love! The two families are nothing like mine but I can recognize so many things in them. I also enjoyed the short stories, especially the first two. I'm looking forward to reading more Roth.

Zack says

After several false starts over the years, I finally read *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) all the way through. Last fall with no copy on hand, I had been eager to read Roth's second book and first full-length novel, *Letting Go* (1962). It's not a title of his that many people are familiar with these days, dwarfed by his success later that decade with *Portnoy's Complaint*, more recently with *American Pastoral* and *The Plot Against America*, and of course back with his first book, which established his reputation -- or rather, his many reputations. As such, *Letting Go* is not, I think, widely available these days, and my only copy of it is in the first of the Library of America volumes devoted to Roth's output; as it's coupled here with *Goodbye, Columbus*, I saw this as an opportunity to finally finish that one and get a better sense of his earliest writings. I'm going to try to piece together a somewhat coherent review of both but will likely just ramble from thought to thought.

I'll briefly touch upon *Goodbye, Columbus*, which might seem a fairly uneven collection but is perhaps a fair reflection of Roth's talents and the directions in which he would go -- melancholic stories of love, pitch-perfect comedic pieces, Newark nostalgia (even in the 50s). The first time I read the title novella, I didn't care much care for it and found the two characters, Neil and Brenda, quite grating. I may not have been any more sympathetic to Neil this time round, but appreciated it more with this reading. "Defender of the Faith," "Epstein," and "Eli, the Fanatic" are great at exploring different kinds of tension -- "Defender" and "Eli" with (the Jewish) community, assimilation and modernity, and "Epstein" with the midlife, marital and cultural. "Conversion of the Jews" was hilarious, and I don't think I completely processed "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song he Sings."

The only references I've ever seen to *Letting Go* were made by Larry McMurtry, who has called it the best exploration of a particular social milieu, one like Roth which he had been a member of: graduate school in the 1950s. When I came upon the first reference, in his book-length rumination on storytelling, modernity and the west, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, I was simply pleased that one of my favorite writers had favorably referenced another. Both had entered graduate studies in English literature around the same time, McMurtry at Rice and Roth at Chicago, and both emerged, as McMurtry put it, doctorateless. Aside from my own general curiosity about or false nostalgia for the 1950s, I consider academia and the lives of writers in that period a rich scene in terms of our cultural and intellectual history. (Stray note: I've often found reminders in Roth's writings that while our culture and world may often be utterly perplexing, it's *continually* perplexing and always has been. Though much has changed since the transitional period of the 50s in which *Letting Go* takes place, some of what he paints still resonates today. One of the more trivial but still funny examples from the novel has to do with the clear division that had already arisen then between those engaged in "criticism" and those in "creative writing," something that has only become more pronounced over time.)

Letting Go centers on Gabe Wallach, part-time narrator, but he is one of a handful of characters whose forays into adulthood, love and sex Roth explores. Wallach is the least attached of any of the characters here but finds himself entangled in a number of lives, sometimes incidentally, sometimes as an attempt at meaningfulness. The novel starts in Iowa City, where Wallach is a grad student in English and meets the creative writing PhD candidate Paul Herz, whose own circumstance in life is almost exactly the opposite of Gabe's. Both are Jewish men from New York and in their 20s, but Gabe is independently wealthy and Paul

eternally hapless; Gabe is after love and untethered, Paul has found himself in a young but already troubled marriage; Gabe is much loved by his father and seeking room to grow as a result, while Paul and his wife Libby have been entirely disowned by their parents. Gabe and the Herzes all move a lot throughout the 50s, seeking but never quite finding the right station (figuratively and geographically), and end up for a while together again in Chicago, where the bulk of the book is set and Gabe and Paul teach at the U of C. While there, Gabe winds up involved with Martha Reganhart. A fiercely intelligent woman and the single mother of two, she has been left to contend with the social constraints of the 50s, the constraints of parenting and pursuing her own happiness, largely on her own.

This seems to me at once both more and less measured than the other works of Roth's I've read and sampled. More in the sense that there is little of the narcissism or chauvinism his later material would be charged with; the male characters here may occasionally make unfortunate, cringe-worthy statements and actions, but these are presented as ultimately human flaws. Though one is portrayed as fairly hysterical, the women in this novel are fairly well drawn, their desires and opinions are not given short shrift, and it's clear that all of the characters here are simply confused with their lives.

The novel is less measured, though, in its sprawl, which is not to say it's indulgent or a bore; on the contrary, it was nice to get lost in. Whereas his later works pivot on -- hone in on, really -- some artistic conceit (playing with history, the form of the novel itself, or the relation a writer has to his work, of autobiography to fiction), this would be better characterized, like those early stories were in miniature, as a contemplative character study. Indeed, along the way there are some profound scenes and narratorial musings, the most striking of which anticipates the opening lines and much of the thematic terrain of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. That is to do with the predicament of our one life and of meaning(lessness); though each novel is also characterized by a slow-building crescendo and focuses on a few male and female characters, the two share little else in common, stylistically and otherwise.

I think I'll be chewing on this one for a while. I can't say it was everything I hoped it would be, but it was definitely satisfying. As always, I continue to love great prose stylists and Roth is one of them.

Anna says

Wow! This redeemed Philip Roth for me. I can hardly believe this is the same person who wrote *American Pastoral*. I gave this a 4-star rating b/c I have mixed reactions. The first 3 stories I would give 5-stars, but the last three weren't as good. A lot of his close-up depictions of the Newark Jewish culture reminds me of my own Kidron Mennonite upbringing (in a starkly different but oddly familiar way). Thanks Sarah for the recommendation.

Vivienne Strauss says

It would be difficult to express how much I loved this collection of stories and novel! Nearly 900 pages of dense writing and I savored each and every word.

Sam Sattler says

I first read *Goodbye, Columbus* in the late sixties and did not really appreciate it as much then as I did upon this second reading. It is a rather vivid portrayal of Jewish family life of the 1950s-1960s period that is both telling and touching. While the novella is not exactly a coming-of-age piece, it is the next best thing, the story of a couple of young people who fall instantly, if temporarily, deeply in love. A striking aspect of the story is how different things were regarding birth control when this was written: the couple has to claim they are married in order to obtain anything other than a condom, for instance. Also striking, is just how unlikable and selfish the narrator is on this second reading, an impression I do not recall from my first reading all those years ago.

The "Five Short Stories" start out strongly, with the second one ("Defender of the Faith") and the third ("Epstein") being my two favorites. Of the five, the only one I disliked (and I strongly disliked it) is the last one, "Eli the Fanatic."

The Library of America volume that includes "*Goodbye, Columbus* and Five Short Stories" is of the usual high quality of everything produced by that publisher.

Michael says

After obtaining all nine volumes of the Library of America's novels of Philip Roth (very likely my favorite author), I decided to start from the beginning and read all of them in sequence (much like Libby Herz plans to do with Faulkner in *Letting Go*-- how's that for coincidence?*)

Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories *** 1/2 (out of 5) Read November 2014
Letting Go *** (out of 5) Read January 2016

Roth's first book features a splendid novella and several good-to-great short stories. They are impeccably written, touching on the themes the fledgling author would concern himself with for the rest of his career, but they're missing something: his voice isn't totally formed yet, so these feel like the apprentice works that they are.

His first novel, meanwhile, ranges from incisively brilliant to frustratingly unfocused and everywhere in between. At 600-plus pages, it's way too long and again, he's not fully himself yet; his writing would soon become more precise.

Verdict: Both works are worth your time, but they're not the titles his legend is built on. We'll encounter one such title in Volume 2.

*Further coincidence: I have all the Faulkner and Bellow LoA volumes and have meant to do the same with their works as well. One project at a time, I suppose.

John Otto says

I am a Philip Roth fan, although not an uncritical one. I don't know anyone who depicts the richness of

Jewish life in America with such warmth and humor but fearlessness. I wish Amish/Mennonites had someone writing who was half as good.

This book is Roth's first one, published in 1959, and winning The National Book Award.

The other five short stories in the book are the equal of or better than *Goodbye, Columbus*. *The Conversion of the Jews*, is about a young boy who questions Jewish dogma, arguing that if God is all-powerful there could have been a virgin birth as preached by some Christians. He gets in trouble with the rabbi and winds up forcing the conversion of his entire synagogue to Christianity. Many Jewish Americans were highly offended by the story, while critics loved it.

The other stories in the book are *Defender of the Faith*, *Epstein*, *You Can't Tell A Man By The Song He Sings*, and *Eli, The Fanatic*. I won't take the time to detail all of them, but generally they follow the same themes as the first two I have mentioned.

If your only knowledge of Philip Roth is the scandal caused by *Portnoy's Complaint*, when it was published (it wouldn't raise many eyebrows now,) then you owe it to yourself to read some of his other works. You will feel enriched.

Michael says

(4.5 stars. So far only rating *Goodbye Columbus* etc.) Ok, it's not as masterful as Roth's later work (there is a feeling that, in a structuralist way, every detail is significant, but at the same time it feels sometimes a bit loose, thus kind of "trying too much", plus the first pages of *Goodbye Columbus* could have been shortened). But I guess anybody would have been proud to have started with stories of that caliber. A good thing about them is that they stick with you long after you have read them, with a certain taste, and the feeling that you may want to go back and read them again someday. And he was like, what, 25 when he wrote them? Damn it.

John Gutiérrez says

This book was an incredible reading. I like so much the mean story, *Goodbye Columbus* and the movie is good, too.

Sven Deroose says

Goodbye, Columbus : ****

The Conversion of The Jews : ***1/2

Defender of the Faith : ***

Epstein : ****

You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings

Eli, the Fanatic :

David says

Roth's debut collection with the titular novella and short stories. Saul Bellow said Roth "emerged fully formed, claws and fangs in full." There is much that is playful, even pious here. This is the first work that brought out Jewish conservatives against Roth, he was condemned in synagogues as anti-Semitic. An amazing debut and "The Conversion of the Jews" alone is worth the price of admission, arguably a perfect short story and equal parts hilarious and touching. The final image of the young student descending from the heavens is among the most moving in all of Roth's work.

Letting Go is a 'big' novel, Roth stretching out for Henry James territory. There are very moving passages but it's not one I would place at the top of his writings. Probably best to say for Roth fans only.
